

SO SOUTHERN VOICE VO

DINING

Pura Vida

656 North Highland Ave.
404-870-9797
www.puravidatapas.com

Agave

242 Boulevard
404-588-0006
www.agaverestaurant.com

Nava

3060 Peachtree Road
404-240-1984
www.buckheadrestaurants.com/nava.html



Hot to trot

Chile peppers add zing, zap & zest

By HOPE S. PHILBRICK

From subtle to full-blown heat, talented chefs are using chile peppers to create dishes with complex layers of flavor at these three restaurants.

PURA VIDA: Chef Hector Santiago is taming the heat at his Pura Vida tapas restaurant in Poncey Highlands. Santiago renovated the casual, rustic dining room himself, but it's the work he does in his kitchen-laboratory that draws eclectic crowds.

The menu is designed to showcase the versatility of peppers. Influenced by his travels and research, Santiago's elaborate experiments are aimed at controlling heat and intensifying flavor.

Dishes include Salmon Ceviche al Mango Verde with a "heatless" habanero sauce, Tuna Ceviche Neotradicional 2007 with pepper "caviar," and Coctel de Camarones al Diablo Blanco poached shrimp with shallots, squash, peppers and a coconut-ginger habanero sauce.

Hate peppers? Try the Coctel de Palmitos Tico's hearts of palm with dates, Serrano ham and watercress in coconut vinaigrette with yogurt, or Agnolotti de Malanga al Huitlacoche pasta with brown

butter sauce and truffle shavings. All tapas are \$10 and under.

AGAVE: Filled with an eclectic, artsy, high-energy crowd, the dining room at this southwestern eatery has an authentic south-of-the-border feel. The bar features over 80 tequilas made of the blue agave plant.

Crave heat? Chiles are key ingredients in dishes like chile-seared halibut, cayenne fried chicken and fire rubbed swordfish. Jalapeños give tastebuds a zap in the tomatillo salsa served with crab and shrimp spring rolls, the guacamole, the sashimi pan-seared tuna, and the grits served alongside spicy tequila añejo shrimp.

Prefer something tamer? Several salads may suit, or try the ceviche martini, Indian fry-bread tostada or stuffed mountain trout.

Most entrées are under \$20. Special orders and substitutions are discouraged when the place is crowded, but the menu offers a range of options.

NAVA: Chef Jesse Perez takes the reigns at Nava, which is part of the Buckhead Life Restaurant Group. But he hasn't overhauled the entire menu.



Agave takes its name from the wide selection of the bar's specialty tequilas, perfect for taming the peppers on its menu

Instead, he focuses on the basics, giving dishes new zest.

Perez concentrates primarily on dried chiles in pastes, rubs and infusions. His goal is to create dishes that offer various degrees of heat throughout a meal, so diners can savor notes that range from spicy to sweet, tropical to charred.

Warm up your palate with starters like painted tortilla soup with roasted corn, grilled cactus and tasso-tomato pico; smoked chicken tacos with green chile grits; and chicken tinga chile relleno. For the main course, consider red chile-seared salmon or scallops, cumin brined pork tenderloin or grilled buffalo ribeye with adobo spice.

Lunch entrées are \$15 and under; dinner entrées are priced under \$30.