

Papas and Beyond: Salvadoran Cuisine at Cafe Platano

By B.J. CALURUS
Special to the Planet

Mark your calendars: Nov. 13 is celebrated in El Salvador as *El Día Nacional de la Pupusa*. To get yourself in the proper frame of mind, I'd recommend a visit to Café Platano, the semi-new Salvadoran restaurant on University Avenue in downtown Berkeley.

Pupusas, for the uninitiated, are the national snack of El Salvador: thick corn (or less commonly rice) tortillas stuffed with pork, chicken, refried beans, cheese, and other things. They have a family resemblance to the Mexican *gordita* and the Venezuelan *arepa*. The Bay Area has a whole slew of *pupuserias*, concentrated in San Francisco's Mission District, Oakland's East 14th Street, and the northern reaches of San Pablo Avenue. But it's always good to have a source closer to home.

Among other fillings, Platano offers *pupusas* with *queso con loroco* (\$2, like all the *pupusas*). *Loroco* is another Salvado-

ran specialty, the flower of a Central American vine (*Fernaldia pandurata*). The plant is one of the few edible members of the dogbane family, which includes the likes of oleander, frangipani, periwinkle, the quinine tree, Indian hemp, and some odd Afro-Malagasy succulents. I've seen the taste of *loroco* described as "pungent," but it struck us as mild, somewhat squashlike, a good match for the cheese. All the *pupusas* come with a side of *curtido*, a tangy cabbage-based slaw. You have a choice of corn or rice tortillas.

The *pupusas* head a list of *plattillos*, "small plates," on one side of the menu, and you could assemble a substantial and satisfying meal from those alone. Platano does a fine job with the traditional *plattanos con frijoles y crema* (\$6): fried plantains—the starchy-sweet banana relative—with pureed black beans and sour cream. It's a heartening combination.

There's also the Salvadoran take on the tamale, *tamales de sal* (\$6), chunks of chicken, potato, and olive embedded in masa and steamed in a banana leaf. Sal-

CAFE PLATANO

11:30 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesday through Friday;
1-10 p.m. Saturday; 1-9 p.m. Sunday.
2042 University Ave. 704-0325.

vadoran enchiladas (\$5) are more like mini-tostadas, with deep-fried tortillas topped with ground beef and *curtido*. Yuca, a popular Central American root vegetable like a dense, chewy potato, comes both fried and steamed (\$8). Although it's spelled "yuca" on the menu, it has nothing to do with the spiky plant of western drylands; it's actually the root of the manioc or cassava plant (*Manihot esculenta*), the source of tapioca.

The flip side of the menu has the *plattos fuertes*, which come with entrée, salad, and a choice of *casamiento* (fried rice with black beans), black beans on their own, or refried red beans. We've enjoyed the *camaron al ajito* (\$13), prawns sautéed in garlic, and the *salpicon* (\$10), a cold beef salad, although the servings were not

huge. Other full-dinner options include *loroco* with squash, fried tilapia, a couple of beef and chicken dishes, and pork ribs.

Desserts range from the familiar—flan (\$4), rice pudding (\$4)—to the more exotic. *Empanadas de leche* (\$5) are football-shaped plantain dumplings, filled with milk pudding and fried. Another dessert features ground yuca in corn syrup.

Platano even has an interesting wine list, all Argentinean as far as we could tell; the house red is a decent Antigua Cava cabernet (\$4). Mexican beers are also available.

In the former location of a Thai restaurant next door to the defunct UC Theatre, Platano has been redone with a cheerful yellow interior and Salvadoran folk art on the walls—more stylish than the typical Mission *pupuseria*. Service is congenial and attentive. It's a welcome addition to a stretch of University that already boasts West African, Thai-Lao, and Indonesian restaurants. Don't wait until Nov. 13 to check it out.

Fantasy Filmmakers Ask for Help

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representative of the community, Ashley James of Searchlight Films, a tenant in the building since 1995, said that the filmmaker community has "supported, sustained and, at times, employed us."

While James thanked Mayor Tom Bates for his efforts to talk to Robbins, he said there ought to have been representatives of the artist community participating in the discussions. "You were in there alone with Wareham," he said, "What we want, what we need and what we deserve is a reasonable negotiating period to work on basic terms of the leases."

Filmmaker Rick Goldsmith told the council that Wareham's claim that the artists are not now paying market rents is false. Rents were raised from around \$2 per square foot to \$3 or \$3.25 per square foot in 2005 and now Wareham is asking for \$4-to-\$6 per square foot, he said. "West Berkeley rental levels are not more than \$2 per square foot," he added.

Wareham spokesperson Tim Gallen did not dispute that the rents were high, but underscored in an earlier interview with the Planet that the rent hike was due to the amenities, such as the two small theaters at the site undergoing renovation and views of the Golden Gate Bridge from some studios.

While the artists said Robbins' insistence that they negotiate one-on-one and not collectively was a divide and conquer technique, Wareham representative de Tienne addressed the issue: "You're going to have to negotiate one-on-one. I'm sorry," he said. "It's just that simple. Being a business and being an artist you still have the

responsibility to stand up and talk for yourself and do what you need to do," said de Tienne, adding that he is an artist himself.

