



PLATE LAB

AN ELEMENTAL GUIDE TO WHAT YOU'RE EATING

Stuffed, savory Venezuelan arepas

BY JENNIFER BARGER

THINK OF VENEZUELA'S arepas as South American Hot Pockets on steroids. Much like their flatter, distant cousin, the pita, the puffed corn-flour rounds are meant to be stuffed with savory fillings and chomped down — probably messily — while grasped in your hands.

“If you eat arepas the right way, you’ll need a lot of napkins,” says Raul Claros, the Caracas-born chef/owner of La Caraqueña in Falls Church, which offers a dozen varieties of the street food, packed with combos such as sifrina (chicken-avocado salad with mayo), perico (scrambled eggs with peppers) and grilled steak, pictured here.

“They’re a great vehicle for so many toppings,” says Graham Bartlett, regional

executive chef for Latin-fusion restaurants Zengo and Toro Toro, who turns out cocktail-size versions that are topped, not stuffed, with spiced pork or shrimp and calamari.

Arepas star precooked corn flour, commonly Colombian-milled, Venezuelan-style Harina P.A.N. (arepas are also popular in Colombia). Mixed and kneaded with water, salt and oil, the polenta-like stuff forms a pliable, unsticky dough that you roll into balls and pat into 4- to 6-inch rounds. The circles are then griddled (or deep-fried) until “they get golden and crispy outside and smoochy inside,” says Ali Arellano, a Caraqueño who started the Northern Virginia-based Arepa Zone food truck with his girlfriend, Gabriela Febres, also from Venezuela.

After the arepas are cooked, chefs use

a knife or kitchen shears to open one side of the circle, then stuff it to overflowing with meat, cheese, avocado or seafood. “It should look like a Pac-Man,” Claros says. The resulting dish starts with a corn crunch yielding to a creamy, often rich interior.

“Arepas aren’t complicated or sophisticated — they’re our soul food,” says Febres of Arepa Zone, which sticks to homey fillings: spiced, shredded chicken; avocados; and, nearly always, queso de mano, a shredded, soft white cheese. The lines that form in front of the lemon-hued truck offer a vibe similar to that at Caracas areperias, all-hours counters that pat out, griddle and stuff the snacks at surprising speed. “At home, arepas are like our daily bread,” Claros says. “They’re for breakfast, lunch and at 3 a.m. after clubbing!” ■

