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Thursday, April 5, 2001

COUNTER INTELLIGENCE

## Comfort Food From Colombia Central

Restaurante Cafe Colombia prepares traditional dishes and more exotic fare with equal aplomb.

By LINDA BURUM, Special to The Times

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When we finished dinner at Restaurante Cafe Colombia, our table looked likethe aftermath of a Roman banquet: fish skeletons and chicken bones everywhere, a few crumbs in the bread basket, the odd dribble of caramel.

We'd started out sampling the cafe's inexpensive meals and ended up with a bacchanal. "You've got to try this," I kept hearing all through dinner.

Cafe Colombia's neighborhood is one of those L.A. areas where you're likely to find a Lebanese deli, a taco stand offering Chicago-style gyros and a Russian pastry shop all in the same strip mall. But this cafe, with its deli selling Colombian imported foods and baked goods, shows a Colombian population is invisibly woven into the neighborhood.

### A Steady Flow of Diners

While never jampacked, this 2-year-old place exudes an energetic buzz throughout the day. The plain dining room, hung with folk art and nostalgic photos of highland farms, welcomes a varied stream of diners.

You see businesspeople with cell phones reading the paper over an espresso and a bunuelo, a golf ball-sized fritter with a delicate crumb enriched with lightly sweetened cheese. For the family attending to their 3-year-old's table manners, the pick-me-up of choice might be a tropical ice-blended drink of imported tropical fruits: maracuya, mora, curuba, lulo. Many patrons rush in for take-out, others linger over desayuno Antioqueno, the hearty highland-style breakfast (served all day).

Menus come in Spanish and English versions, and include an enlightening glossary of Colombian food terms. The menu's dish descriptions are a marvel of detail and clarity.

My friends agreed that seldom in L.A. had we tasted Latin American comfort food made with so intelligent a hand. Even the simple Colombian salad, a tropical coleslaw with a lemon-herb dressing, was sprinkled with chopped, perfectly ripe tomatoes. For a place where full meals average \$8 or \$9, that's simply amazing.

We particularly liked the empanadas, with their paper-thin cornmeal crusts and filling of meat and potatoes flecked with herbs. There was nothing heavy or greasy about them.

The meal offers yuca in many guises. This homely potato-like root is even an ingredient in bread--yuca flour gives a chewy but airy quality to the rich cheese-laced rolls called pandebono. By the way, the cafe sells frozen pandebono



through its Web site, <http://www.arepas.com/>.

Yuca also appears as wonderfully crunchy yuca chips cut like French fries. Chunks of yuca appear in soupy stews, simmered to a buttery sweetness.

Plantain is yielding and tender in the soup-like stew sancocho. Smashed and deep-fried, it's the base for the tostada-like plato de patacones, layered with pink beans, shredded chicken or beef and a confetti of Colombian salad. It's a complex mingling of flavors and textures. Other plates are just as elaborately conceived.

Three kinds of potato (including tender, marble-sized papas criollas) thicken santafenero, a mellow chicken stew. The huge, steamy bowl comes to the table with a separate plate of garnishes: capers, avocado slices and heavy cream.

Pechuga a la criolla (chicken breast) and sobrebarriga (flank steak), both stewed in a garlicky tomato sauce, come with a trencherman's portion of cheese-covered potatoes chorriadas. The only disappointing dish I've had here was an overcooked breaded pork chop.

#### **Choosing Dessert Over Tortilla-Like Corn Disks**

Just about every dish comes with arepas, Colombia's answer to the tortilla. Apart from the several cheese-stuffed versions, most of us felt these dry, bland corn disks are an acquired taste (these too are sold on the restaurant's Web site). We preferred saving the calories for the dense, rich flan de Araceli and the dessert of figs served with fresh white cheese and a dollop of satiny caramelized milk.

Restaurante Cafe Colombia serves traditional food--the dishes of Antioquia in the country's mountainous central highlands, to be exact. But its more exotic offerings could vie with any at a Nuevo Latino place, at perhaps a third the price.


\* \* \*

\* Restaurante Cafe Colombia, 222 S. Glenoaks Blvd., Burbank. (818) 558-3985. Open 11:30 a.m.-8 p.m., Tuesday to Thursday; 11:30 a.m.-9 p.m., Friday; 8 a.m.-9 p.m., Saturday; 9 a.m.-7 p.m., Sunday. No alcohol. Street parking (public lot parking one block away). Visa and MasterCard. Light dishes and snacks, \$1 to \$5.29; dinner entrees, \$5.99 to \$8.99.

\* \* \*

\* What to Get: pandebono, bunuelo, blended tropical fruit juices, el plato de patacones, empanadas Antioqueñas, plato santafenero, sobrebarriga.

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