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Foodcrawling: Cartagena, Colombia

by Karen Catchpole | Jan 29, 2015

8-10 minutes

The streets of Cartagena, Colombia, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, are crammed with places to indulge in Caribbean favorites and international classics. As Colombia's most touristed city, Cartagena attracts the country's best chefs and most ambitious newcomers all while tried-and-true establishments, from humble to posh, continue to deliver. Here are our top picks for making the calories count, from Caribbean classic to *paletas* to fine dining to sushi, all in the most beautiful city in Colombia.

[Demente](#): The city's sexiest place to eat and drink.

Opened in 2013 in the bohemian Getsemani neighborhood, Demente is still the sexiest bar in Cartagena. A new menu adds *platos fuertes* like *ensalada de pulpo*, *mojarra frito*, and *chuleta de cerdo*, to the original tapas menu which includes the not-to-be-missed rich and nuanced *hamburguesa de rabo*. Plates of the addictive *aji dulce frito con flor de sal* are the perfect accompaniment to cocktails, aged rum, beer on tap and a small but well-sourced wine list. Real Cuban cigars are available too and you can relax in a stylish rocking chair and watch the smoke loft gently up through the retractable roof (one of only two in the city).

Frank & Frank: Top notch newcomer.

The newest fine dining addition to Cartagena opened in 2014 in a narrow, five level townhouse style building. Frank & Frank is the creation of an eclectic group which includes an accomplished chef, a Colombian swimwear designer, a civil Engineer, and a former Wall Streeter. This team uses their diverse skills to transport patrons to New York and Paris of the 1920s.

There is a distinct speakeasy feel about Frank & Frank, from the discreet doorway to the parquet floor, chandeliers, leather banquettes, intimate lighting, and masculine colors and materials. If you were seated next to F. Scott Fitzgerald you would not be surprised. You also wouldn't notice once the food arrived. The signature grilled octopus appetizer, marinated in miso and white wine, was nuanced and beyond tender. The rack of lamb with mint and star anise was bright and decadent. And just say yes to the cheesecake *criollo* topped with smoky, sweet eggplant. It works.

[La Paleteria](#): **Best way to beat the heat.**

It's hot year round in the Caribbean city of Cartagena, which makes La Paleteria an essential stop for cooling off with an all-natural, hand-made popsicle offered in more than a dozen flavors using the best local ingredients. They're almost too beautiful to eat. Almost. Yes, everybody recommends La Paleteria, but there's a delicious reason for that.

[Carmen](#): **Playful finesse from a rising star.**

Carmen Angel met Rob Pevitts when the two were studying at the Le Cordon Bleu in San Francisco. They soon started a romance and a catering company while working at various restaurants in the city. Three years later they moved to Colombia (Carmen's father is Colombian) and opened Carmen Restaurant in Medellin. That was

followed, in 2012, by Carmen Restaurant in Cartagena in an indoor/outdoor space at the Ananda Hotel, which also offers rooftop dining.

The duo were inspired by the ocean and by the local, coastal ingredients. But if the ingredients are traditional, the preparations are not. Take, for example, The Beach which presents octopus, white fish, and shrimp with an edible beach on one side and coconut rice “sea foam” on the other. One of my favorite dishes was the red snapper prepared with fermented pineapple butter paired with a delicate red coconut curry, black tempura baby banana, and a pickled lychee and cilantro chimichurri. The duo also run Humo BBQ & Bar in Medellin and their fourth restaurant, the Mexican-themed Don Diablo, will open in Bogota, Colombia in 2015.

[La Mulata](#): **Almuerzos re-imagined.**

Affordable *almuerzos* are a way to fill up quickly and cheaply in the middle of the day. Rarely is your *almuerzo* a plate you look forward to, unless you're having lunch at La Mulata where the graphic décor and uber hip black and white logo are your first signs that this will be no ordinary lunch plate. Local workers and tourists looking for an affordable meal fill the place for seafood, pork, beef, and chicken dishes served up with Caribbean style and sass. All meals are prefaced with a soup and should be washed down with one of La Mulata's three varieties of ice cold, homemade lemonade. If you're in town for a while ask for their frequent diner card. You will be back and you might as well eat your way toward a free lunch.

[La Cocina de Pepina](#): **Tasty takes on traditions.**

When not one but two restaurateurs that you respect insist that you have eat at La Cocina de Pepina for the city's most creative take on

Caribbean dishes, you do it. Here you can get vibrant sweet and sour *corozo* juice made from seasonal palm fruits, fish stew rich with coconut milk, refreshing *ezcapacio* (chunks of fresh tuna pickled with carrots and peppers) all served in a brightly painted space barely able to hold its six tables and chalkboard menu. Note: the restaurant is down an unassuming *callejon* so don't assume you're lost. Just keep looking.

[La Vitrola](#): **A classy classic.**

It is widely said that Gregorio Herrera is the best maître d' in Cartagena and he is securely at the helm of La Vitrola. Opened in 1994 by actor and restaurateur David Hennessey, who has since moved on to run a small restaurant group in Panama City, La Vitrola has cultivated a gravitas beyond its ten years with an extensive menu (jerk chicken, rib eye, ravioli, ample seafood options and more) and skilled wait staff. I recommend sticking to the classics like Vitrola's out-of-this-world *ropa vieja habanera*. There's a live Cuban band most nights set up in front of La Vitrola's inviting long bar. Before his death in 2014 Colombian Nobel Prize winning writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez was sometimes spotted here. Reservations are a must and there's a city casual dress code.

[Tabetai](#): **When you're sick of ceviche.**

It's hard to imagine begin sick of ceviche, but if it's going to happen anywhere it's going to happen in Cartagena where ceviche is available on nearly every block in the historic center. It's delicious, but when you're craving fresh fish in a different form head to Tabetai Sushi (there's one small location in the historic center and one even smaller outpost in a re-purposed shipping container on

the beach in Boca Grande).

Thick cuts of achingly fresh sashimi and inventive sushi rolls like the Lucia roll with shrimp, tilapia, avocado and soft, ripe plantain on the outside of the roll are served by knowledgeable staff. The fabulous *tiriditos de pescado* plate is covered with artful slices of tilapia covered in *leche de tigre* and small dollops of creamy pepper sauce and shaved peppers. Each ice cold beer comes with a fresh frosted mug and there's a saki menu as well.