

JASO: MEXICO'S BEST?

This Polanco eatery features local, seasonal and organic raw materials in their creations

BY NICHOLAS GILMAN
Special to The News

"Forget the hole, there's plenty of donut," admonished my dining companion Suzanne, as I tried in vain to think of something to criticize. "This place is a gift," she said. And so it goes, after two spectacular meals, I hereby proclaim Jaso to be Mexico's No. 1 restaurant of the moment.

Located in the center of Polanco, this "Contemporary American" restaurant is the baby of U.S. chef Jared Reardon and his wife, master pastry chef Sonia Arias, a native "capitalina." Together they've created a superb gastronomic temple, featuring local, seasonal and organic raw materials.

Foams, vegetable and fruit reductions, and other already well-worn standards of contemporary *alta cocina* are used intelligently and discreetly here. Asian influences are evident, but one does not get the impression of trendiness for its own sake.

The couple met as students at The Culinary Institute of America, and later worked together at Bouley in New York's Tribeca. Returning to Sonia's hometown of Mexico City, they were able to realize their dream of opening their own restaurant. Jared is passionate about food, and unlike many emerging star chefs, he never strays far from his kitchen.

"Yes, he's always in," the waiter informed us when I asked if I could interview him for this article.

The food, although based on classic French concepts of preparation and presentation, is influenced by the teachings of Ferran Adria of El Bulli near Barcelona, a legendary destination of international chowhounds, where experiments with "molecular gastronomy" have turned the culinary world upside down in recent years.

How to get the most flavor out of a beet? Why not make



"Lechón," or suckling pig, is served in different guises.

a reduced beet Jell-o cube? What to do with the mundane sardine? How about serving it over olive oil ice cream?

Both chefs work with purveyors of exquisite artisanal products, from nearby or within the Federal District. Fresh raw milk, delivered twice daily, is used for ice creams, sauces and desserts. Hand-fed organic baby lamb and wild mushrooms from the State of Mexico grace the menu.

Chef Reardon makes two trips weekly to the Central de Abastos, the city's huge wholesale market, where he seeks out an inspiring array of foodstuffs to work with, creating new dishes for his constantly evolving menu. Sonia, the dessert and pastry chef, is inspired by Mexico's fabulous variety of fruits, and is equally fastidious in her selection of high quality ingredients.

The interior of Jaso is a series of modern rooms, simple but elegant, splashed with sunlight during the day, and romantically lit at night. Service is attentive and infallible – as it should be at this level.

On our first visit, we were offered an amuse-bouche of mint- and almond-scented "cappuccino," served in a martini glass with tiny cubes of beet aspic as a surprise at the bottom. For our second repast, this cocktail had morphed into a foam of cactus fruit and "jamaica" (hibiscus blossom), providing a sweet and sour contrast to several small grilled shrimps.

The confit of baby octopus, served on a bed of piquant eggplant puree, was tender and flavorful. And how about this for an appetizer: raviolis of foie gras bathed in black truff-

MORE INFO

Be aware that the menu is constantly changing.

Jaso
88 Newton, Col. Polanco
Tel: 5545-7476
Open Monday - Saturday,
2 p.m. - 11:30 p.m.
All credit cards accepted.
www.jaso.com.mx

fle sauce and beurre noisette, with bitter chocolate, black grapes, lashings of parmesan cheese, dotted with aged balsamic vinegar? This befuddling combination of mouth-watering, but seemingly egotistical ingredients, actually worked well, each of its parts surprisingly discernible.

We sampled a succulent "lechón" (suckling pig) twice, in different guises. One was beautifully complimented by a beet reduction sauce, the other cooked *sous vide* (i.e. sealed in a bag and slowly cooked in its own juices), with a hint of star anise to complement the delicate flavor of the meat.

Sea bass with puree of earthy wild mushrooms was another successful combination. Grilled skate, highlighted by finely diced pineapple, was glazed with the brown sauce traditionally served with Japanese eel – a simple and beautiful treat.

Wild Atlantic salmon (a rarity in Mexico) was marinated in miso, soy, and mirin (sweet Japanese rice wine), then grilled and accompanied by coconut-jasmine rice and a puree of broccoli spiked with spry slivers of grapefruit – the total an exercise in culinary

harmony.

Be aware that you may not find any of these dishes on the menu when you visit, as everything depends on what the chefs find each week, and what new discoveries they've made in their kitchen/laboratory. The bittersweet olive oil ice cream I tasted during my trip to the kitchen is part of an experimental dish that may never see the light of the dining room. Go with an open, adventurous mind.

Jaso's dessert menu is divided into two sections, Fruits and Chocolate. From the latter we chose the chocolate brioche topped with a crispy orange cookie lid (and served with the best pistachio ice cream I've ever tasted) – as rich as it sounds and looks. This frozen wonder is also available as part of the "degustación de helados" (ice cream taste).

An interesting fruit concoction is a velvety parfait of mamay – a subtle and beautiful fruit chef Sonia describes as undervalued. I'm sure it will appear on her menu in new guises if we wait long enough.

Finally, complimentary madeleines, fresh out of the oven, added a Proustian reflection on all things good, present and past.

Jaso is pricey (at least 750 pesos per person with wine – be aware that tip and tax are added onto the bill in addition to the printed prices), but well worth the splurge.

Financial crisis or no, I'm saving my pesos to come back soon.

Nicholas Gilman is author of "Good Food in Mexico City: A Guide to Food Stalls, Fondas and Fine Dining."

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