

Caviar, Banana and a French Chef from Brazil

Contributed by Davida Tretout
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Prolific restaurateur Jeffrey Chodorow (China Grill Management in New York) and internationally renowned Brazilian Chef Claude Troisgros (Restaurant Olympe in Brazil and Blue Door at Delano, Miami Beach) have partnered to create an innovative Brazilian hot spot with the opening of Brasserie Caviar & Banana.

Building upon their successful venture at the Blue Door, which Chodorow owns, Troisgros asked Chodorow to open a casual Brazilian "brasserie" with him in New York, dividing his time among New York, Miami and Rio.

Thus was born "Caviar & Banana," a name inspired by Troisgros's signature "amuse" offering of tapioca "caviar" and banana chips. Troisgros has appointed Bobby Varua (who formerly worked at Jean Georges, Daniel, Aureole and ONE c.p.s.) as Executive Chef to bring his vibrant and exotic Brazilian-inspired cuisine to New York.

Upon entering Caviar & Banana, guests are immediately transported from New York climes to the fun and friendly seaside of Brazil, with its scintillating rhythms and "Braziletric" ambiance, thanks to the magic of Brazilian designers Rogerio Ribas and Monica Reis.

The welcoming front lounge boasts an oversized supple leather ottoman. Behind floor-to-ceiling Brazilian wood columns, a soothing sand and ocean blue restaurant interior is revealed. Antique floral lace, which is protected by glass panels, is showcased on the restaurant's four illuminated central columns.

Generous banquettes that have artisan-made, bright multicolored 'rag confetti' upholstered backs, also appear throughout the restaurant. A row of decorative Brazilian brass-framed mirrors resides over a long bar which features Brazilian specialty drinks.

A seashell-colored private dining room, which houses an elegantly oversized driftwood communal table that seats up to 14 people, comes alive with authentic Brazilian art and pottery showcased in glass vitrines.

From the moment the kitchen sends out the customized tin of tapioca "caviar" with crispy plantain chips, guests will begin an exciting journey of the palate while surrounded with the sounds, colors and designs of Brazil.

The festive and appetizing menu, conducive to sharing, begins with "salgadinhos," the Brazilian equivalent to tapas, served in groupings of four small tapas per order.

They include Brazilian cheese bread ("pão de queijo"); shrimp salad with 'açai' vinaigrette; grilled hearts of palm salad with black raisins; tuna confit with capers and black olives; octopus with achiote vinaigrette; and Spanish Serrano ham, to name just a few.

The Carioca breads, Troisgros's thin and crispy-crustured Brazilian answer to pizza, include the Copacabana, topped with beef tenderloin carpaccio, dried "carne seca," mushrooms and white truffle oil, as well as the Flamengo, a vegetarian offering of grilled eggplant, zucchini, shallots, caramelized pineapple and banana with spicy achiote olive oil and sesame seeds.

Appetizers include Troisgros's signature Big Ravioli, filled with taro root mousseline and covered with an airy mushroom foam and white truffle oil; Foie Gras with caramelized mango, ginger confit and red peppercorns; "Pastéis," crispy empanadas with a choice of shrimp and coconut "vatapá;" beef with green pepper tomato and mushrooms; or hearts of palm and Minas cheese.

Must-tries for seafood lovers include the "Siri," a gratin of crab and taro root puree with "requeijão" cheese and crispy

toasted yucca flour, and succulent Saint Jacques, sautéed Cape Cod scallops with cashews, raisins, ginger, parsley and red onion "farofa."

Main courses include a variety of "moquecas," Brazilian coconut stews with red onions, tomato, garlic, ginger, fresh hearts of palm and toasted cashews served bubbling hot in a handmade "Panela de Barro," a black clay pot from the state of Espírito Santo.

Served with a side of sticky rice, "moqueca" choices include a meaty monkfish, giant shrimp, sweet Maine Lobster, tender chicken or an all-vegetable option.

An assortment of "churrascos," Brazil's traditional grilled and skewered meats, are beautifully presented, most (where possible) in custom-made "churrasco" holders with three deliciously packed vertical skewers as the centerpiece.

