

## Peruvian chef Gaston Acurio charms at his first Chicago restaurant Tanta

By Michael Nigrant | FOR REDEYE

You might not have heard of Peruvian chef Gaston Acurio, but he has 33 restaurants around the world, including Astrid y Gaston in Lima, which ranked one spot higher (#14) on The World's 50 Best Restaurants 2013 list than Chicago's celebrated Alinea. Tanta, his newest spot in River North, is only his third restaurant in the United States. While Tanta, billed as a casual cebicheria (heavy on citrus-cured seafood), isn't shooting to be a four-star restaurant like Astrid y Gaston, it displays the mark of a very talented chef.

**The scene:** A huge mural on the east wall depicting the Peruvian countryside, an octopus tentacle, floating chilis and a buxom Latina beauty looks like the work of a talented street graffitist. A grey slatted half-wall divides the chalkboard-backed bar from the comfy banquette-studded dining room. Though hot new spots like Tanta are usually dominated by the young and sharply dressed, the night I visited, the place was filled with a mostly older crowd, many khaki- and linen-clad, nursing pisco sours.

**The food:** The temperature topped 90 degrees outside when I visited and the AC struggled to keep up, leaving the air thick with humidity. Acurio's food was the perfect foil. From the tiradito (Peruvian sashimi-style plates) portion of the menu, the nikei (\$16) featuring diamond-shaped pieces of ruby-colored ahi tuna dripping with honey, passion fruit and a sweet lime and chili-brightened sauce called leche de tigre (which translates to tiger's milk) was especially cooling. Cebiche chifa (\$16), lime-cured bass tossed with smoky roasted peanuts, crispy wonton strips and spicy ginger threads, was refreshing. Chef de cuisine Jesus Delgado said that unlike many Mexican ceviches, Peruvian cebiches are made at the last minute, so the seafood and other ingredients don't get soggy. The man speaks the truth—this bass was exceptionally firm and fresh. Causita clasica (\$9), whipped Peruvian potatoes dabbed with huancaina (a sauce of condensed milk, queso fresco cheese and fiery aji chilis) and heaped with crab, avocado, tomato and a half-moon slice of hard-boiled egg, had the potential to bog me down with heat, but the potatoes were smartly served at room temperature. The chaufa aeropuerto (\$18), a pork-studded fried rice topped with a custardy shrimp omelet served in a stone bowl, was probably the only dish that didn't have some kind of lifting acidity. And yet, like Korean bibimbop, it was



Nikei tiradito  
JASON LITTLE/  
PHOTOS FOR  
REDEYE

# Southern wild

### MINI-REVIEW:



### Tanta

118 W. Grand Ave. 312-222-9700  
Heating up

rich and comforting, the kind of thing you'd like to eat in the morning while nursing a killer hangover.

**The drinks:** Though I was thoroughly stuffed, I was so enthralled by the chaufa aeropuerto that I kept digging in until the waiter mercifully arrived and packed up the rest for me to take home. Thankfully, the Smooth Criminal cocktail (\$12), a mix of herbal chartreuse, woody rye and chocolate-like bitters, had a digestif-like quality that perked me up enough to power through dessert. Tanta's classic pisco sour (\$12), made from lime juice and Pisco (Peruvian grape brandy) shaken with sugar and egg white until frothy, was also a nice summery sip.

**The service:** Though our server was generally knowledgeable and attentive, he took awhile to take my order and was a touch pushy on the upsells, prodding me to order another cocktail when mine was only half



gone. The pacing of the meal was also slow; it took a whopping 47 minutes from the time my table was seated to receive our first course. This kind of lag seemed to be par for the tables surrounding mine.

**Bottom line:** While most Peruvian spots in Chicago serve heavy carb- and meat-laden home-style plates, Tanta's fare—which is balanced with acidity and features the pleasing interplay of crisp and soft textures—is the

inspiring work of an accomplished gourmet chef. Just don't come here if you're in a hurry. While the dining room at Tanta pulsates with throbbing beats and a vibrant energy, the kitchen is very deliberate and food trickles out at a slow pace.

MICHAEL NAGRANT IS A REDEYE SPECIAL CONTRIBUTOR.

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

REDEYE@TRIBUNE.COM | @REDEYEEATDRINK