

AUGUST 2 - 8, 2007

## FOOD

## Mauricio Fraga-Rosenfeld



When Mauricio Fraga-Rosenfeld departed his home in Ecuador at 20 years old—deciding to leave after “too much partying” and a “rough situation”—his businessman father gave him a gold wrist-watch and said, “When you’re ready to come back, this is your ticket.”

The watch came back, but Fraga-Rosenfeld did not. These days, he sports his own Breitling watch, a perk of becoming one of the country’s most innovative nightlife impresarios/restaurateurs. With his wife and business partner, he’s owner of some of the area’s swankiest restaurant/bars and lounges: Chi-Cha Lounge, Gua-Rapo and its accompanying Nena Lounge, two Ceviche locations, Maté, and Gazusa. He’s also credited with having started the cigar-and-martini-lounge trend after opening Ozio in 1995.

Chi-Cha, his flagship joint, opened in 1996 and has become his business model. “Chi-Cha is my baby, my favorite,” admits the New Jersey-born Fraga-Rosenfeld, who moved to his parents’ Ecuador when he was 2 years old. “The concept of Chi-Cha was to make a very cozy, neighborhood place—a Cheers. How does the song go? ‘Where everyone knows your name?’” The iconic Chi-Cha’s rich, dark red decor, crushed velvet drapes, secondhand kitschy sofas, and warm lighting makes it chic and sophisticated, but also comfortable and homey. The restaurant offers a menu of modern Andean cuisine made up of family recipes. “I would call my grandma and ask her, ‘Abuelita, how do you prepare a ceviche [fish or shrimp in a citrus-tomato based marinade] or yapingachos [mashed potato patties filled with cheese]?’ I would then prepare them in my apartment,” explains Fraga-Rosenfeld.

A decade after opening Chi-Cha, he opened Maté, continuing the concept of cultural fusion. While Chi-Cha fuses Middle Eastern Arguileh—hookahs for inhaling fruit-flavored smoke—with Latin American cuisine, at the posher Maté, Fraga-Rosenfeld rolls up tamale paste and plantains into Japanese sushi rolls as the featured dish. He also takes credit for bringing the “new Peruvian gastronomic movement” to the area in 2006 with Ceviche in Silver Spring. The menu is centered on the ceviche appetizer, but also offers various platos fuertes—or “heavy entrées”—such as ají de camarones, jumbo shrimp in ají amarillo sauce with cilantro, parmesan cheese, and rice. Ceviche’s popularity inspired him to open a second, brand-new location in Glover Park.

And he’s only warming up. In November, Fraga-Rosenfeld plans to open a new Clarendon restaurant, Yaku, focusing on another specialty of Peruvian cuisine—the chifa, a seafood rice plate

that is part paella and part Chinese fried rice. Fraga-Rosenfeld, a furniture designer and the de facto interior decorator for most of his spots, says he’s already picked out the art for the new place and assures, “It’s going to be gorgeous.” He is also scoping out locations for his Argentinean grill bistro Santo Pecado (“blessed sin”). Then there’s his Pais Tropical eco-tourism resort project near Quito, and his Belly Hop record-label partnership, which he hopes will blossom into a Middle Eastern hip-hop cultural movement.

It wasn’t always as easy as Fraga-Rosenfeld makes it look. He turned his life around literally overnight—from a life of debauchery in Ecuador to getting up at 6 a.m. to work alongside prisoners at a \$3-an-hour construction job. Then he became a door-to-door encyclopedia salesman to pay for college, once selling encyclopedias to a sheriff and his staff while sitting in jail because of a case of mistaken identity (he looked like a guy wanted for child abduction).

When a student discount-card business crashed before his senior year, he was evicted, kicked out of school, and went days without eating. He got back on track by promoting clubs, and later opened Chi-Cha in the “only place I could afford”—an old fire station on then-empty U Street. To build his clientele, he would offer to buy passersby drinks, a strategy he would later modify after opening Gua-Rapo only a few weeks after 9/11, going door-to-door in nearby apartment buildings inviting residents to stop by for a drink.

Along the way, he’s done whatever it takes to succeed and prove the doubters wrong. His partner at Ozio told him combining cigars and martinis wouldn’t work; billionaire Richard Branson didn’t agree, as he once stopped by for smoke. Fraga-Rosenfeld’s friends and family called him “crazy” for opening Chi-Cha on U Street, where he had to usher homeless people away from the front door; the restaurant has since helped build up the neighborhood into one of the region’s liveliest.

