

Chef Alex Garcia is back on New York's upper West Side with new restaurant A.G. Kitchen

The restaurateur, who recently opened Babalu in the Bronx, offers diners his favorite Latin dishes

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DAVID HANDSCHUH/NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
Chef Alex Garcia's Ecuadorian Shrimp Ceviche at A.G. Kitchen, on Columbus Ave. and W. 72nd St.

Chef Alex Garcia is returning to his old stamping grounds.

After cooking at restaurants across the city, the celeb chef, who rose to fame for his Nuevo Latin cuisine, is back on the upper West Side.

His latest venture, A.G. Kitchen, at Columbus Ave. and W. 72nd St., gives diners a taste of Garcia's favorite dishes.

"Every section of the menu is something that has to do with my daily routine — what I like to cook, what I like to eat," he says.

The items — mini crabcake sliders, guacamole-topped burgers and Brazilian-style roast chicken — are a reflection of Garcia's personal history. Though the chef is originally from Cuba, he has lived and worked in New York City for over two decades.

"We wanted to do fare that reflected more of who I am," he explains.

"We even named a burger Manhattan Latin because that's Alex," adds co-owner Spencer Rothschild. "He's a Manhattan guy who was born in Cuba."

The restaurant's name and bright decor also play up Garcia's love of fun and flavorful food.

Stacks of cookbooks, many of them from friends and family, and pots and pans from Garcia's yet-to-be-released cookware line fill shelves.

Though Garcia and his team made big changes to the space — the booths are now lime green and there's cabana-style seating out front — they made sure to keep a piece that's been around for over 100 years: the 20-seat mahogany bar.

It's a beloved neighborhood relic, according to co-owner Jeremy Wladis.

"I thought we were going to get so much flak because we made such a big change, but they love it," he says, referring to the upper West Side's tight-knit community.

To Wladis, a longtime restaurateur, A.G. Kitchen's appeal comes from the menu's variety.

"One day, it's a burger bar. Another day, it's a romantic date with paella and surf and turf. The next day, it's roast chicken for the whole family," he ticks off.

In coming weeks, the trio will also launch brunch and an expanded cocktail program created by mixologist Christian Post.

Like everything else that comes out of the kitchen, the brunch dishes and drinks will get an Alex Garcia twist — smoky chipotle Bloody Marys and breakfast burritos stuffed with eggs are currently in the works.

"It is not my favorite meal to cook, but it's my favorite meal to go out and eat," says Garcia with a laugh.

It's been a busy year for the spirited chef, who also helped launch Babalu in the Bronx.

Much like A.G. Kitchen, the restaurant and lounge, which opened in Throgs Neck in January, is Latin-influenced and has quickly become the neighborhood's go-to dining spot.

While lunch and weekend brunch draw a lot of professionals and families craving authentic arepas and empanadas, Babalu transforms into a different scene at night.

Mojito Mondays, Taco Tuesdays and Wine Down Wednesday are only three out of the seven nightly specials that turn Babalu into a nightlife hot spot.

"Dinner is very active, very fast-paced, very musical," says Garcia. "You know how Latinos are. They go ahead and make their own dance floor."

Industry vet Ariel Lacayo, who worked with Garcia at his first restaurant, Patria, was recently brought in as general manager to help elevate front-of-house service.

It's crucial for servers, he says, to be knowledgeable about the food.

"Babalu specializes in an eclectic Latin American menu. Teaching them how to combine the wine, food and side dishes is very important," says Lacayo.

Having worked closely with Garcia in the '90s, he understands that good service and good food are keys to a successful restaurant, no matter where it's located.

As for Garcia, the chef calls his homes — both native and adopted — his biggest culinary influences.

It doesn't matter if he's whipping up Baja fish tacos at A.G. Kitchen or pabellón criollo (a seasoned shredded beef dish) at Babalu, "the reason we have great food is because everything is oriented around family," he says.

"The biggest part of my success is being proud of being Latin and showcasing it through food and music."

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MINI CRABCAKE SLIDERS

Pineapple Slaw

1 head green cabbage

1 medium-size pineapple, small diced

2 cups mayonnaise

1/4 cup white vinegar

1 teaspoon celery seed

1. Remove outer leaves of cabbage. Cut 1 inch off the bottom of stem side. Quarter cabbage head lengthwise. Cut out the core of each quarter. Place quarter on cutting board and, with a large chef's knife, thinly slice down lengthwise to make long, thin shreds. Cut once across grain. Repeat for entire head and toss into a large bowl.

2. Mix remaining ingredients and pour over cabbage. Mix from bottom to top.

3. Place a plate on top and store in refrigerator. Juice will settle, so toss from bottom to top with wooden spoon several times.

Optional: Shredded carrots add color. Dark or golden raisins are nice too.

Crab Cakes

1 pound jumbo lump crabmeat

1 pound backfin crabmeat

8 ounces mayonnaise

2 eggs, large

3 ounces Dijon mustard

2 ounces Japanese breadcrumbs

1 ounce fresh lemon juice

2 teaspoons Old Bay seasoning

1 tablespoon fresh chopped parsley

1. Thoroughly pick crabmeat. Make sure not to mash the crabmeat.

2. Mix mayonnaise, eggs, mustard and breadcrumbs together.

3. Sprinkle lemon juice on top of the crabmeat and toss together.

4. Mix crabmeat with mayonnaise mixture and fold gently. Sprinkle mixture with Old Bay seasoning and parsley.

5. Form crab cake mixture into 3 1/2-ounce balls, and flatten slightly.

6. Bake on lightly oiled baking pan at 375 degrees for 12 minutes or until light brown in color.

7. Top with slaw and serve on mini brioche buns

POMEGRANATE & PINEAPPLE GUACAMOLE

Guacamole

1 avocado, remove pit and dice

1 teaspoon lime juice

2 tablespoons plum tomato, cut into petals and diced

2 tablespoons cilantro, chopped

1 teaspoon salt

2 tablespoons jalapeños, diced (more to be spicier)

4 tablespoons white onion, diced

Combine 1 tablespoon of the jalapeños, cilantro and onions and grind with pestle in a Mojacete. Add avocado and other ingredients and mix together.

