

Maine lobster moqueca

# BRAZILIAN BEAUTY

## Beleza struts on the runway of restaurants

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

It's that time of year when resolutions are either being kept or cast aside. If you're considering a change in diet but fear that would require eliminating restaurant visits from your lifestyle routine, take heart: There's a new restaurant in town serving healthy food that actually tastes good. Beleza, Portuguese for "beauty," serves up natural foods and culinary cocktails influenced by Brazilian cuisine.

I hear you. You're thinking, "Healthy Brazilian cuisine? Come on, it's steaks served on a sword." Yeah, well, Beleza is not one of those kinds of restaurants. Beleza is the brainchild of Riccardo Ullio, who gave Atlantans Sotto Sotto and Fritti, and was inspired by a juice bar.

Don't worry. I'm not suggesting that you spend 2008 on a liquid diet—although one glance at Beleza's cocktail menu and you may not think that's such a bad idea. The menu features an array of salads, crudo, small plates and even desserts. But fruit plays a key role.

"My first trip to Brazil inspired me to open Beleza," says Ullio. "After spending 72 hours on a bus from Santiago, Chile, drinking cachaça with singing gauchos and their lovely entourage, I walked into a juice bar in Rio de Janeiro. There was fruit from floor to ceiling, and I had no idea what any of it was. There, I tried Suco de Cacau, a simple smoothie made from the pulp of chocolate fruit ... beleza! Beleza transcends literal translation ... it stands for a celebration of nature, indulgence and life."

When Beleza first opened, it was met with some disappointment. "We started out with a



very strict health food philosophy," says Ullio. "The problem was that a lot of people were unhappy with the food. It was very light and wasn't filling them up." Ullio has since modified the original philosophy, adding heartier options. The food is still very healthy, made without sugar and without dairy products. All of the desserts are gluten free. There isn't any pasta on the menu, but there is rice and quinoa. And while there's still an emphasis on seafood, some meat dishes have been added. "We didn't take away anything," says Ullio. "We expanded the menu to make it more filling, so people are

like a blend of candied fruit and cream—are imported from Brazil as frozen purées. Perhaps because Ullio wasn't able to exactly replicate the fruit wall from the juice bar that inspired him—purées aren't pretty—the décor at Beleza features a 150-square-foot wall filled with tropical plants. It adds a rainforest feel to the otherwise sleek and contemporary space where white walls set off the green bamboo tiles and brown zebrawood tables.

The cocktail menu features 17 creations by mixologist Lindy Colburn. If you're half as passionate about exotic fruit juice as she

pineapple, key lime and coconut adaptations. In addition, tempting combinations of kiwi, pomegranate, grapefruit, soursop, agave nectar and other fruits are offered with various top-quality brands of bourbon, vodka, gin, tequila and rum.

Salad doesn't mean just lettuce. In the lobster salad, chunks of seafood are paired with cubes of papaya, then mixed with strips of basil and topped with a soursop-aji purée; the dish is pleasantly sweet and noticeably fresh. The shrimp salad features a scrumptious Brazil nut pesto in place of the usual cocktail sauce. The quinoa salad uses an heirloom organic grain, peppers, spicy raw cocoa purée and avocado with great results.

Though zapped with curry, the sweet potato dish seems uninspired compared to other, more creative, small plates. Habanero purée adds a welcome zip to the pork tenderloin. Best of all is the Maine lobster moqueca, which hails from the Brazilian state of Bahia. It features organic coconut milk, organic extra virgin red palm extract, malagueta peppers, cilantro and cashews. If this dish is good for you, why ever be bad?

Indeed, healthy can be tasty. The chocolate tart is so dense and rich it's hard to believe it's actually gluten free.

Ullio's goal for the restaurant is "Basically to have a fun, beautiful, healthy place where people can go, hang out and eat, and feel good about it." It's a resolution worth embracing. **SP**

MAIN COURSE



Beleza

PHOTOS/SPARK ST. JUDE

more satisfied. It was too strict before."

The menu changes frequently, with dishes defined by the seafood and other fresh ingredients that come in. Unusual fruits like soursop—which has a white pulp that tastes

appears to be, making a selection can be a challenge. In addition to the flavorful traditional caipirinha, which is made with cachaça and muddled organic limes, there's a yummy passion fruit version plus Meyer lemon,

### DINING ESSENTIALS

#### BELEZA

905 Juniper St. (at 8th St.)  
678-904-4582  
www.belezarestaurant.com

**Hours:** Thur.–Sat. 5:30 p.m.–3 a.m., Sun. 5:30 p.m.–12 a.m.

**Reservations:** Accepted

**Dress Code:** Casual

**Cuisine:** Brazilian-inspired small plates and cocktails

**Alcohol:** Full bar

**Cost:** Small plates, \$6–\$15

**Credit Cards:** All major

**Outdoor Seating:** Yes

**Parking:** Street or \$5 valet in Wachovia deck across the street