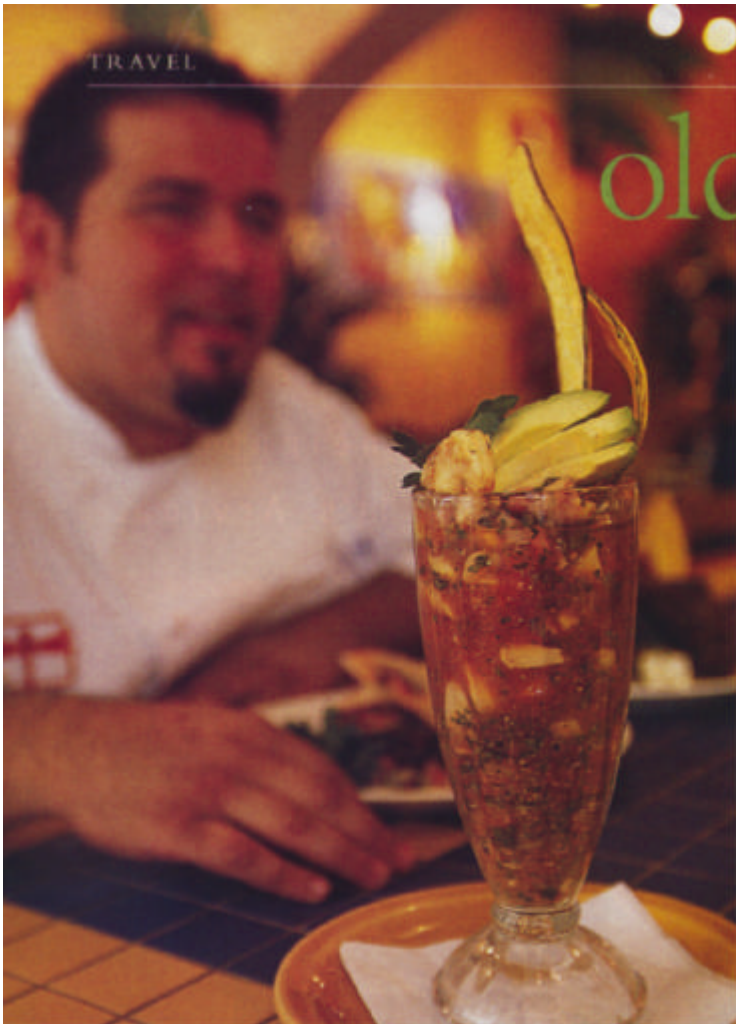


old san juan's new groove



We have seen the future of Nuevo Latino cooking and his name is Roberto Treviño. The 32-year-old chef is the fresh face of dining in Old San Juan, Puerto Rico, where his world-beat food rules two of the city's hottest restaurants. Fortunately for us he's set his sights on Miami and beyond. And he has just the backing for a welcomed Puerto Rican invasion.

Spirited food sizzles in Puerto Rico's capital city.

and African influences." That's what drew him here from San Francisco.

His innovation has paid off during his seven years in the United States commonwealth.

Savvy cruise-ship travelers in town for only an afternoon know to make their way to The Parrot Club; it's the first place a visitor to Old San Juan is sent for a taste of new San Juan. The bustling, tropical-themed spot is tucked into the shimmering blue cobblestone thoroughfare of Calle Fortaleza. It's one of the key streets in the seven square blocks that make up the area, where pastel Spanish Colonial architecture is forever being restored and brightened. (For more on Old San Juan and Puerto Rico, see "Islands Insider," page 206.)

"It was only a matter of time before people discovered our culture," Roberto says, citing pop star Ricky Martin as the most neon example of the island's vibrancy. "But then, there's so much more."

The native Californian pulls up a barstool at his most celebrated restaurant, **The Parrot Club**, and samples a Veracruz-style shrimp and scallop sevice, in this case fashioned more like a sundae than a seafood salad (\$12).