Pomegranate & Grilled Pineapple Salad

3 tablespoons of pomegranate seeds

3 tablespoons pineapple, grilled

1 tablespoon reduced pomegranate juice

Combine ingredients together and refrigerate. When ready to serve, top guacamole with pomegranate and pineapple salad.

SHRIMP CEVICHE

Kosher salt

2 pounds medium-small shrimp, peeled and deveined

8 limes, juiced

8 lemons, juiced

2 oranges, juiced, preferably sour oranges

2 large tomatoes, cut into 1/2-inch dice

1 red onion, cut into 1/2-inch dice

1 bunch cilantro, stemmed and roughly chopped

1 serrano chili, roughly chopped

1/2 cup ketchup

2 large avocados, peeled, seeded and cut into 1/2-inch dice

1 large cucumber, peeled and cut into 1/2-inch dice

Tortilla chips, for garnish

1. In a large pot of boiling salted water, add the shrimp and simmer until just cooked through, about 5 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the shrimp to a bowl of ice water to chill.

2. Drain the shrimp, cut into 1-inch pieces and transfer to a bowl. Add the lime, lemon and orange juices, stir to combine, and refrigerate for at least 4 hours and up to 6.

3. Stir the tomato, onion, cilantro, ketchup and chili into the shrimp mixture and let sit at room temperature for about 20 minutes.

4. When ready to serve, gently stir in the avocado and cucumber. Divide the ceviche among 8 chilled martini glasses and tuck 2 to 3 tortilla chips around the sides of each.

TRADITIONAL FLAN

1 1/2 cups sugar, divided

7 egg yolks

1 (14-ounce) can sweetened condensed milk

1 (12-ounce) can evaporated milk

3/4 cup milk

1 1/2 teaspoons vanilla extract

1/8 teaspoon salt

4 egg whites

1 (8-ounce) package cream cheese

1. Preheat the oven to 350 degrees.

2. Cook 1 cup sugar in a medium-size saucepan over medium heat, and cook, stirring constantly, 5 minutes or until sugar melts and turns a light golden brown. Quickly pour hot caramelized sugar into a 2-quart flan dish. Using oven mitts, tilt dish to evenly coat bottom and sides. Let stand 5 minutes. Sugar will harden.

3. Whisk together egg yolks and next 5 ingredients in a large bowl.

4. Process egg whites, cream cheese and remaining 1/2 cup sugar in blender until smooth. Stir egg white mixture into egg yolk mixture. Pour mixture through a wire-mesh strainer into a large bowl; pour custard over caramelized sugar.

5. Place dish in a large shallow pan. Add hot water to pan to a depth of 1/3 up sides of dish.

6. Bake for 1 hour and 45 minutes. Remove dish from water bath; cool completely on a wire rack. Cover and chill at least 3 hours.

7. Run a knife around edge of flan to loosen; invert onto a serving plate.

SAMBA ROAST CHICKEN WITH DOMINICAN HONEY GLAZE

3 1/2 pounds chicken

3 cloves garlic, quartered

2 teaspoon salt

4 tablespoons Latin Spice Co. Samba Chicken Dry Rub

1/3 cup olive oil

1. In a blender, blend the garlic and salt to make a paste. With blender running, slowly add olive oil.

2. Pour oil mixture over chicken, turning chicken to coat both sides. Loosen breast skin and rub oil mixture under skin. Cover and refrigerate 2 to 24 hours.

3. Take the chicken out of the refrigerator about 1/2 hour before beginning to roast it. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Put the bird in a large roasting pan, pour the marinade over and around it, and brush the skin of the bird with the melted butter. Then rub Latin Spice Co. Samba Chicken Dry rub on all surfaces of chicken. Put the bird in the oven and roast it, basting from time to time with pan juices. Roast for about 20 minutes per pound, or until the internal temperature reaches 165 degrees. Remove from oven and let stand for 15 minutes, loosely covered with aluminum foil.

4. For a charcoal grill, arrange medium-hot coals around a drip pan. Test for medium heat above the pan. Place chicken on grill rack over drip pan. Cover and grill for 50-60 minutes or until chicken is no longer pink (internal 165 degrees). (For a gas grill, preheat grill. Reduce heat to medium. Adjust for indirect cooking. Grill as above.)

Dominican Honey Glaze

1 gallon orange juice

1 quart lite soy sauce

1 cup Hoisin sauce

1 cup oyster sauce

1 quart honey

2 cups sugar

1/2 cup grated ginger

1/2 cup chopped garlic

1/2 cup sesame seeds

1/4 cup red pepper flakes

1/2 cup cornstarch

1/2 cup cold water

1. Combine all ingredients, minus the corn starch and cold water.

2. Reduce by half. Slowly pour corn starch into cold water while mixing vigorously.

3. Add corn starch liquid slowly into reduced sauce while boiling to thicken.

4. Cut chicken into 8 pieces and pour 1/4 1/4 cup of heated Dominican Honey Glaze over chicken and serve.

Recipes by chef Alex Garcia for A.G. Kitchen.

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