



Photographs by J. D. Peterson





**W**e don't have a sign outside, just two palm trees," says Louise Clement, who part-owns the new San Francisco restaurant Cafe Marimba. Authentic Mexican folk art (even a lifesized papier-maché diablito), a bar under a tin-roof palapa and chef Reed Hearon's unerring menu energize Chestnut Street with the living colors of Oaxaca.



**B y   Z a h i d   S a r d a r**

# CAFE, CARAMBA!





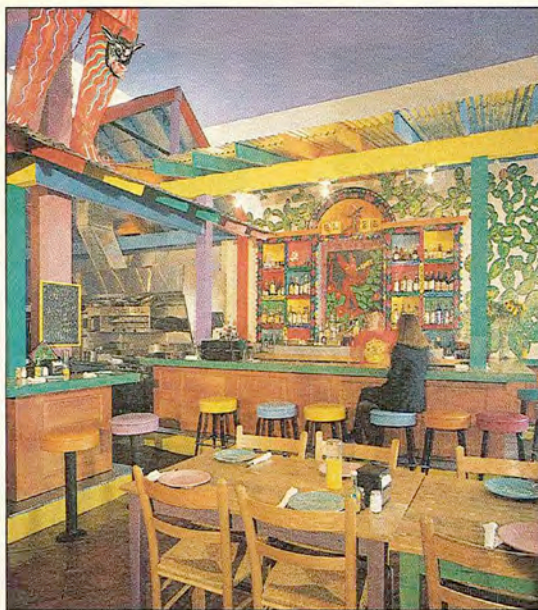
I've been working on Marimba in my head for six or seven years," says chef Reed Hearon, who opened Cafe Marimba in San Francisco's Marina District last September. The indefatigable 36-year-old chef and part owner of the wildly successful South of Market restaurant Lulu didn't just dream about this Mexican cafe: He lived it. "Mexican food is *the* non-European American cuisine and I grew up with it in the Southwest," he says.

"I cooked, working my way through college while studying philosophy and math," says the chef, which is probably why he approached the menu for his latest venture with an academic zeal. "Mexican cuisine is a Spanish culture overlaid on pre-Hispanic times," he says. "The Spanish disrupted a strong cultural, culinary tradition, but somehow pieces of it survived and 'repaired' itself. A lot of dishes now have Spanish names but are in fact very old Mexican Indian dishes."

"Whether it's *mole* or the Virgin of Guadalupe — they are both Spanish ways of assimilating older Indian ideas," asserts Hearon. So, to investigate a resurgence even in Mexico that examines historic recipes, over the years he made several forays for months at a time into Mexico, scouring the markets for special ingredients. Around the time he was opening Lulu, he and partner Louise Clement, who now runs Marimba, went on a fact-finding mission to Oaxaca to track down grandmothers for their prized secrets.

But authentic recipes alone don't make a great ethnic restaurant in San Francisco.

"We watched how they prepared foods in a very, very old way. There's a beauty to it, and we combined that and traditional folk art at Marimba," says Hearon, whose personal collection of hand-hewn figurines of



*The cactus bar reverberates with color even as the day starts.*

animalistic musicians (on proud display at the restaurant) inspired the marimba theme.

"It's *musica* for the mouth," he says. "We wanted it to feel like you were in Mexico," adds Clement.

"The floor plan is mine," says Hearon. "I wanted it to be like a thatched *palapa* hut inside, and I wanted it to feel like you were between two buildings." So the 2,000-square-foot space is broken by a colorful bar that hugs one wall shared by an open kitchen. Along the facing wall, an *allée* of tables leads to a plush, whimsical, car-shaped banquette in the back. The thatch roof was translated to a tin roof to meet fire codes. "We wanted

to do something that felt handmade and not architectural," says Hearon. "We used colors and motifs that are on Mexican buildings," says Clement.

The detail-conscious owners even tracked down self-taught artist Ralfka Gonzalez, whose work they had first seen at Oaxaca art gallery Mano Magica, to a San Francisco address. Gonzalez, who was visiting friends, agreed to work on the restaurant interior. With artist Anna Ruiz, who mixed all the colors and rendered several of the final designs that he did not have time to finish, Gonzalez created an environment that includes many of the childhood myths he grew up with in San Antonio — a virtual Mexico. "I've heard folk tales from Oaxaca all my life. The Watermelon Mermaid is a recurring theme in my work," says the artist. "People are probably confused by the devil motifs, but in Mexico, the *diablitos* are more mischievous than evil. It's really a pre-Columbian idea."

Gonzalez sketched the cactus bar, which was then constructed and painted piecemeal at Hearon and Clement's home. "We pushed the artists loose to let things evolve ... there's a naiveté," says Hearon. So giant cactuses appear in the men's room, overblown roses in the women's. The overall impression at Cafe Marimba is that its separate areas were constructed and decorated at different times without any particular grand plan, the way buildings go up in Oaxaca.

Gonzalez, with a seasoned Tex-Mex palate, generally hates Mexican food in San Francisco. But at Marimba it's different, he says. "This is authentic food as cabaret. The artwork is entertainment too. It goes with the bright flavors of Oaxaca." ❁

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