"There's a certain level of sophistication about San Juan," Roberto explains. "It's always been that way. It's our artistic mix of Caribbean, Spanish,

At lunchtime, when rum punch-drinking *touristas* mix with working locals, The Parrot Club's food is imaginative but approachable. Try a savory lamb and goat cheese burrito (\$14), a plate of succulent fried pork with sweet plantain mash (\$13), or a Caesar salad with flank steak and chimichurri sauce (\$15). By nightfall the once-perky place is more

Puerto Rico's always had the best food in the Caribbean," says chef Roberto Treviño, shown above with a sundae-style sevice at his hot spot The Parrot Club. At left, Dragonfly offers Treviño's creative "Latinasian" fare. Below, La Querencia showcases fresh new flavors as well as live music and museum-quality artifacts.



BY DENISE GEE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHARLES WALTON IV

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TRAVEL



sophisticated, as is the food: Hits include a seared sea bass with lobster, leek, and scallop confit (\$27) and blackened tuna in a dark rum sauce with orange essence (\$24). It's all very good. But it gets even better.

Roberto's newest creative outlet is a few doors down, but miles apart in ambience. There, at what appears to be a club, locals line up into the wee hours for a taste of **Dragonfly**, a restaurant aflutter with the most creative food and atmosphere on the island—or anywhere, for that matter. The dark, tiny space comes on more like an opium den than an eatery. Inviting you in are cushy, dark-red booths with silk pillows and lanterns, hypnotic music, and friendly waiters in Asian garb. It's indeed worth the first-come, first-served wait.

Dragonfly's true opiate is Roberto's "Latinasian" food, an inventive fusion. Standouts include the Peking-duck nachos with wasabi sour cream (\$16); miso- and honey-glazed steamed sea bass (\$25); and Mongolian beef ropa vieja, served moo-shu style with tortillas (\$15). Everything sampled was dreamy, especially two desserts: a milk-chocolate and black-tea pot de crème and a banana-ginger crème brûlée (both \$8).

OK, so there *are* enticing places besides Roberto's. On one of the quieter streets, **La Querencia** is a

HOT PLATES

Since Puerto Rico's capital is a U.S. commonwealth, food at well-established places is considered safe to eat, and easily payable with U.S. cash or credit cards. Do know, however, that even locals prefer their water bottled.

- **Dragonfly**, 364 Calle Fortaleza; 787/977-3886. Open for dinner Monday through Saturday.
- **The Parrot Club**, 363 Calle Fortaleza; 787/725-7370 or www.parrotclub.com. Open for lunch, dinner, and Saturday and Sunday brunch (with live music).
- **El Picoteo**, at the Hotel El Convento, 100 Calle Cristo; 787/723-9200. Open for lunch and dinner every day but Wednesday.
- **La Querencia**, 100 Calle Cruz; 787/725-1304. Open for dinner Monday through Saturday; for paella only 11 a.m.–2 p.m. on Wednesday.

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TRAVEL

soothing New Wave Latin dining retreat that's also a gallery. To get the evening started right, order an appetizer platter of Mediterranean cheeses, meats, and olives (\$14).

Inspired entrées include an artfully presented lobster on a bed of caramelized onions and pesto-and-garlic risotto (\$35) and the Seafood Zarzuela, a bounty of fresh fish, calamari, shrimp, and mussels with a broth from heaven (\$27). Fittingly, "la querencia" means "the habit." We'll be back.

El Picoteo, at the historic Hotel El Convento, is a far cry from fusion. The cosmopolitan open-air retreat (its name loosely translating "eat like a bird") offers both beautifully simple and creative tapas that go hand in hand with pitchers of sweet, cooling sangria. Its tile floors, terra-cotta walls with eggplant trim, and courtyard streams of yellow bougainvillea inset with chirping birds visually transport you to Spain. Then the food seals the deal.

For a perfect afternoon, order the thinly sliced serrano ham or beet-red chorizo (both \$5.50), several types of olives with extra-virgin olive oil and peeled orange (\$3.50), lobster turnovers (\$8), and sautéed shrimp in garlic sauce (\$11.50).

Like our group, cruise passengers Brian and Kim Tieszen stumbled upon El Picoteo. The Vancouverites explained that they're always in search of truly authentic food to eat on dry land. "We look for these out-of-the-way places, and this looks like the real San Juan," Brian said.

"The only thing I wish," added Kim, sinking deeper into her chair, "is that the cruise ships would stay longer. There's so much to see."

And eat. 🍷

More restaurants: coastalliving.com