

## Guava Tree Cafe

### ¡Pura Vida!

January 31, 2011

Men are often accused of using unrestrained hyperbole at times in their speech and writing, maybe like this:

*“The Cubano Sandwich that I had this afternoon at The Guava Tree Cafe is the absolute best that I have ever had anyplace in this Universe or its parallels.”*

This is not only not hyperbole, but also a justifiable statement. Here's why.



My Favorite Cubano

Roast pork is the soul of a Cubano. It must be perfect. The pork prepared by Anamargarita Otero,

the vivacious and effervescent chef, has been lovingly marinated and slow roasted to enhance the flavor and retain the juiciness of the pork without rendering all the fat (which dries out the pork). This, together with sweet ham, nutty tasting Swiss cheese, thin pickles, and the correct mustard is placed on delicious bread (from TLC on Osuna) and finished off in a panini press until the cheese pulls it all together. Three napkins juicy. My first bite brought tears to my eyes — I have been searching for this kind of perfection for decades, and now I have found it.



Arepa de Pabellón

LP, my lovely lunch companion, had an Arepa de Pabellón — flavorful shredded beef, black beans, sweet plantains, and fresco cheese served on a muffin of fine, white cornmeal that was crispy on the outside and delicately smooth on the inside. This combination is superb (no, not more hyperbole), and the blend of flavors and textures is astonishingly good. It was accompanied by rice and beans, a small green side salad, and a small side of Colombian Hogao, Hogao is one of the most traditional Colombian seasoning sauces. It is used either as a base for many typical Colombian dishes or just as a dipping sauce for Patacones, platanitos and yuca frita, or just as a topping for arepas. This is a rarified combination, and Ani does it very well.

### Ajiaco Santafereno

On a return visit, I had Ani's version of Bogota's Favorite Dish: Ajiaco Santafereno. It is the perfect expression of Colombian indigenous and Spanish culture with native main ingredients like potato and corn mixed with Spanish acquisitions such as chicken and capers.

It is said to have been invented by the Chibcha natives of the Cundinamarca and Boyaca regions; starting out as a potato based soup with "guascas" a type of green leaf and "aji" a concoction

made with onions and cilantro and a kick of spices, with which this recipe can not exist. In Colonial times the Spaniards added the protein, capers and heavy cream, resulting and what we enjoy today as “Ajiaco Santafereno.” Ani’s version is superb.

**March 20, 2011**



Empanadas LechonEmpanadas Lechon

Empanadas Lechon—baked empanadas filled with flavorful bits of slow roasted lechon! Muy delicioso.

I had these for lunch yesterday with a new old friend, Pedro. Served with black beans, rice, sweet fried plantains, and a delicious mango salsa. This was one of Ani’s specials. Seems that everything she creates is special.

The Guava Tree Cafe was opened on November 27, 2010, by Maricarmen Pijem de Barbosa and Diego Barbosa (Diego es un barista excepcional — try his double Cuban), and is their dream come true. It is a welcome addition to the UNM scene just south of Central on Yale, a few doors south of The Outpost.



Chef Anamargarita (Ani) Otero

The chef, Ani, a native of Puerto Rico, is a graduate of the CNM culinary arts program, and she learned well. We talked with her for nearly an hour during our initial visit. She lived in Baltimore (my home town) for a time, and understands real crabcakes. She has many dreams for Guava Tree. As

the business expands and maybe hires more staff, she will try baking Cuban bread (which cannot be found in Albuquerque) on site. She said, with a sly wink of an eye, that she has many more tricks up her sleeve. I bet she does, and I can't wait to taste them. Ask her for her special of the day — you can't go wrong.

The Guava Tree Cafe is one of those rare finds in New Mexico. You need to try it. Bring some friends; I have sent many there. You may even see me there, because I have put it on my regular rotation.

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## **Asado de Cerdo con Vegetales Asados ??por Ani**

On a recent Saturday afternoon while erranding in Nob Hill, we needed a real treat for a late lunch, and Guava Tree Cafe loomed large, diet or no. Could Chef Anamargarita (Ani) whip up some low-cal magic for us?

And how.

We explained our diet requirements to her, she winked, and said, "Watch this." She knew that her Cubano is my favorite sandwich in all of New Mexico, and disappeared into her tiny kitchen.



Roast Pork and Roasted Vegetables por Ani

She reappeared in about twelve minutes, grinning that pulchritudinous grin, and set before us two plates of the most delicious and beautiful looking diet food I have ever seen. Two rolled-up slices of her perfect slow-roasted pork (the soul of her Cubano) flanked a mound of oven-roasted vegetables. Red onions (with a hint of oil and balsamic vinegar), mushrooms, olives, tomatoes, sweet red peppers, and she deftly placed a few curls of zucchini to complete the artwork. A beautiful plate of food. And it tasted as good as it looked — fabulous.

Each vegetable had been roasted slowly, carefully, and individually, and the dish was assembled at plating. Each texture was appropriate. Each taste was distinct — no vegetable mish-mash here.

Ani is a magician and an artist. She listens. She knows. Best lunch we have had in a very long time.

And Jane and I did indeed lose weight that weekend.

## **Guava Tree Cafe**

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