So when will it be enough? “I’ll stop when I die,” Fraga-Rosenfeld says. “Originally, the money was the motivation; now it’s to build. I really look forward to building projects with my kids. It will be a lot of fun.”

As for the gold watch? “I let my grandpa have it after his was stolen,” he says. “He wears it to this day.”—Mario I. Oña

WASHINGTON

## CLEVELAND PARK

Dino

It’s hard to say who’s the star here, owner Dean Gold, a beloved member of the city’s culinary society, or the wine list, which is his baby—actually, twins: the “focus” list of a mere 90 wines, and reserve list of more than 200. A couple dozen come by the glass or the very civilized option of a 3-ounce *ombra*. On the reserve list, Gold provides a personal discussion of each wine. Almost as much attention goes into finding rare cheeses from Italy, and executive chef Daniel Amaya keeps both cheese and wine in mind when crafting his highly authentic Italian menu, with an emphasis on sustainable sources. For: Great wine and the food that loves it. Entrées: \$12-\$25. 202-686-2966. O, V. **3435 Connecticut Ave. (Cleveland Park) [JS]**

## DUPONT CIRCLE

Dupont Italian Kitchen

Fettuccine alfredo is a naughty gem of a pasta dish, and Dupont Italian Kitchen is one of the District’s finest providers, delivering a version that could match any Jersey strip-mall Italian restaurant. Swimming in a creamy, yet not too thick, sauce, it’s classic, and perfect, and it’s more or less impossible to leave a noodle on the plate. Don’t want to feel overwhelmingly guilty about the Washington Monument-sized caloric intake? Add broccoli. (You *could* split the for-two Caesar salad, sure, but, hey, life is short.) Seafood specials such as salmon with mango salsa are good, but, if you’re going that route, you might as well cross the Circle to the neighborhood’s fish mecca, Pesce. For: Inhaling so much pasta you’ll be too stuffed for dessert and not even mind. Entrées: \$8-\$15. 202-328-3222. B, L, O. **1637 17th St. (Dupont Circle) [SKG]**

## FRIENDSHIP HEIGHTS

American City Diner

Sit down, order a black-and-white milkshake, and play a Blood Sweat And Tears song at a table jukebox at the fun, ‘50s-themed American City Diner. As it is in Heaven, breakfast is served all day, but also try the open-face hot turkey sandwich with mashed potatoes, diner-standby bacon cheeseburger, or any blue-plate special. The servers must come from Jersey, as their sass is undeniable and totally lovable. Watch out, though: The kiddies roam free and owner Jeffrey Gildenhorn sometimes dons a conductor hat as a toy train circles the tracks above diners’ heads. ACD can make for a great date night though, with free movies projected onto a large screen on the patio; the diner shows everything from *Grease* to *Some Like It Hot* to *Fatal Attraction*. For: A Jersey diner experience in the nation’s capital. Entrées: \$3-\$13. 202-244-1949. B, L, O. **5532 Connecticut Ave. (Friendship Heights) [SKG]**

## GEORGETOWN

Ralph Lauren Rugby Café

If eating a meal in the annex of the “hip, young” imprint of an über-preppy fashion label sounds like your personal hell, think again. Of all the Rugby stores around the country, D.C.’s is the only one to have an in-house eatery. And, surprisingly, it doesn’t suck—in fact, it’s quite good. Particularly yummy are the chicken Scots burger and fresh-fruit smoothies. With a breakfast menu and bar that’s open until the wee hours on weekends, Rugby has become a multi-purpose meeting place for students and shoppers. The sartorial side’s posh academia vibe extends into the café, which looks like a prep school dean’s office, with clipboard menus and beaker candleholders reminiscent of sophomore-year chem class. You’ll probably enjoy your dining experience in this periwinkle popped-collar paradise more than you’d like to admit. For: Basic cuisine served by Abercrombie models. Entrées: \$9-\$14. 202-298-6894. B, O. **1065 Wisconsin Ave. (30, 32, 34, 35, 36) [AL]**

## TAKOMA

Red Line Grill

Sitting inconspicuously next to Takoma Station, the Red Line Grill is a glutton’s delight. Less than \$35 gets a hungry couple enough to gorge themselves—both that evening and the subsequent afternoon—on barbecued ribs (slathered in sauce and tender, with the meat dropping off the bone), gourmet buffalo wings, baked beans, fries, collard greens, and slaw. The meals are packaged in obvious little combos that make ordering easy: A soda, a pulled pork sandwich, and fries runs around \$7. There are a handful of booths—from which you can watch the chef prepare

