

Latin Flavor Redefined at Wapango

By Suzanne Corbett

Expect the unexpected when dining for the first time at Wapango, one of St. Louis' newest restaurants. Here the décor is open and the design edgy with a Latin American style that's as eclectic as Wapango's tabletops.

"The tabletop at the bar and at the chef's table is made from pressed sorghum stalks – we even had them made into serving trays," said co-owner Todd Wyatt, who explained the concept from table décor to the chef's menu.

While the sorghum stalk trays and tabletops are pleasing, it's the flavor of the food that counts. And, those flavors and foods created at Wapango proved a surprise for my preconceived conceptions of what I thought was Latin cuisine. Forget the usual Mexican and Cuban fare that surfaced in recent years. Instead, think pan-Latin – translation, a fusion of flavors and ingredients used in traditional and non-traditional recipes throughout the whole of Latin American.

Chef Jason Sparks has overseen the creation of Wapango's menu where plantains, black beans and yellow rice are found in abundance, as are the menu selections. But let's begin at the beginning, the first course. To get a sample of tastes and textures, we



ordered the Carnivale, a combination platter of appetizers.

Arriving on a narrow sorghum tray was six offerings, two ceviches – one tuna (Ceviche de Atum) and one shrimp (Ceviche de Carmarones). Since I've never been a big fan of tuna, raw or otherwise, I favored the shrimp, which was served in an avocado half and seasoned with lime and chipotle.

Langostino Spring Rolls was another sample that proved a hit with my dining partner. Crisp and nicely stuffed with enough langostinos to carry the flavor throughout the dish, include dipping in the mango honey habanero sauce proved a great appetizer choice for anyone who is a meat and potato kind of guy.

Arepas, a Columbian white cake topped with smashed black beans, shredded pork carnitas that's drizzled with a chili-orange mojo and Tostones, crisp fried plantain patties served with a spicy black sauce and a pineapple pico de gallo are two traditional Latin starters included on the platter. Both good and each processed unique textures and flavors, however for my taste, the plantains could have used a little extra dash of salt. Speaking of which – salt and pepper shakers are not on the Wapango table. You have to request salt and pepper.

"We want you to taste the food first before you salt or pepper it," explained our server, which is a novel idea in St. Louis, but a practice I've seen on both coasts.

Reminiscent of Brazilian churrasco, the Wapango Feast for Two, priced at \$40.00, is the menu's best buy. Roasted samples of Pork Tenderloin, Beef Sirloin and Adodo Chicken arrived on a mini-sword and served with the Wapango trinity - black beans, rice and plantains. Chicken and pork had been roasted for hours to enhance the natural flavors and the seasonings while the sirloin seemed to be seasoned and cooked to order any gaucho would favor.

For diners seeking something other than a bountiful feast, order a

signal entrée. Just don't let the Spanish and Portuguese titles intimidate you. Take your time and read through the menu. You'll even discover tacos, but not the Tex Mex version. Here the tacos are Yucatan. Wapango's Yucatan Tacos are made with an achiote marinated chicken grilled with onions and flavored with a peanut sauce and fresh herbs and served with flour tortilla.

Wapango's cocktails, wines and desserts are as exciting as the rest of the menu and well worth exploring with or without dinner. The wine list offers exclusively South American wines, with an emphasis on Malbec. Malbec is a lovely rich red Argentine wine that's full of fruit and spice. It pairs well with grilled meats as well as Wapango's Chocolate Fritters with Carmel Sauce. You can also build your own mojito – from the classic lime and mint to tropical fruit. My favorite choice was the blood orange.

Dinner can be pricey with the average dinner with drinks costing about \$40.00. However, consider Wapango as an evening's destination, filled with live Latin music, exotic flavors served in portions large enough to share, making it a perfect night out for a group to party with Latin sizzle.

Wapango is located at 2020 Chesterfield Mall. For directions or reservations call 636-536-1151.

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