

# Searching for the Galatoire's of Colombia

## Adventures in Cartagena

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PAUL COSTELLO PHOTOGRAPH

It was useless to call, as this popular Cartagena culinary destination was always booked a month in advance. That set the hook for a challenge I couldn't resist.

My band of three culinary pirates picked 9 p.m. for our attack. We walked about five blocks from our hotel and cased the joint hungrily from across the street. La Vitrola was barely a newborn, having been birthed in 1994, but it was in the old city within angling distance of the Old Wall that has protected Cartagena for centuries.

It was time to make the move. We approached the main entrance of this venerable establishment under a sign proclaiming the name La Vitrola. A sealed door, much like the former main entrance of Galatoire's, prevented entry. A guard standing watch a couple of windows away beckoned us over and opened a much smaller side door. We entered La Vitrola, a restaurant of three connecting rooms resonating with the music of a six-musician Cuban band.

The skeptical and unsmiling maitre d' couldn't find our reservations, which wasn't surprising, as we had none. His English equaled my Spanish, which was close to zero; but he obviously knew the routine. He searched through several large reservation ledgers as we awkwardly soaked in the ambiance. He was so sorry; he could find nothing.

It was time for the closing shot. With my saddest puppy dog face I pointed to our group and mumbled the only two words of French I know – Nouvelle Orleans. Finally a slight smile crossed his face, and he escorted us to an abandoned table in the rear room by the cashier. The attractive cashier behind the desk resembled a younger version of a reincarnated Miss Yvonne, the beloved manager of yesteryear who watched the checks and the waiters at Galatoire's for decades. It was the sort of table where waiters and staff sit during slow periods.

A long menu in Spanish arrived. The English phrases Carpaccio Harry's Bar and Ensalada Beverly Hills jumped off the page in a startling way, but a kind captain named Gregorio Herrera quickly took over. Gregorio told us their food was international with a Cuban ambience, but the only Cuban dish we found on the menu was Ropa vieja Habanera. He found some menus in English and steered us towards main

During my 15 years at the New Orleans Health department, whenever I traveled, helpful hotel front desk types from Los Angeles to Paris to Tokyo dispersed addresses and directions to the nearest sexually transmitted infection clinic along with smug smiles. Being from New Orleans opened doors, and I learned secrets of the trade from municipal STI clinics across the world.

My life and missions have changed. Now, whenever I have a few days in a new city, I search for the "Galatoire's" of that city, which I define as a restaurant with good food and one that's a favorite of the locals. A post-Christmas week in Cartagena, Colombia, opened new territory for that hunt. Like New Orleans, Cartagena is a port city with a historical core that has embraced tourism.

In New Orleans, we build walls around cemeteries. In Cartagena, a wall was built to keep the bad element out of the city. It works. Francis Drake was the last pirate to sack this northern Colombian coastal city, and that was in 1572. The murder rate in Cartagena last year was 20 per 100,000 compared to 71 per 100,000 for New Orleans.

From a travel guide and online sites, I pared a list of potential must-eat restaurants down to three and approached hotel staff, my never-fail technique. The concierge scanned my list and said no problem for two but declared one called La Vitrola an impossible

courses reflecting Colombian seafood from the coast off Cartagena with some additional fish from colder waters such as tuna.

Our party of three settled for starters of garlic shrimp with a cream and white wine sauce over fried plantains, a luscious ceviche of local seafood including grouper and slices of raw tuna as fresh as the ocean breeze that cooled Cartagena each evening.

We shared a single house salad large enough for four. It reminded me of a house salad at Windsor Court with coarsely cut greens, bacon, hearts of palms, tomatoes and a local white cheese with a sensuous olive oil and Balsamic vinegar on the side. During the salad course a waiter produced a new napkin and fished my old one off the floor. I hadn't even noticed that it had slipped.

"It is Mel Gibson's favorite," whispered the captain in conspiratorial English with a Spanish accent after I tasted my entrée. It was my favorite, too – a beautifully grilled grouper with a ginger and mint sauce accompanied with a side of rice and coconut, the signature Cartagena side-dish.

Both my companions ordered seafood casserole entrées, large bowls of thick seafood stew somewhat akin to the sauce we associate with shrimp Creole. The Peruvian version had large hunks of slightly overcooked lobster, king prawns, squid, shrimp and corn kernels that I suppose helped make it Peruvian. The local version lacked the corn but had similar sea creatures swimming in a more mysterious and interestingly flavored broth.

La Vitrola had the best desserts we found on our seven-day trip. My favorite was a long narrow wedge of delicious coconut pie described as "typical for the area" with a generous scoop of homemade vanilla ice cream on the side.

Our eyes drifted to an adjoining table with two beautiful women and an entourage whom the staff obviously knew well. There was a buzz about, and Gregorio shared the scoop – Miss Colombia 2003 was at that table. I had enough wine onboard to give Miss Colombia greetings from New Orleans and asked permission for a picture. All of a sudden the other woman at the table was by my side. I had assumed the wrong one was Miss Colombia.

"No problem," said the now very gracious maitre d' as I surprised him with a request for reservations the next night as we finally waddled out at about midnight. I promised to mail him a Zulu coconut in addition to what you normally give helpful maitre d's.

We returned with proper reservations the next night and were greeted like old friends. It was a busy Friday night, and we opted for a 15-minute bar wait for a favored table near the band that was about to become available. Ascensions happen quickly in Cartagena. We moved from the worst table in the house to the best in exactly 24 hours.

By the second evening, our group had grown to four. We asked Gregorio to select everything. Over the next couple of hours he brought half dozen smaller appetizers to share, a huge salad, and four entrées, one after the other, which we all split four ways. One divided entrée was a tasty platter of grilled lamb chops with fresh French fries that made me homesick for Galatoire's at Easter.

La Vitrola gets my vote for the Galatoire's of Cartagena – reservations are difficult but there's always a way, a sealed main door with entrance by a side door, knowledgeable waiters with current gossip, well-poured drinks, no need for menus after the first visit and excellent bread for the tablecloth with no bread plate in sight.

The cost of a meal at La Vitrola runs into hundreds of thousands of pesos. For us this converted into about \$60 a person each night which included Cuban muddled mojitos to start and South American wines recommended by Gregorio.

*Ed. Note: In addition to being a respected physician and the health columnist for New Orleans Magazine, Brobson Lutz is a celebrated gourmet and has been, at different times, an outspoken advocate and critic of Galatoire's.*