

eat & drink

Black cod al pastor



Fuel to the fire

Rick Bayless' Leña Brava dazzles in the West Loop

By Michael Nagrant | FOR REDEYE

Leña Brava, which translates to “ferocious wood,” might make a decent character name in the next “Magic Mike” flick. But in this case, it’s a nod to the fact that just about everything cooked at Rick Bayless’ new West Loop restaurant is wood-fired in a hearth or cooked over oak-stoked grills. That’s right; there’s not a single gas-fired dish coming from the kitchen at Leña Brava.

“We’ve got these fancy grills where the coals drop down and slow cook and there’s no flame, what Rick [Bayless] likes to call ‘romantic cooking,’” said chef de cuisine Fred Despres, who co-runs the kitchen alongside his wife, Lisa. “But we can’t do that because the restaurant is packed. So we stoke these huge firewood flames to get things going instead.”

I think Despres is underestimating the romance factor. The flames and sparkling embers I witnessed while dining were sexy and primal.

Bayless is in the (tiny) house

The room, which is topped with thick mahogany-colored timber joists and outfitted with exposed brick columns, is quite intimate. As I ate, I kept looking around for a secret passageway to another dining area, but there’s only a shared hallway that leads to tiny tacos, tequila and beer, aka Leña’s sister restaurant, Cruz Blanca. Given Bayless’ fame, you’d expect a banquet hall-sized dining room, one he’d have no problem filling. But instead, there are just 75 seats.

Rick’s wife, Deann, and daughter, Lanie, worked the host station the night I visited,



Lanie, Deann and Rick Bayless
BRIAN CASSELLA/TRIBUNE

making Leña a true family affair. Bayless strutted amidst tables, stopping to take diner-requested selfies every few minutes. He engaged every patron who stopped him and indulged in conversation. Even as one of the most famous chefs in America, he is undeni-

ably hands-on.

Over the past 20-plus years, Bayless has become the king of jarred salsas, saint of weary travelers with O’Hare’s Tortas Frontera and prince of philanthropy through Frontera Farmer Foundation. This is a long way of saying he can do anything, and yet he chooses to do one of the hardest things: open more restaurants. Frontera was one of the first truly authentic regional Mexican restaurants that didn’t sling free chips and salsa. Topolobampo was the first haute-cuisine Mexican restaurant in Chicago. Xoco introduced the masses to bean-to-cup hot chocolate like no one else could. And now, Bayless is bringing the seafaring flavors of Baja to the shores of Lake Michigan.

“I think Rick still opens restaurants because, one, his family is really committed to hospitality and sharing with diners. Rick lives, eats and breathes the restaurant life,” Despres said. “And also, despite his work,

RATINGS KEY ***** DEAD UPON ARRIVAL ***** PROCEED WITH CAUTION ***** GIVE IT SOME TIME ***** TAKE IT OR LEAVE IT ***** OFF TO A GOOD START ***** HEATING UP ***** ALREADY HOT



Bloody Maria

REVIEW
Leña Brava
900 W. Randolph St.
312-733-1975



Already hot

there's still a misconception about what real Mexican food is, that it's not Tex-Mex. And by opening new places, he can share the message of true regional Mexican cuisine."

A song of ice and fire

Bayless and the Despres' menu is divided into two sections: "Ice" houses salads and ceviches while "Fire" offers treats from the oven and hearth.

The Ice section absolutely sings. Sustainably sourced yellowtail, albacore tuna and less familiar fish like opah runneth over cups and plates. My favorite was the Bloody Maria (\$18), a bulbous goblet filled with firm white-fleshed tuna dripping in tomato and lime and tossed with a gazpacho-like assortment of crisp cucumber and zingy red

onion. The glass is rimmed with chili-spiked celery salt, and the whole thing is served with a sidecar shooter of mezcal. Our server told us we could pour it in or shoot it. I decided to shoot it as a reward for putting in work on that tasty dish.

Another star of the Ice section is the opah laminado (\$15), thin ruby-red planks of fish cured with salt and sugar and then smoked into what I can only describe as fish bacon. It's briny and topped with addictive spicy pork cracklins and grassy pea shoots. A creamy bacon-bean dip painted beneath the fish adds a silky touch.

While the menu is mostly Mexican, there are some Asian nods mixed in. The rock crab salad (\$15), for instance, gets a generous helping of Kewpie mayo that binds tender



Apple tart



Leña Ice



Dungeness and rock crab flesh, flame-grilled serrano pepper rounds, scallions and bitter frisee lettuce.

It's getting hot in here

Those seductive fires in the kitchen are also responsible for some serious eats. None may be better than flaky blackened cod al pastor (\$26), gleaming with a rusty orange achiote, red chili and pineapple rub. It's topped with pineapple salsa that's studded with bits of citrusy shiso leaf. House-griddled tortillas made from freshly ground heirloom corn masa made especially for Leña Brava are served on the side. I'd venture to say it's the best fish taco in Chicago right now.

There's also octopus "carnitas" (\$24) sous-vided in pork fat for seven hours and char-roasted on the wood-fired grill. The sous-vided process (super-slow cooking in a vacuum pack) creates a very tender tentacle, and the wood grill provides a caramelized sweet and bitter bark on the flesh.

Liquid gold

While I ate, I spent a lot of time mesmerized by the glinting kaleidoscope of mezcal bottles lining the bar. Not only is the colorful assortment aesthetically pleasing, but a quick

round of mental math made me realize I was sitting about 10 feet away from a year's worth of rent in liquid form. Those mezcal bottles aren't just pretty and expensive, though. My favorite deployment of the spirit was a cocktail called Leña Ice (\$12) with mezcal, yellow chartreuse, lime juice, cucumber and serrano chili. Fiery, sweet, sour and bracing, each sip felt like a liquid spa retreat.

Bless your tart

My server was so emphatic about the apple tart from pastry chef Suzanne Imaz that I bit despite the \$15 price tag. This ain't no limp, fussy French tarte tatin. The shareable dessert is a rough-hewn, flaky, free-form pastry stuffed with caramelized apples that burst with ginger and black pepper spice. It's smoky from the wood-fired oven and drizzled with acidic tamarind-caramel sauce that foiled the overall richness of the dish.

Bottom line: Rick Bayless has created another unique masterpiece, a wood-fired seafood-serving citadel that conjures the azure waters, salty air and shimmering sun of Mexico's northern Baja state.

REPORTERS VISIT RESTAURANTS UNANNOUNCED AND MEALS ARE PAID FOR BY REDEYE.