

eat&drink

Desierto Florido at Ronero.
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE FILELIQUID
GETAWAYRONERO IS A COCKTAIL DESTINATION
IN WEST LOOP, BUT THE FOOD HAS
SOME CATCHING UP TO DO**By Michael Nigrant** | FOR REDEYE

Ronero, a new Latin American/Cuban restaurant in the West Loop, is the kind of place where I'd imagine dictators or Scarface spending a night away from the rigors of managing a cartel. You could easily picture Fidel Castro hunkered down in one of the rattan peacock chairs, smoking a Cohiba and regarding the glass chandeliers while stroking the straggly tendrils of his prodigious beard.

The ceiling is a beautiful crosshatch of chocolate-colored timbers. The wavy banquettes are marked with an island palm frond print, and the restaurant's soundtrack is rich with rhumba. On the night I visited, strains of "Guantanamera" crooned and mingled with the wafting perfume of garlic-soaked fried tostones.

The backlit bar features a trove of rum and glinting glass bottles filled with amber- and tobacco-colored liqueurs. With a list of 25 cocktails and many more highballs and drams, Ronero is a sexy place to get your drink on. Were this New York City, you could imagine Marnie dragging Shosh and Hannah here for a post-work tittle (if, of

Review: Ronero738 W. Randolph St. 312-600-6105
Rating: ★½ stars (out of four)

course, any of the "Girls" characters had real jobs). They might order the Cipitio (\$13), which packs the aromatic wallop of an orange grove, the puckering tang of a granny smith apple, and a bitter bite of watercress with the soft sweet finish of pineapple and mango.

Noted Cuban exile Ernest Hemingway might order his namesake Hemingway daiquiri (\$13), which is a bit of a misnomer. I doubt Papa would tolerate the smoked sea salt rim. I imagine he would, however, love the bracing splash of grapefruit juice, the almond and cherry tones of Lazzaroni maraschino and the hint of nutmeg in the dry rum.

Service at the bar and in the dining room made an evening at Ronero feel as easy as an afternoon on a sandy Colombian beach. While I dined, I noticed owner Nils Westlund, who grew up in Colombia, checking tables in the front. When he found one

whose wobble troubled him, he quickly asked the staff to remove the table from service and rearranged the other tables to fill the gap.

The food menu has more than 20 choices and is ripe with Latin classics such as ropa vieja, albondigas (meatballs), ceviche and empanadas. As much as I would have liked to eat it all, I couldn't, so my server endured a lengthy interrogation. She was knowledgeable and decisive in parsing my queries.

Chef Cory Morris (Mercat a la Planxa, Rural Society) helms the kitchen. His pedigree suggests that the food at Ronero should be exemplary. Sometimes it is. The cordero (\$42), which features a wealth of crispy char-crusted lamb chop lollipops with medium-rare flesh, is the pinnacle of exquisite carnivorousness. The rich lamb is cut by a bright huacatay sauce and nested in a salty soulful hash of Peruvian potato and pancetta.

The ceviche mixta (\$16) boasts plump limey hunks of mahi mahi bathed in coconut milk and spiked with fiery Fresno chili slivers. I loved the crunch of fat oven-

toasted corn nuts sprinkled on top. I didn't love that the shrimp in the mix was a touch soggy. Ropa vieja (\$15), which translates to "old clothes," is often an apt descriptor, as the braised meat left behind in the preparation is sometimes dry and shredded like cast-off vintage laundry. Morris', the product of a 14-hour braise, is the silkiest I've ever had. It's topped with goat cheese, which adds a touch of seasoning. Still, I yearned for more salt here. The empanada (\$11) pastry shined with a golden egg wash, but the chicken inside was gritty and under-salted. A dollop of chimichurri featuring a blast of red pepper and grassy herbs saved the day.

The menu has a section called "el gran show," which highlights huge family-style platters. I went for the pescado frito (\$80), or whole fried red snapper swimming in a bed of a coconut-cola rice flanked by grilled oranges and fried smashed plantains. Morris brought it out, filleted it off the bone tableside and proudly explained that all the pin bones had been removed before it was cooked. Unfortunately, there was a bone in my very first bite. Still, that



Cordero lamb chops



Pescado frito
LENNY GILMORE/REDEYE

was the only bone I encountered. The fish had been seasoned with toasted coriander, ginger and chilies, but I only got a hint of these flavors—not the pungent punch I craved. The biggest disappointment, however, was that the corn starch and flour crust on the fish was heavy and gloppy.

But the coconut-cola rice was a revelation. It's cooked in a combination of water, stock and Coca-Cola and tossed with roasted coconut, shallots and garlic. I was full and my belly distended like a Goodyear blimp, but I couldn't stop eating that rice. Parts of the mix were crusty like the goodies you find on the bottom of paella or a sizzling bibimbap platter. The interplay of sweet coconut, crunchy shallot and soft rice was such a satisfying textural mélange. The only problem: The plate goes for \$80, which is a lot, even for transcendent rice. My favorite deep-fried whole snapper is served at El Barco in West Town, where

the cross-hatched fried flesh breaks off in delectable nuggets, all for the wallet-friendly price of \$23.

Morris also oversees the desserts and is clearly a rice master. The rice pudding (\$12), made with bomba or Spanish paella rice, is killer. The cool sweet porridge bursts with star anise and vanilla. Dehydrated pinwheels of pineapple add a crisp counterpoint to the whole thing.

The bottom line

Ronero is made for serious cocktailing and the service is great. The food, especially stuff made with rice, has some great moments, but there are also some seasoning and execution issues that need to be addressed before Ronero can hang with Chicago's great restaurants.

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