

La Vida Loca is seriously Mexican

Bringing in chef from Mexico City key part of plan



JOHN GILCHRIST
OFF THE MENU

Palm trees tend to stand out in Calgary.

So when Ryan Scott and Grant Cichacki wanted people to notice their restaurant — La Vida Loca — they planted two palms in front of its new patio at 1129 — 17 Avenue S.W. (587-349-1400). Sure, they're artificial but the gently waving fronds wave seductively as cars and pedestrians pass by, attracting attention. And at night they're lit with twinkle lights, adding to the ambience.

La Vida Loca opened last fall but the patio didn't arrive until just before this year's Stampede. Now, on any given sunny day, its fifty seats are packed with fans of Corona, shrimp ceviche and enchiladas topped with mole verde.

Inside, La Vida Loca is a little bit of Mexico with terra cotta-coloured walls and tile floors and Mexican decorations throughout.

Partners Scott and Cichacki, seeing the number of Calgarians who head south during winter, felt there was room for a good Mexican restaurant on 17th Avenue. So they picked up the space between 80th & Ivy and Soby's Eatery that had previously been a wings shack and did a full make-over of it.

One key element in the partners' planning was bringing in a serious Mexican chef. So they hired chef Armando Ortiz from Mexico City to handle the kitchen. Ortiz has developed a tasty list of fish tacos, crab empanadas, beef fajitas, chorizo quesadillas and churros.

Meanwhile, Scott and Cichacki, both longtime veterans of the local restaurant scene, split their time between La Vida Loca and their other operation, Fiddler's Courtyard. The British-themed pub — it's home to the Liverpool FC North Supporters Club — at



Partners Ryan Scott, left, and Grant Cichacki, on the newly opened patio of their La Vida Loca restaurant on 17th Avenue S.W. The Mexican restaurant opened last fall, followed by the patio. Scott and Cichacki also operate the Fiddler's Courtyard, a British-themed pub.

723 Edmonton Trail N.E. (403-250-5079) couldn't be farther in style from La Vida Loca. With its bangers and mash and shepherd's pie, it's a far cry from Loca's baked mussels in a chipotle sauce. But you can't accuse Scott and Cichacki of being stuck in a rut. And the palm trees are a nice touch.

There are other changes along 17th Avenue. The Coup (924 — 17 Avenue S.W., 403-541-1041) closed for renovations a few months ago and then reopened with a new look and a new operating partner. Tabitha Archer, who founded The Coup along with Dalia Chen in 2004, has decamped to Revelstoke where she is working in the food industry and honing her snowboarding skills.

Replacing Archer as Cohen's partner is Ian Armitage who made a huge leap from helping manage the meaty Chop to joining the vegetarian The Coup.

Cohen and Armitage knocked down the wall that separated The Coup from its loungey neighbour Meet, expanding two smallish spaces into one large one. A large bar — made from recycled materials — sits in the middle of the 74-seat restaurant and a south facing wall is covered in herbs used by the kitchen. True to their ultra-green personality, The Coup also repurposed wood and other elements of the former Meet, incorporating them into the new design.

The Coup is now open daily, its hours have been extended and it also offers a takeout service. To

help deal with the expansion, Cohen and Armitage hired 26 new staff, bumping their workforce up to 40. That's a far cry from the early days when Cohen and Archer had only three helpers.

Further east on 17th Avenue, Sal's has been transformed into Galla Winehouse & Bistro (529 — 17 Avenue S.W., 403-802-3988).

The 110-seat dining room has been redone in brown and white with a new floor, white walls and all-new tables and chairs.

Two former bay windows have been transformed into sought-after private booths overlooking Galla's patio and 17th Avenue.

The menu is a unique hybrid of Italian and Ukrainian with lobster penne and a fig-and-blue

cheese flatbread cozied up with potato and cheese perogies and beef-filled cabbage rolls. Ten different bruschettas are offered including one with confit chicken, mandarin oranges and mango chutney and another with poached tomatoes, hummus and fried salami.

A fair deal of attention has been paid to Galla's wine list with an international collection available by the glass — including sparkling wines — or the bottle. One note: Galla does not take reservations.

JOHN GILCHRIST'S RESTAURANT GUIDE TO CALGARY, CANMORE AND BEYOND IS AVAILABLE IN BOOKSTORES AND SPECIALTY FOOD SHOPS. HE CAN BE REACHED AT ESCURIAL@TELUS.NET OR 403-235-7532 OR FOLLOW HIM ON TWITTER AT @GILCHRISTJOHN

Planters add life, energy to outdoors



ALYKHAN VELJI
ALY'S FAVOURITE THINGS

Never underestimate the impact of a few strategically placed planters.

Whether you live in a large house with a great yard or a condo space with a small balcony, planters are key when it comes to adding some life and energy to your outdoors.

Use a grouping of them if you're sprucing up your balcony, or if you've got a house, try them on either side of a garage or at the entranceway with an oversized pot. Planters make the perfect statement and can create some much needed curb appeal. And let your imagination go wild — planters are not just for annuals, fill them with anything from twigs to tropicals, greenery to succulents.

This month I have come up with some out-of-the-box ways to fill your planters, and your outdoor space, no matter how big or small (or how green your thumb is).



Uniquities

Pair of French Urns

These double lobed handled, 19th Century urns add wow to your outdoors. They are the perfect addition to a stately garden or add the right tension to a modern space. I am in love with the chipped paint and bold colour, almost giving them a patina of aged copper. Filled with modern white flowers, these add the right amount of surprise and glamour to your outdoors.



For the Calgary Herald

Plant Terrariums

If pots and upkeep are not up your alley, then these are for you. These skillfully made terrariums add a zen-like quality to either an indoor or outdoor space. Put one on a coffee table in a modern outdoor space for the perfect green finishing touch.



Light + Ladder

Spora Planters

Ceramic containers with vegetable tanned leather straps add an organic vibe to any space, indoors or out. With a matte finish and available in three strap colours, a grouping of these planters is perfect to house herbs, succulents, or trellis plants. Better yet, a large grouping of these would make the perfect statement in a small patio.

Crate and Barrel

Ibarra Ficonstone Planters These planters (available in two sizes) are made from an innovative blend of stone, plastic and cement, making them strong but lightweight. The shape of the bowl and the texture makes it perfect to plant small shrubs.



Ferm Living

Plant Stand

Used to house an eclectic collection of pots, this midcentury style plant stand would add some life to a boring or unused corner of a patio. Or placed on either side of a sofa with a side table, would add some much needed height. Take your plants in for the winter and leave the stand outside to act as sculptural piece.