When Councilmember Linda Maio tried to ask de Tienne why the artists had different rates for similar studios, he cut her off: "Let me stop you. This life is not egalitarian," he said. The audience groaned.

Representing West Berkeley Artisans & Industrial Companies, woodworker John Curl told councilmembers that they should play hardball with the developer.

"Council should tell the building owner in no uncertain terms that he must treat these tenants in a decent and responsible manner," Curl said, reading from a prepared text. "Tell him that that is a price of doing business in Berkeley. This landlord depends heavily on the city being cooperative with his projects and developments. Tell him that, if he expects the city to cooperate with him, he needs to cooperate for the betterment of the city."

In fact, Robbins has at least one project under consideration in the city—the Garr building at 740 Heinz Ave. in West Berkeley—and has talked to various city staff about another he says he wants to build on the parking lot at the Fantasy Building.

Councilmember Kriss Worthington addressed the issue: "If the developer wants to get something done, it's far better to get out on the table what you want to do and work things out," he said, adding, "This type of greed is not acceptable."

Councilmember Dona Spring argued that the West Berkeley Plan protects artists, but Land Use Manager Mark Rhodes countered that the space is protected as arts space, but the individual artist is not protected. Lower income filmmakers could be forced out and replaced by those

executive committee into the position of interim executive director. She is a recent employee in the city's energy division. While affirming that the position is salaried, Joel Kreisberg, Sustainable Berkeley chair, declined to disclose Squire's rate of pay. "Kate is working on a grant to make this thing go," he said.

Kreisberg is the executive director of Teleosis, which describes itself on its website as "A leadership training program guiding health professionals towards greater sustainability in their health care practice."

Writing the Measure G plan will no longer be under Sustainable Berkeley auspices because the organization is still "building its infrastructure and capacity," Kreisberg said.

One of the questions that the community and the Daily Planet had asked those involved with Sustainable Berkeley was about the degree to which the organization, most of whose meetings are closed to the public, would be transparent. The ques-



Judith Scherr

Filmmakers working in the Fantasy Building ask the City Council Tuesday to help them in negotiations with new landlord Wareham Development, Inc. In the front row are (l-r) Wareham tenants Jeb Riffe, Susan Starr and Rick Goldsmith.

who can pay the higher rents—"There's no commercial rent control," Rhodes said.

In a separate interview with the Planet, Jed Riffe of Jed Riffe Films said that the loss of the artist community is more than a loss of creativity to Berkeley. Riffe said he just finished a documentary for which he spent \$1 million in Berkeley. That included renting equipment, hiring a local editor and crew, copying costs, and "feeding a small army of people," he said.

Berkeley Arts Festival Director Bonnie Hughes had her own take on the situation, telling the council that unless they act, history books will say Berkeley was once known as "the home of free speech and artistic innovation until it was invaded by greedy hordes of carpetbaggers."

Hughes laid out the dilemma: "Carpetbaggers come to make millions; artists come to make art; to whom will you dedicate our city?"

City to Take Charge of Greenhouse Gas Reduction Plan

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"would be taking a look at Measure G [the voter-approved advisory initiative asking the mayor to work with the community to develop a greenhouse gas emissions reduction plan] programs across department lines." Chakos called back to say a person hired for a new position in the city's energy division would be working on the plan.

Sustainable Berkeley is an organization whose steering committee is made up of nonprofit corporations, healthcare professionals, UC Berkeley staff and consultants. It is not incorporated. The organization's fiscal agent is CESC, a nonprofit that partners with PG&E and other entities and was created by the city. Its board of directors is the Energy Commission, selected by the councilmembers and mayor. Commissioners (and therefore board members) serve at the pleasure of appointing councilmembers.

The new interim executive director of Sustainable Berkeley is Catherine Squire, who moved from the Sustainable Berkeley

positions were raised because writing the plan to implement Measure G, authorized by council and funded by the city, would have been executed behind closed doors with staff hired without a search process.

"We'd like to be transparent," Kreisberg said. "We're trying to get ourselves organized."

Sustainable Berkeley never got the \$100,000 that was originally to have been directed toward it (through its fiscal agent) to write the plan. Still, the group hired Timothy Burroughs to begin work getting community input on the plan, the Daily Planet was told at the time. Since the contract was never executed, Burroughs has been doing other work with Sustainable Berkeley, Kreisberg said.

Among the questions that had been raised was the appointment of Burroughs to the post without an open process. "Timothy Burroughs was hired by Sustainable Berkeley without a recruitment process since he is a nationally recognized expert in GHG [greenhouse gas] Reduction and the

position is temporary through December 2007," Kreisberg said in a letter to the Daily Planet published on March 16.

The city will release a job description today (Friday) for a person who will execute the plan, Chakos said. The job description forwarded to the Planet is vague, however, saying that the six-month temporary position is for an "Associate Management Analyst" in the energy division. It says nothing about the candidate having special expertise in greenhouse gas reduction—or even about the need for training in environmental questions.

The city's new Public Information Officer Mary Kay Clunies-Ross told the Planet that according to City Manager Phil Kamlarz, it will not be necessary for the council to execute a new vote to have the \$100,000 redirected to the new city position, rather than the Sustainable Berkeley position.

"The council does not have to act separately," she said. In April, staff will go to the council and inform them of the change, she said.