The wide selection of "churrasco" items include, Maine Lobster with achiote butter; Jumbo Shrimp with tamarind barbecue sauce; Baby Back Ribs with goyava barbecue sauce; Lamb Loin with herb and yucca crust; Aged Strip Steak; Long Island Duck Breast with sugar cane caramel; Yellowfin Tuna with sesame crust; a Vegetarian "churrasco" and several more.

Troisgros's signature sauces offer additional pizzazz, including an "açaí" and bittersweet chocolate vinaigrette and a goyava barbecue sauce (which is super on the "churrasco" ribs).

Other creative seafood entrées include Azul Marinho, roasted grouper with caramelized bananas, lime, raisins, sweet & sour soy sauce and baby sprouts; Peixe no Forno, a whole sea bass cooked with saffron, ginger, lemongrass, curry and achiote fish broth with Brazil nuts, spinach, smothered in a traditional Brazilian topping of melted queijo Minas.

Quail aficionados will rejoice over the Caille FHC (created for Brazilian President Fernando Henrique Cardoso in January 1997) a must-have of tender baby quails stuffed with roasted farofa and cranberries, then caramelized from slow cooking with baby onions, vanilla bean and fresh pineapple in handmade clay pots. The dish is as beautiful as it is delicious!

The side dishes are just as enticing as the main dishes with interesting combinations such as taro root puree with cheese fondue, passion fruit with caramelized apple purée, banana skin with crispy bacon, coconut creamed spinach, and "vatapá," a coconut milk, ginger and peanut purée.

Fun tropical desserts include Troisgros's signature Crêpe Passion, a caramelized soufflé crêpe with fresh passion fruit coulis; Tropical Five, a velouté of five mousses (passion fruit, "cupuaçu" - a tropical Brazilian fruit - & chocolate, caramelized banana & coconut, chocolate and raspberry, avocado and honey); and Sweet Cigar, a "doce de leite" crispy spring roll with vanilla and "cachaça" dipping sauce.

Caviar & Banana's vibrant bar and festive setting are the ideal spot to indulge in Brazilian specialty drinks such as "caipirinhas" ("cachaça" muddled with sugar and lime), "caipirovka" (Skyy vodka muddled with sugar and lime) and "caipirum" (rum muddled with sugar and lime), in addition to signature cocktails such as the Bahia, the Caviar & Banana version of a Mai Tai; a Jalapeño Caipirinha made with Beleza Pura cachaça and real jalapeños; a São Paulo Margarita made with "cachaça," Cointreau and fresh lime juice; and the Brasileiro, made with Domaine Chandon Brut, crème de banana and mango puree - as the menu suggests, it's Carnival in a glass.

Signature "batidas" ("cachaça," vodka, and rum with fresh fruit juice and sugar) and "sucos," non-alcoholic fresh fruit juice combinations such as strawberry and pomegranate, avocado and honey, papaya and raspberry are also offered.

The restaurant features an extensive line of premium and aged "cachaças" from different regions, which are considered as versatile and complex as tequila, available for tastings, mixed cocktails, straight up as an after dinner drink or chilled as an aperitif.

Authentic Brazilian ingredients are featured on Caviar & Banana's menu, like "açai," the all-natural energy fruit from Amazon palm berries that is full of antioxidants, amino acids and essential omegas that tastes like a vibrant blend of berries and chocolate; "cupuacu," an elongated coconut from the Amazon region of Brazil, the pulp of which has a unique floral and citrus flavor; and "polvilho," a tapioca flour.

For those who have traveled to Brazil and have already been seduced by the warmth, rhythm, festive lifestyle and addictive cuisine, Caviar & Banana will be a welcomed haven for them to rediscover its magic.

Those who have not had the pleasure, will be swept away by the fun, excitement and inviting hospitality of this vibrant new culinary oasis. Caviar & Banana is open seven days a week for dinner: Sunday through Thursday, 5 to 10pm; Friday & Saturday, 5 to 11pm.

Chef Claude Troigros
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