

Pan-seared Chilean sea bass served with yuca mashed potato and calabacitas



REVIEW

WAPANGO

The spice is right at this—gasp!—Chesterfield Mall eatery

BY DAVE LOWRY

Consider, if you will, the quandary Wapango presents for the urban dining trendinista. The place is hip, stylish, the food exciting, unique, delicious. But Wapango is in—brace yourself—a shopping mall. In Chesterfield. The city's serious dining trendinista—and there is no other kind—would almost rather be caught in a chain restaurant. Unafflicted with such terminal urban pretentiousness, we're OK with the location (though the search for the Northwest Passage was a stroll

compared with the difficulties of navigating Chesterfield Mall's parking lot). It's the concept we detest: "pan-Latino." Unless followed by "fried," anything with "pan" in the title is apt to be a culinary equivalent of a junk drawer so crammed with odds and ends, it's impossible to find anything you want. Here, though, the approach works, mainly because the kitchen gives more than a perfunctory nod to authenticity and exhibits a refreshing respect for the disparate cuisines of South America.

That approach became obvious with the arrival of the first of several worthy starters, a paper cone bulging with crispy hot yuca fries, salty and fine by themselves but served with a garlic-oregano-onion *chimichurri* sauce and a fiery chile aioli. *Arepas*, coaster-size rounds of dense cornbread, slathered with mashed black beans and shreds of soft pulled pork, then drizzled with a rich cream sauce, are another should-try appetizer. (The presentation, on a long white platter, is almost as good as these Venezuelan

treats.) Salads tend to be a little too busy, tossed with everything from mango salsa to passion-fruit vinaigrette. Consider instead the simple chicken-and-lime soup with floating strips of tortilla.

Garlic, vinegar and smoky chipotle are combined for *adobo* sauce, a recipe that's pinballed all over Latin America and caromed off to the Philippines as well. The spin here is completely worthwhile; the marinade, mild yet flavorful, is slathered on a spit-roasted chicken. The skin is delicate and crisp, the marinated meat juicy, the half chicken so generous a portion, it's a good course to split. A fresh *pico de gallo* complements the chicken, which sits attractively and deliciously on a hefty mound of mashed potatoes and starchy yuca. The grilled 8-ounce beef tenderloin would have been good—though ordinary—had it not been for the dressing, a garlicky, lemony *mojo* sauce studded with tiny langostino tails. "Langostino" is one of those catchall terms for anything from a shrimp to a lobster; here it refers to a sweet, tasty crawfish. The richness of this sauce is an inspired addition, coaxing even more flavor from a good cut of beef. Served with fingerling potatoes and a heap of sautéed kale, the tenderloin will delight any carnivore (\$30). It's a good example of the kitchen's ability to give the familiar an exotic kick without going overboard.

Aside from Mayan pyramids and affordable vacation destinations, the Yucatán should be best known for *cochinita pibil*, marinated pork that's wrapped in banana leaves and cooked excruciatingly slowly. Again, the recipe here is authentic, though instead of the usual piglet, the meat tasted like pork shoulder. The leaves unfold on the plate to reveal the steaming, fragrant meat, stained a dark red by *achiote*, which adds little taste but makes for a dramatic presentation. The sides—pickled onions, black beans and rice—all work on the palate as secondary tastes that keep the meat at the forefront. *Achiote* shows up as well in make-'em-yourself tacos; a bouquet of skewers of roasted chicken and onions arrives along with a pleasantly oily Thai-like peanut sauce and a roll of flour tortillas. (Both corn and flour tortillas come with some meals at Wapango; ask for the former. The flour version is fine, but the corn tortillas are impeccably fresh and chewy, as good as those at any Mexican eatery in town.)

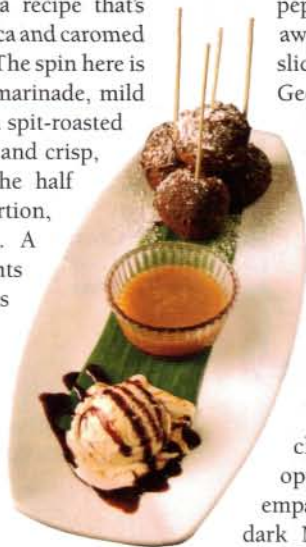
And then there is the *moqueca*, a Brazilian seafood stew, served here in its Bahian incarnation. Shrimp, scallops, mussels and squid all go into the pot, along with whatever fish is freshest, after which they're simmered in a broth of coconut milk, green

peppers, tomatoes, garlic and the awesomely rich *dendê* palm oil, slicker and more unctuous than a Georgia politician's stump speech.

Served with creamy golden rice, this is one meal that should not be missed, and Wapango is one of the few places around that offers it. A *moqueca* such as this is serious eating, easily the equivalent of the best gumbo or bouillabaisse. Alone, it makes the restaurant a destination for the gourmet.

Desserts include an ever-changing array of unusual opportunities, from hot apple empanadas to dense fritters made of dark Mexican chocolate and topped with melted white chocolate. And for that diner for whom *tres leches* just doesn't cut it, there's an upgrade to *cuatro* in a cake laden with half-and-half plus whole, condensed and coconut milks.

Fruity red Chilean Malbecs, crisp Argentine whites: The wine list here is so South American, practically any selection will make you feel like instigating a military coup. There's a nice variety of Latino alcoholic concoctions as well, from pisco sours to *caipirinha* to "build your own" mojitos—a couple of which should push



ABOVE: Mexican chocolate fritters served with caramel sauce and a *dolce de leche* ice cream.

BELOW: While you wait, the bar serves four mojito variations—including a build-your-own option.



WAPANGO

ADDRESS: Chesterfield Mall

WEBSITE: wapango.com

PHONE: 636-536-1151

AVERAGE MAIN COURSE: \$19

RESERVATIONS: *iClaro que sí!*

DRESS: Suavely

BOTTOM LINE: Stylish and hip, authentic Latin American cooking is employed for inventive and delicious dining at—we emphasize again with some relish—a mall.

further construction or any other sort of activity requiring fine motor skills off the list for the rest of your evening.

The interior at Wapango features a soaring ceiling, with soft yellow and orange walls; the wide-open spaces are broken only by a weird metal picket fence, apparently arranged by an earthquake. There's a nice bar and a combination of tables and booths. Concrete floors provide the acoustics of a steel mill, especially when the place is full, which it is, quickly and nightly. Service is wonderful; Wapango has grasped the importance of good and plentiful help. The exterior here, incidentally, is beautiful, with natural stone walls and enormous windows. And a note to all you urban hipsters: That big building attached to Wapango, one of the trendiest and most creative and enjoyable new eating spots around? That's a suburban mall. Life's ironic, isn't it? ●