

Jacó Restaurant Serves Up A Slice of Lemon

By Leland Baxter-Neal

For many, cooking is art. For Richard Lemon, it's architecture.

His plates aren't just prepared, they are constructed. A small tower of wonton chips and raw tuna rises like a miniature model of the condos being sold from the office next door.

Amid dancing kitchen flames and popping skillets of oil and butter, he lays a foundation of pineapple risotto, upon which he builds his macadamia nut-encrusted dorado, painted with a passion fruit bierre blanc sauce.

The flavors of his dishes, Mr Lemon says, are assembled just as painstakingly as their presentation. Take, for example, one of his favorite appetizers: grilled sugar cane-skewered shrimp with naranjillo mojo sauce.

"You've got sweet sugarcane and once you grill it, it caramelizes. Then sweet, tender shrimp, then you're going with garlic and oregano and spices. There's the pungent heat from the garlic, then hit it with the sour from the naranjillo sauce, and then of course the butter for the smoothness," Mr Lemon says.

"I try to layer the flavors, so they come together on the palette," he adds, interlocking his fingers in front of his chin. "Sour, sweet, spicy, smooth, pungent — that all blends together."

In his black chef's coat, chef's beret and Dickies cargo shorts, Mr Lemon is both a laid-back surfer and highly trained professional chef. That combination is also the attitude behind his new Jacó restaurant, Lemon Zest.

"It's casually elegant," he says, but thinks a moment, and corrects himself. "But it's not elegant. It's casually awesome."

Overlooking Jacó's central strip from the second story of a shopping center, Lemon Zest has been open just a few weeks, and has encountered problems familiar to most that have tried opening a business in Costa Rica. He waited a month for his gas tank, three weeks for coffee and his wood tables and chairs should have been ready a long time ago (he now expects them to be ready next week).

"We're the place with the plastic chairs," he says, laughing. "But once people try the food it won't matter what chair they are sitting on."

With Lemon Zest, Mr Lemon and his high-school sweetheart and wife of 21 years, Nellie Lemon, hope to bring dining in Jacó to a new level.

"Where we are today with food around the world, it's time for that different perspective, both in the preparation and the presentation. I'm bringing people up to speed with what is happening," Mr Lemon says. "Not only modern food techniques, but flavor combinations. I'm applying all my years of experience."

Those years of experience — which include professional training at the Culinary Institute of America in New York, teaching at the Le Cordon Bleu College of the Culinary Arts in Miami and running his own restaurant in South Florida for 11 years — began at a young age on the island of Bimini, in the Bahamas.

"I started as a kid cooking with my grandmother while my parents were out fishing. I think Jell-O was the first thing I ever made," he says.

Living between the Bahamas and Florida, Mr Lemon began working in restaurants as a way to support his surfing habit, a passion that has also brought him to Costa Rica every year for the past 17 years.

After discovering his passion was also for cooking, during a three-year apprenticeship in “what was then one of only 10 five-star restaurants in the Unites States,” Mr Lemon took his surfboard to New York and attended the Culinary Institute of America. The surfboard was only ever used once, as a Halloween prop.

After graduation, he worked his way through a series of four and five-star restaurants, Mr Lemon recalls, before deciding to try his hand at the business with Splendid Blendeds Café, in Delray, Florida.

In 2004, the year he sold Splendid Blendeds, the Zagat Survey restaurant guide said he had “the best snapper franchise anywhere,” and “fabulous, uniquely prepared dishes... they really know what they’re doing.”

The late, famous racecar driver Jeff Gordon was a regular, Ms Lemon recalls, despite being turned away his first time to the restaurant because it was full.

“I didn’t know who he was,” says a laughing Ms Lemon, who ran the dining area of the restaurant, as she does now with Lemon Zest.

The couple is hoping to repeat, or beat, their success with Splendid Blendeds now that they’ve settled in Jacó.

“Now that Jacó is what it is, and is going to be what it is going to be, this is the time. I want to be a part of the future of Jacó,” Mr Lemon says. “I plan to kick this up to five-star food and the service to go with it.”

Currently, lunch and dinner diners are given an amuse bouche — a bite-size teaser served upon arrival, and whose name means “mouth amuser” in French — that is whatever Mr Lemon thinks up that day. Pineapple-fried rice, pasta and arugula pesto and patacones with chicken and pineapple chipotle barbeque sauce are a few recent examples.

Mr Lemon also plans to eventually serve small, palette cleansing morsels between dishes to cleanse the diners’ palettes, in hopes they will pick up on the complicated play of flavors he orchestrates in each dish.

His meals, though representing modern, international trends, are based on local, traditional Costa Rican ingredients that he buys, as much as he can, locally: dorado, snapper and corvina from local fishermen; passion fruit, blackberries and chayote from local farmers; cheese and milk from a dairy in Tulín; sugar cane from his cook’s back yard.

“I’m not here just to relax. I’m here to make the best restaurant in Jacó, and if it turns out I can be the best in Costa Rica. I’ll shoot for that,” he says. “I’m not here to take over or anything, I’m here to fulfill my dream.”

Lemon Zest is currently open Mon-Sat, 11am-3pm, and 5pm-10pm, and is located above Bagelman’s in the El Jardín shopping center.