A taste of Lima

Peruvian restaurant INKA opens on Poydras

Beth D'Addono

AFTER VEHO HOSPITALITY opened two restaurants-within-restaurants this year, it seemed like the group had plenty on its hands. Instead, the locally owned company has opened another new concept.

INKA is its latest venture for owners Danny Cruz and his wife and partner Vilexys Salas, conceived and executed in a whirlwind two months in the former Johnny Sanchez space at 930 Poydras St. The team opened Inka on Nov. 2.

"Everything happened really fast," says Diana Perez, the company's director of operations. "After Johnny Sanchez closed in May, Danny came into the office and said we should have something there. My thought was, we're just getting situated. But Danny is a very ambitious person. His instinct was right."

INKA is just steps away from the Mexico City-inspired Taquerias Carnalito, which opens to the sexy speakeasy concept Tragos Amargos through what looks like a jukebox in the back.

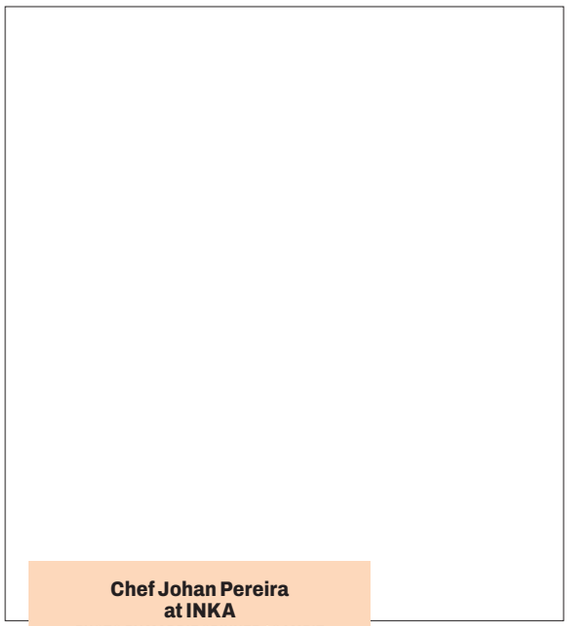
To open their first Peruvian restaurant, the team made a one-week dive into the bars and restaurants of Lima. Cruz and Salas brought Perez, bar program developer Evan Smits and executive chef Johan Pereira along for the ultimate bar and restaurant crawl.

"We learned so much," Perez says. "We were surprised at how elevated and sophisticated the scene was."

Peru's three main ecosystems inform the drink and the food offerings. The menu includes dishes inspired by Costa, the coast, Selva, the Peruvian Amazon, and Sierra, the Andes.

For chef Pereira, exploring Lima's flavors was both familiar and new. Earlier in his career, he was a chef at a Peruvian restaurant in Madrid, working under his mentor chef Jorge Rodriguez, who collaborated with this opening.

The Peruvian menu is anchored by five cured-to-order ceviches made from local fish and shrimp, as well as imported Spanish seafood, flavored with fresh lime, leche de tigre and hints of aji amarillo, the country's distinctive hot chilis.



Chef Johan Pereira at INKA
PHOTO BY MADDIE SPINNER / GAMBIT

Another national dish, nicknamed por la causa, or "for the cause," is a reference to a cold potato dish sold during 19th century wartimes. Fluffy whipped potatoes bright with citrus are piped into what looks like a bright yellow bird's nest dotted with herbs and flowers. At INKA, it's then layered with Louisiana blue crab, Gulf shrimp or the traditional chicken with aioli, avocado and olives.

There also is a menu of "chifa," or Peruvian dim sum, referencing the country's sizeable Chinese population. Options include steamed shrimp dumplings or a mixture of pork and shrimp.

Larger shareable dishes include the traditional lomo saltado, or strips of filet sautéed in a soy-based gravy with tomatoes and chunks of potato, served with rice on the side. Fettuccine is topped with a huancaina sauce, made with yellow chilis, and queso fresca. Another iconic dish, aji de gallina, is a rich, comforting stew of shredded chicken simmered in a golden chili and cheese sauce.

For dessert, a soft Basque-style cheesecake is served with passionfruit.

On the drinks side, where pisco is the start of the conversation, coastal flavors reflect minerality. The jungle inspires tropical, aromatic sips, and the mountains bring herbal, earthy notes.

On the tour of Lima, they went to high profile spots like Muna and Lady Bee. Smits brought his impressions back to the company's bar leader, Ivan Castillo, a consultant from Mexico City.

"We adjusted our formulas to be less citrus forward — like they are in Mexico City — to bring more sweetness into balance," Castillo says.

INKA has an open floor plan, like its predecessor, but now, instead of images of Mexico, one wall is painted with a huge mural of the Andes Mountains, and Peruvian imagery from artist Connie A. Harris of St. Gabriel, Louisiana. Peruvian textiles drape from the ceiling. Wrought iron chandeliers, an uplit bar and a soft, life-size llama adorn the space.

The Peruvian concept expands Veho's borders and delivers a polished, flavor-packed dining experience.

"When we expanded with Tacos del Cartel three years ago, we learned so much about what our priorities are and what we wanted to improve," Perez says. "We are focused on quality of ingredients and service. Peruvian cuisine may be new for some of our guests, but we are confident they will love it."

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