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Chef's Picks: Hidden Gems in Bogota, Colombia

by Karen Catchpole | Nov 19, 2015

8-10 minutes

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Arizabaleta is also a partner in Demente in Cartagena and plans to open a sandwich shop and two new restaurants in Bogota in the coming months. Luckily, he wasn't too busy to share some of his favorite under-the-radar places to eat in Bogota. In typical style, Arizabaleta, who has a tattoo of a pig on his upper left arm, showed up for our eating tour through the capital city in a lemon yellow and white 1953 Chevy Bel Air that looked like a rolling slice of lemon meringue pie. It just got tastier from there.

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There are many markets in Bogota but Arizabaleta made it clear that we needed to begin at *Mercado 12 de Octubre* for classic *fritanga* and what might be the best *chicharron* in the city. Doña Segundo has been making *fritanga* in this market for 57 years and she's got it down, especially when it comes to her *chicharron*, which is so crispy it's close to what we call pork rinds in the US. The stuff melts in your mouth.

[Nueve](#) restaurant is located inside a two-story house that's been converted into a retails space, which includes BD gourmet shop, Café Le Amis bakery, and this 32-seat temple to inventive tapas

and a mind-boggling wine selection. There's only a small sign out front and you have to be buzzed into the front door of the house before making your way to the restaurant on the first floor. Owner, chef, and sommelier Pedro Escobar opened Nueve in 2009 and he named it after the number nine because, says Escobar, the number nine is important in all stages of wine making.

Wine really is the focus of Nueve where there are more than 165 different bottles all available by the glass. Escobar's menu offers small plates that support the wine. The *Tabaquito de Morcilla* plate presented complex and firm blood sausage wrapped in a spring roll-like casing and fried with a pear and roasted pepper jam on the side. The contrast of rich and soft with basic and crunchy and sweet and spicy was delightful.

Even *arequipe* gets a makeover at Nueve which serves *arequipe* made from buffalo milk slathered between sheets of light pastry and homemade banana ice cream. All of these delicate options come out a miniscule open air kitchen that has a tree growing in it and up through the roof. Sous-vide cooking and strict pre-portioning mean that just two chefs can stay on top of the 30 item menu.

Adjacent to Nueve is a six-stool watering hole called Bar 8 1/4. Here Ronnie Schneider, a Venezuelan who calls himself a Slow Drink Tender and produced a food blog called [Bogota Divina](#) plies his craft with the passion and precision of a watchmaker. Armed with a cabinet full of homemade infusions and bitters he experiments boldly, fails rarely, and delights his patrons with classy (but never pretentious) presentation with surprises in every sip. Whatever you do, don't order a boring old beer. Arizabaleta is a common co-conspirator and he and Schneider can sometimes be seen putting their heads together behind the bar in the search of

the next great cocktail.

Ice cream is everywhere in Bogota. Premium homemade gelato is not. That's why Arizabaleta appreciates [Cremeria Italiana](#). The Italian owner makes everything from scratch on site—from ice cream sandwiches to cones to 18 flavors of gelato, which are whipped up in machines imported from Italy. Flavors are rich and quality is high.

You can count the number of places in Bogota that serve sushi on one hand. The places that serve authentic sushi and not an Asian-inspired hybrid are even rarer. That's why every Japanese expat in Bogota (from the Japanese ambassador on down) eats at Wabi Sabi. Owned by a Japanese chef, the place is nothing to look at (in fact, don't look too closely – cleanliness has lapsed). But we didn't come for the décor, we came for the freshest raw fish in the capital and the austere, classically Japanese menu delivered. You will NOT find cream cheese in your sushi roll here.

Mercado Paloquemao is the second market Arizabaleta insisted we visit and he was clearly in his element as he strolled past the overflowing stalls pointing out *chugua* (which looks like an odd red potato but isn't), *manzaninas* (an oblong local apple), and other hard-to-find ingredients. Chefs love this market and Arizabaleta tells me there's a separate area for bulk buying for restaurants. He stopped at a vegetable stall and bought cheese from a container hidden under a counter then started searching through the dried goods section for a particular type of extra small corn. In the prepared food area soups reign supreme with stall after stall anchored by a stove groaning under the weight of multiple pressure cookers. We ordered bowls of stew-like cow foot soup, the meat tender and gamey in the gelatinous broth.

Though his growing group of restaurants are all in Bogota, Arizabaleta was born in Cali and he was anxious to show off [Chuleta Champus](#), the best place in Bogota for a taste of Cali specialties like mini *pipian empanadas* fried crisply with a creamy peanut and potato filling, *marranitas* (plantain balls stuffed with *chicharron* and baked), and the namesake *champus* (a fruit juice beverage thickened with the addition of whole cooked corn and a spicy cinnamon and clove syrup). The owners are from Cali and they keep their no-frills place decorated with salsa and soccer memorabilia.