



# diningout

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT email diningout@suntimes.com | Follow @michaelnagrnt



The flaky vegetarian empanadas with blue cheese and leek are a favorite.



Try the salad of shaved Brussels sprouts, almond, radicchio, manchego cheese, lemon and olive oil.



The Moqueca fish, mussel and shrimp stew is among the menu highlights celebrating food from “la Casa” (“the home”) at La Sirena Clandestina, 945 W. Fulton. | RICH HEIN-SUN-TIMES PHOTO

## LA SIRENA CLANDESTINA ★★

954 W. Fulton  
(312) 226-5300;  
www.lasirenachicago.com

Hours: 4 p.m. – 2 a.m. daily;  
kitchen closes at 10:30 p.m.

Prices: appetizers and sides  
\$4-\$12; Larger plates, grilled  
items: \$8-\$28

Try: Empanadas, Moqueca,  
Brussels sprouts salad,  
alfajores

In a bite: A true taste of  
South America in Chicago’s  
old meatpacking district that  
doesn’t involve all-you-can-  
eat meat served on scimitars.

KEY: ★★★★★ Extraordinary;  
★★★★ Excellent;  
★★ Very Good; ★ Good;  
Zero stars: Poor

a drink, and the selection of cocktails from Anderson, including a daiquiri pumped up with sweet, rich, apricot preserves and the Cusco Cup — an elixir of bright lemon and cucumber, spicy ginger and a touch of the bitter digestif Fernet Branca — would fuel any resistance well.

Previously, South American food in Chicago had been limited to hunks of spit-roasted meat served on swords by faux gauchos. Manion instead draws on his childhood growing up in Brazil, celebrating the food of the home (la Casa) and the street (la Calle).

In the former category is the *Moqueca*, a wonderful comforting brew of spiced coconut milk-soaked, risotto-style rice pumped full of plump head-on-shrimp, steamed mussels, planks of whitefish and hearts of palm. There’s also a kebab of rabbit leg and loin served over pickled mustard-braised kale and well-turned baby carrots. The rabbit is slightly dry, but the sour mustard-coated greens and sweet al dente carrots are satisfying.

Every revolutionary deserves



Executive Chef John Manion runs a no-nonsense operation with a variety of unique offerings.

From the “la calle” part of the menu, comes a selection of buttery puff pastry empanadas stuffed with a rotating selection of flavors. Though I’m an unapologetic carnivore, the vegetarian empanada, dripping with a fondue of sharp blue cheese and melting sweet leek, is my favorite. The chicken and Cheddar empanada is also remarkably juicy, like an excellent cheeseburger. The empanadas are so flaky it’s impossible not to soil my table with their crumb. Thankfully, Anderson not only makes great cocktails, but he’s also ubiquitous with a towel, often running from table to table to wipe up empanada remains. He also acts as a second server, offering to take orders for wine, while our primary server spends her time focusing on the older couple to our left.

Though the meat-wielding gauchos, and their sabers, have been kept at bay, Manion does offer plenty of grilled meat (la parilla) at La Sirena. The ruddy rare steaks on offer — hanger and tri-tip — are nice, but it’s the crispy sweetbreads, showered with a confetti of vinegary salsa of pepper and onion, that’s the smoky

treat you’re not likely to find elsewhere. The flavor is punchy and the protein tender. The only thing missing? The sweetbreads could use a dusting of finishing salt to round things out.

But again, it’s not the flesh, as much as the veggies, that really sing at La Sirena. My wife and I (and the overzealous food runner trying to snap the plate away) parry and thrust our forks for the last bits of a salad of shaved Brussels sprouts, radicchio and Manchego cheese tossed with crispy bits of Marcona almond and a zingy lemon/olive oil vinaigrette.

Because La Sirena is a small

operation, they don’t have a dedicated pastry chef, but the cheesecake drizzled with a tiny bit of guava juice is light and tangy, and the *alfajores*, shortbread cookies smeared with dollop of caramel are a righteous sweet and salty indulgence.

Unless you’ve spent a lot of time in South America, you probably haven’t heard of an *alfajores* (or *moqueca*, or *salsa criolla*), and that’s what’s most exciting about Manion’s work. I didn’t love a side dish of *farofa*, a hot sandy mess of grated cassava tossed with raisins, but I loved the fact that it gave me an authentic look in to the comfort food served at the South American family table. Like the Mendezes at Vera, Manion is not following a business partner’s demand, rather, he’s cooking, clandestinely, rewarding diners from his heart and pursuing a creative unique voice that honors his heritage and his passions.



Shortbread cookies smeared with caramel are a sweet and salty dessert treat.

Michael Nagrant is a local free-lance writer. E-mail the Sun-Times Dining section at diningout@suntimes.com with questions and comments.

# A NEW STANDARD

## La Sirena Clandestina takes South American cuisine in Chicago to the next level

During the day, blood runs through these streets. At night, it’s whiskey that flows. Despite the fact that some of Chicago’s most refined, hot restaurants — Next, Moto and

the Publican — have claimed their place in the Fulton Market district, it is still very much a neighborhood of propane-belching forklifts, hanging beef carcasses, and men in hard hats and

long white coats whose edges are stained crimson. And maybe no Fulton Market restaurant represents that gritty “hog butcher (to the world)” heritage right now as well as La Sirena Clandestina,

a new South American-inspired spot from John Manion (formerly of Mas and Branch 27). It all starts with Manion, the square-jawed, barrel-chested one. He looks not like a celebrity

chef, but a forearm-tattooed, bare-knuckle brawler, a sturdy Hemingwayesque figure manning the kitchen pass. There’s also Manion’s partner Justin Anderson, bartender and part-time

kitchen general and de facto maitre ’D, who sports a bramble of a black beard that would make Grizzly Adams jealous. These two ooze masculinity, as does La Sirena’s oil-rubbed wood tables and looming rough-hewn back bar. The west wall of the restaurant is slicked with street art including a Roy Lichtenstein-esque handbill of the restaurant’s namesake (which translates to “clandes-