



Hey, Babita

Looking for La Moderna

By [Jonathan Gold](#) Wednesday, Feb 20 2002

A decade or so ago, when culture- page editors were still trying to come to that part of Los Angeles that didn't happen to be contiguous with Beverly Hills, a little before television commentators learned to curl their lips into a sneer when pronouncing the word multiculturalism, La Moderna was something close to the platonic ideal of a Southern California Mexican restaurant, a comfortable place that just happened to have great food, a rough-edged Eastside joint whose service was burnished to a white-tablecloth sheen. Chef Roberto Berrelleza, who had spent years as a waiter and maitre d' at fancy restaurants before he ever picked up a pan, may have fixed the various generic combo platters and taco plates you might expect to see at a midlevel Mexican restaurant in Los Angeles, but there were also an elaborate antojito or two from his hometown of Los Mochis in Sinaloa, and even a few classic-seeming dishes that on further inspection seemed to have been invented by Berrelleza himself.

La Moderna's shrimp Topolobampo, named after a pretty seaport just outside of Los Mochis, may still be the single fieriest invention in the history of Los Angeles cuisine, a citrusy saute of white wine, tomatoes and two diced habanero peppers that took over its victims' bodies like an ebola infection -- searing lips, closing throats, blasting tongues, forcing blood to extremities, bringing forth great bursts of panic sweat that subsided only a few minutes after the last shrimp was safely swallowed. The sensation wasn't anguish, exactly -- the endorphin rush kicked in practically before the pain receptors realized something had gone terribly, terribly wrong -- as much as it was of total, irrevocable loss of control, like that moment you give yourself over to a big wave, start up the first long hill on a roller coaster or say "I love you" to somebody for the first time; you just have to trust that everything is going to turn out.

I had found La Moderna completely by accident, while scouting a nearby bakery for tamales, and I must have eaten at the place once or twice a month, crunching through the chicken-laden tostadas that Berrelleza called sopes Sammy, gobbling the salmon-filled guerito chiles that Berrelleza glazed with a sauce of chile-laced pureed strawberries. My mother-in-law, who lived just a few miles from the restaurant, went even more often than I -- she was a sucker for the

seared salmon with tomatillos and chiles piquin. Then, without warning, seven or eight years ago, La Moderna closed.

There had been rumors of Berrelleza sightings, at the Arcadia French restaurant Chez Sateau, at a fish place in Glendale, but nothing ever seemed to pan out. My friends and I became distracted by the terrific Oaxacan restaurants opening on the Westside, by Veracruz-style seafood, by the wonderful brand of intra-Mexican fusion cooking being done at Alegria in Silver Lake. And although my mother-in-law would ask plaintively once in a while if I had heard from Berrelleza, I eventually forgot about the chef.

So on a random visit the other evening to what I thought was still El Emperador Maya, a San Gabriel Yucatecan restaurant that I had at one point liked quite a lot, I couldn't have been more surprised to see sopas Sammy on the menu, gueritos rellenos, the fearsome shrimp Topolobampo. I tasted an awesome soup of pureed pumpkin flavored powerfully with fresh epazote, a delicious pickled salad with cotija cheese, and a classic version of beef barbacoa, roasted beef cheeks, dripping with a tart tomatillo-laced gravy. There was a delicious sauteed halibut drizzled with a vinaigrette made with kernels of corn infected with huitlacoche, the expensive, coal-black fungus sometimes called the Mexican equivalent of truffles, and mixiote, a chile-rubbed lamb shank cooked down until the connective fibers had collapsed into pure juice.

Chiles en nogada, once considered the national dish of Mexico, is almost always a bad call in a restaurant, oversweet and fussy, but the version here was incredible: the pure, oozy essence of pork heightened subtly with dried fruit and pecans, the mellowed sharpness of roasted chile, a delicate cream sauce garnished with pomegranate seeds.

There could be no doubt. Berrelleza was in the house -- now named Babita, after his daughter. And although there were still modernized, red-onion-studded versions of the Yucatecan specialties panuchos and cochinito pibil that devotees of El Emperador might reasonably crave, the rest of the menu was pure La Moderna. At last.

Babita, 1823 S. San Gabriel Blvd., San Gabriel; (626) 288-7265. Open for lunch Tues.--Fri.; and for dinner Tues.--Sun. Beer and wine. Takeout. Street parking only. Dinner for two, food only, \$36--\$49. MC, V. Recommended dishes: gueritos rellenos; mixiote; chiles en nogada; seared fish with huitlacoche vinaigrette.