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Tantalizing Tapas

El Vaquero raises the bar.

On a seemingly ordinary Thursday night, El Vaquero was bustling. The new restaurant in 5th Street Public Market has only been open a few weeks, but clearly word has gotten around that there's something special going on here. Owners Katie Marcus and Sara Willis, who also own Red Agave, have hit the mark in every regard with this spacious, comfortably elegant tapas restaurant. Dark wood and warm gold tones make the space inviting; the simply designed menu lists dishes in Spanish with an English translation beneath; and the service is impeccable.

El Vaquero

296 E. 5th Ave. (5th Street Public Market).
Lunch, 11:30 am-4:30 pm. Dinner, 5:30 pm-10 pm Su-Th; 5:30 pm-11 pm F & Sa. Tapas, 11 am-1 am. \$\$\$-\$\$\$\$.

the stage for the heartier dishes to come. The coconut prawns were succulent, lightly fried, the sauce zingy but not overwhelming. Lobster meatballs, so tender they fell apart in the mouth, made for an unusual texture and flavor combination. The sweet potato fritters, crispy outside but soft and moist inside, were lightly spiced, with a faintly Indian tang.

But without question, the most stunning dish was one not on the menu. We'd planned to order the sashimi aquachile, fresh ahi tuna with serrano chiles, but for the night the dish had changed to a tuna steak on a bed of Dungeness

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El Vaquero has two menus, one for entrées with delectable-looking side dishes, and a tapas menu with an incredible array of small plates. It can be hard to tell how many small plates you'll need (or crave), but you can hang on to your menu and order in stages. Five tapas plates for two people (with two miniature desserts) left us happily stuffed.

Garlic scallops, crab crepes, Red Agave's grilled baby back ribs, artichoke tamale — how's a person to pick? We started with a cheese plate, taking our waitress's suggestions of Mt. Tam, a soft, triple-cream California cheese, and garrotxa, a tart, hard goat cheese from Spain. Served with two slices of bread and a handful of almonds, the cheeses — along with the cucumber, lime and guacamole tasting plate that arrived before we'd even ordered drinks — nicely set

crab mashed potatoes, topped with braised fennel. Each element alone was delicious, but together they created virtual perfection. The buttery, falling-apart fennel sweetened the tuna, and the crab gave the potatoes a distinct texture and a last kick of flavor.

We opted to end with two tapas dessert plates: a tiny pot of chocolate and peanut butter topped with whipped cream and one solitary peanut, and a seashell-sized key lime tartlet with the same mildly sweetened cream. Both were so luscious we could hardly have eaten more.

The true appeal of El Vaquero isn't just that the dishes are an utter taste treat. It's the fun of anticipating each plate, comparing one to the next and sharing them all with your dining companion(s). This is food to linger over, to savor, to have fun with — and definitely not to miss. **ew**

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