O: Outdoor seating  
B: BrunchV: Vegetarian-friendly  
L: Late-night (after 10 p.m.)

your meal—and a television. The service is assured and nearly sublime, especially if one enjoys being served by a cute 5-year-old. The menu also includes seafood. For: An inexpensive, relaxed, delicious meal before the go-go goes on next door. Entrées: \$6-\$24. 202-291-9464. L. **6912 Fourth St. (Takoma) [TF]**

## U STREET

Crème Café

Pork ‘n’ beans, grits, and chicken noodle soup: Sounds like comfort food from mom’s kitchen, right? But they’re also on the menu at this much buzzed-about hangout, where chef Terrell Danley puts his own gloss on soul food in a modern setting. Crème operates at the nexus of chic and down-home, serving up deep-fried deliciousness with five-star attention to flavor and presentation. Visual highlights include the semi-exposed kitchen and a colorful clientele primed for people-watching. As for edibles, Mama Laura’s chicken is a lip-smacker, and diners needn’t even like pork or beans to be bowled over by Danley’s tender, mouth-watering version. The spartan dessert menu leaves something to be desired, but the entrée portions are so heaping it doesn’t matter. For: Sumptuous soul food. Entrées: \$10-\$18. 202-234-1884. B. **1322 U St. (U Street) [AL]**

MARYLAND

## SILVER SPRING

Jackie’s

Silver Spring is becoming a nightlife destination, and the most ambitious restaurant in the mix is Jackie Greenbaum’s funky eatery. Converted from an auto parts store, Jackie’s looks like the cool kids’ clubhouse, with patterned pillows, hanging dots, and a stylish evening crowd at the bar. Chef Sam Adkins’ menu uses impeccable ingredients to update comforting favorites, such as pork chops with applesauce (free-range pork, organic collard greens, and mashed sweet potatoes) or succulent chicken breast (free-range, skin on, with fresh skinny fries and a red-wine vinegar glaze). Popular starters include tricked-out miniature “Elvis burgers” and tiny, luscious pork riblets in a finger-licking black-bean sauce. The daily Nostalgia Plate finds new potential in classics from the American heartland, such as roast beef with mashed potatoes, spaghetti and meatballs, or meatloaf with green beans. For: Fun, retro atmosphere and fun, retro food. Entrées: \$15-\$26. 301-565-9700. B, L, O, V. **8081 Georgia Ave. (Silver Spring). [JS]**

## TAKOMA PARK

Mark’s Kitchen

Mark’s Kitchen is a natural fit for a liberal area such as Takoma Park, so it’s unsurprising that, with satisfying and reasonably priced fare, the restaurant’s cozy dining room is almost always busy. “Saint” Mark has been in business for more than a decade with both Korean and American dishes, so there’s variety enough to please all diners, from those who just want a burger and fries to those jonesing for some radish-cabbage-cucumber juice. If the juice bar doesn’t offer enough of a kick, Mark’s also has an espresso bar and great soy milkshakes. The Kitchen’s generous Korean steak entrée includes broccoli, bean sprouts, and excellent fried rice, while the fried man doo app is consistently enjoyable. Getting a server’s attention can be comically difficult, but Mark’s has, for many, become a staple of life in Takoma. For: Health nuts, hippies, vegans—and the people who tolerate them. Entrées: \$4-\$9. 301-270-1884. B, V. **7006 Carroll Ave. (Takoma) [TF]**

VIRGINIA

## COURTHOUSE

Ireland’s Four Courts

Irish-themed pubs generally don’t have a problem getting down the look of the originals; the cuisine, however, is usually too U.S.-friendly to do the Emerald Isle justice. Then there’s Ireland’s Four Courts, which feels like a comfortable rural restaurant both in presence and on the plate. The native offerings excel (carefully prepared seafood, warm Irish brown bread, filling chicken innishmor, top-notch shepherd’s pie), and even the American fare is given inventive touches. The waitstaff are usually smiling and affable, except on pub quiz night, when the crowd often seems to overwhelm them. In the winter, sit by the fire. In the summer, sit outside. And the Sunday brunch is a classy feast that tends to inspire shameless gluttony. For: Irish ambience and Irish food. Entrées: \$8-\$22. 703-525-3600. B, L, O. **2051 Wilson Blvd. (Courthouse) [CM]**

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