

Cuca

Remaining high up on the must-try, must-return lists of Bali's gourmands, Cuca has gained somewhat of a cult status on the Island of the Gods.

For the foodies in-tune with Bali's dining scene, Cuca needs no introduction. Since opening in July last year, the casual tapas restaurant has been keeping the island's finest restaurants on their toes, wooing the masses with some outstanding plates served free from pretension or hefty price tags. With the restaurant on the lips of every in-crowd, it seems Bali has caught Cuca-Fever – and for good reason, too.

With a concept that is "all about taste", Cuca serves up three distinct menus that use 100% local ingredients: tapas, cocktails and desserts. They keep things simple so that the food in front of you is the main event, and the entire restaurant is wholly geared towards enhancing flavours. It doesn't try to wow you with fancy furnishings or elaborate presentations. Instead, Cuca lets the food speak for itself.



CUCA'S LATEST CREATIONS



Golden Onion Rings

pickled red onions, coconut crust, green chilli yoghurt.

Strawberry Cloud Cake

freshly baked sponge cake, pandan gelato and a berry cream.



Warm Melting Cheese

candied granola, papaya jam and rosemary.

Iced Rosé Cocktail

hibiscus ice, brandy, wild honey and lemongrass.



Take Cuca's ritualistic amouse bouche for instance. In front of me sits a ball of colourless cotton candy. It looks plain and rather unappetising, but with a name like Cotton Betutu, its dull exterior is intentionally misleading. The moment I bite into the soft and squidgy sphere, the most incredible explosion of aromatic spices from the signature Indonesian dish, Ayam Betutu, makes my eyes bulge and my taste buds water. This truly exemplifies Cuca and its concept – simple and unassuming, yet tastefully and intrinsically mind-blowing.

The tapas menu shuns the bog-standard "starters, mains, desserts" structure to instead categorise the plates by Cuca's four unique styles: Inspired, Ceviches, Chichas and Puddles. I start with a dish from the "Ceviche" section as these plates seem the perfect way to kick off a meal. Inspired by Peruvian tradition, delicate slices of the freshest raw fish are splashed with a fiery blend of chilli, lime and Cuca's unique shaved ice. I opt for the emperor fish, topped with a colourful mishmash of watermelon ice, toasted pumpkin seeds and a scattering of torn basil. The fish is pleasantly sour, which can be balanced perfectly by a shared bite of the watermelon ice for an incredible play on texture and temperature.

I follow with something from the "Inspired" section. These dishes are always being tweaked and are ever-changing, and Cuca has recently introduced a few new signatures. First are the deep-fried red onion rings coated in a coconut crust and served in a rustic paper bag. Like a Spanish-Indian twist on fish 'n' chips, the crunchy bites come with a squeeze bottle of aioli-inspired green chilli yoghurt. There is also the "Warm Melting Cheese" that sees chunks of gooey fromage rolled in a mind-blowing candied coconut granola and droplets of a homemade papaya jam. Sweet, sour, rich and roasted – each bite is like nothing I've ever tried before.

The "Inspired" section also boasts two long-standing favourites like the KFC-style crispy fried chicken or the glazed young carrot salad scattered with Bedugul strawberries, cashew nuts and whipped avocado. The texture of the carrots is sublime – almost meaty in their glazed and roasted succulence. Dip them into the whipped avocado and you'll hardly believe that this is healthful food.

Onto the "Chichas" and I am treated to the real taste of Spain. Each dish follows the Spanish tradition of coarsely chopping premium meats, then delicately infusing them with rich seasonings before being skilfully shaped



and fire roasted. I try the succulent pork chicha which is topped with fresh apple, East Bali cashews, cauliflower and peppermint. The meat is so juicy it just falls apart, while cute ribbons of apple shavings offer a pleasant crunch to each tender bite.

Last but certainly not least are the “Puddles” dishes. These are inspired by the forgotten ritual of making a broth, which is then enriched with a garnish and gently poured over traditionally farmed organic rice. Try the deep ocean tiger prawn puddle with its perfect balance of wild herb earthiness and the sweetness of the sea, finished with a touch of red chilli.

Despite feeling perfectly satiated from so many spectacular creations, it didn't seem right missing out on Cuca's two other menus: desserts and cocktails. Beginning with the latter, Cuca's Tokyo Mojito is an Asian, local twist on the classic. Served in a super cool tilted glass with a huge sphered ice cube so that it takes longer to melt, the cocktail is beautifully refreshing with a lime piquancy and a sweet but earthy undertone. Continuing the zesty flavours, I try the “Bali breakfast” from the dessert menu. Resembling a fried egg, an orb of sweet runny mango bursts open with the touch of my spoon, oozing bright orange goodness over a white frozen passion fruit and coconut yogurt. A wonderfully sweet and tangy note to end the perfect meal.

THE CUCA LOWDOWN

Cuca was conceptualised, designed and opened by husband and wife duo, Head Chef Kevin Cherkas and Virginia Entizne, and they form what can only be described as the perfect team. Kevin has worked in some of the world's most successful restaurants, while Virginia uses her professional expertise and natural charm to take the reigns of the business and welcome each guest into their world. The invincible pair are the heart and soul of the restaurant, and their zest for making sure every diner leaves open-mouthed and wide-eyed comes across in each and every dish. Be prepared to catch Cuca-Fever, and be prepared to return for more.

Cuca

Jl Yoga Perkanthi, Jimbaran,
Bali 80364, Indonesia
T. +62 361 708066
www.cucaflavor.com



Grab a chair at Cuca's food bar, one of the three distinctive spaces of the restaurant. It is an interactive and exciting 8-metre-long elevated teak counter where you can watch the high energy chefs slice, toss, sizzle and sear right in front of your very eyes. *Chef Kevin Cherkas* will even serve your dishes to you directly, and if you're lucky, he will share some of his infectious passion for cooking with you, and might even let you step into the kitchen for a quick photo opportunity wearing a Cuca apron.

