

Chef Marie tastes

LA LUNA EATERY

BY CHEF MARIE YNIGUEZ | PHOTOS BY KORI KOBAYASHI

From the moment I walked into La Luna Eatery and Events, I was greeted with a smile and a glass of fragrant white wine. I could already smell the delicious aromas coming out of the kitchen before I could even guess what I would see on the plate. After being seated, I had the honor of meeting Chef Robin Valdez and owner Maria Valdez as they poured their hearts out, outlining the concept of what they were going for in creating their latest menu and bringing back native food to Albuquerque. As Chef Robin from Taos, NM plated his latest indigenous food dish, I felt my heart warm with happiness. This is food from our land, our state!

The first course was rabbit pâté. Presented on a little snack board, I was treated to rabbit pâté, fresh tomato, duck prosciutto, and dijon mustard. It even had diced red onions! This provided a plate of accompaniments you would never think would accompany each other. I don't want to leave out the pickles! The simplicity of this plate was so intriguing because I didn't know exactly where it would go. This was quickly changed once I saw the orno bread. Once I saw it, I knew exactly what I would do with it and piled everything onto a little piece of bread. After sampling this dish, the verdict was in! The rabbit pâté was terrific! I couldn't stop eating it! The prosciutto had the perfect amount of salt and the perfect amount of everything. I was amazed by this plate and immediately wanted three more! The tomato alone, combined with pâté and diced red onion, made this dish a done deal.

While I would have been satisfied with three more of the first course, I eager to move on to the second. Once presented with the meal, my initial reaction could only be described as shocked! It was the most beautiful birria tacos I had ever seen. They were full and combined with the aromatics; I couldn't wait to eat this taco! The taco was utterly out of anybody's wheelhouse; a vegan birria taco made with hibiscus and (house made) vegan cheese was textural "meat" without being meat. The cheese inside melted so beautifully that I would never believe this was a vegan taco in my life. I could have eaten 12 of them in one sitting. They are floral and have the spice and everything you could want in a birria taco. The consommé itself is drinkable.

On to the third course! Again I was presented with orno bread and the most tender pieces of meat in a delicious beef stew. It had corn



Clockwise from top: Chef Robin Valdez, owner Maria Valdez
Chef Marie Yniguez



masa gnocchi (who thinks of that); it was so homey and so beautifully plated and so tender that you pretty much drank it. I couldn't help wanting more of it. There is nothing on a cold evening that would make you feel better. Once I dipped my orno bread in that stew, I was introduced to the most incredible flavor I've ever had! It had carrots; it had chickpeas! Who puts chickpeas in a stew?! I mean, the textures! Everything about this stew was excellent!

The fourth course was a pumpkin seed and piñon-crusted hen. It was tender; it was juicy; it was crunchy. It had every tectural point that be could hit. On top of that, next to the hen, I had a celery root and parsnip puree that just perfectly pushed that hen through, along with the roasted grapes that were full and juicy and full of rosemary. Everything on this plate smelled beautiful and tasted even better! Again, I ate the whole plate!



By this time, I was starting to feel full. But the delicious dishes didn't end there, as Chef Robin came out with lamb chops paired with different colors of hominy. The hominy was plump and went perfectly with the medium rare lamb chop. The combination blew the whole dinner away!

After the completing the tasting, I am excited to share my final thoughts. In my opinion, both Chef Robin and Maria Valdez didn't just bring back indigenous food; they brought back everything that I think indigenous food is supposed to be. I believe people should always look to utilize their homeland's food as there is nothing that can't be done with it. Whether you are looking to eat vegan or vegetarian or satisfy your meat-eater palate, you and everybody will be happy to eat Chef Robin Valdez's food!

Maria Valdez, the chef's counterpart, is an amazing businesswoman who pushes her husband and herself to the fullest while having his back as much as he has hers. In a couple, owning a restaurant and running a business is one of the hardest things that can be done. I do it myself, and it's tough. But when you have each other 's back, there's nothing that can't be done, and I guarantee they've done it!

I recommend going and trying this restaurant and I am personally looking forward to being a frequent customer of this establishment. Every team member at La Luna Eatery and Events put their hearts into every plate! There's no doubt about that! I can't wait to return and try everything on their menu! It'll be my pleasure, and my Poncas happiness depends on it!



Head Chef Robin Valdez, La Luna Eatery and Events