

## Now Open: El Rey Mezcal Bar

Words and photos by Nelson Tam



Talk to any food-loving Torontonian regarding the city's restaurant scene and it won't take long before Grant Van Gameren's name - or one of his restaurants - comes up. The chef first wowed diners at The Black Hoof with dishes like beef heart, and horse tartare. Since then, he's moved on to open Bar Isabel and Bar Raval to wide acclaim. And so his latest project, El Rey Mezcal Bar in Kensington Market, with co-owner Owen Walker, comes highly anticipated.



*Co-owner Owen Walker mixes up a drink behind the bar.*

This time around van Gameren has brought aboard husband and wife chef team Julio Guajardo and Kate Chomyshyn – friends of his wife's from Montreal. Their “audition,” so to speak, involved van Gameren flying over to have dinner at their house. “He finished it and pretty much flew back to Toronto that same day. Then he called us a week later and said “Okay, let's open a restaurant,” says Guajardo.

Not surprisingly, there are a couple of dishes from the dinner that are now on El Rey's menu. One of them is the Coctel a la Campechana, a classic Mexican mixture of seafood. Guajardo and Chomyshyn's version has clams, oysters, shrimp, cucumbers, red onions, avocados, and olives, with a zingy tomato sauce made with clam, oyster and lime juice. It's served with soda crackers, just like in Mexico.





*The Coctel a la Campechana: a classic Mexican mixture of seafood. El Rey's version has clams, squid, oysters, shrimp, cucumbers, red onions, avocados, and olives, with a zingy tomato sauce made with clam, oyster and lime juice. Served with soda crackers, \$21.*

The rest of the plates are traditional as well, and the chefs love working with what the Market has to offer to cook - they are regulars at Sanagan's and Perola. One of the most authentic dishes (and perhaps challenging for diners) is probably the Cacahuete Mix, which is a peanut mix with chapulines (grasshoppers). "It's a typical snack when you sit down at any cantina in Oaxaca," Chomyshyn asserts.



*Chef Julio Guajardo puts the finishing touches on the daily special dish.*

Oaxaca is definitely where heart of El Rey flows from. The team's four principals have all traveled there before, returning with a lot of love for the Mexican state. And after all, it is where most mezcal is made.

Often referred to as "tequila's smoky cousin," a big part of the purpose of El Rey is to educate guests on mezcal. In fact, in-depth information can be found on the menu, including some on its subsections. "It's an ongoing project and we're trying to bring in as much interesting product as we can," Walker tells us. The mezcals are available in flights, as well, ranging from \$25-\$50. Walker's bar program also includes classic cocktails and classics with a twist, like the "Mexploitation" - a mai tai with tequila. Rounding out the list are wines, West Avenue "Heritage Dry" cider, and some generally lighter beers to complement the food.





*Mezcal flights range from \$25-\$50. Daily special dish of cucumbers with chapulines (grasshoppers), pineapple vinegar, chilies, lime juice, and salt, \$4.*

Upon walking into El Rey, the vibe is decidedly Mexican - the bright stools, the brick archways, the cactuses and agaves. But that's not to say the design is without any flare. Solid Design and Build - responsible for restaurants like La Carnita, DaiLo, and Miss Thing's - was involved in the project. A wheat-pasted collage is inspired by Walker's love of old Mexican movie posters. A mirrored ceiling in the dimly lit upper level dining room begs one to question just how much mezcal he or she has already consumed. Meanwhile, Elvis appears in a few spots as well. "El Rey" means "The King" in Spanish, so it's a fitting appearance.

As for Grant Van Gameren, it remains to be seen if he's got his eye on the crown for restaurants and bars in the city. But given his current record, along with two upcoming projects - Parkdale cocktail bar Pretty Ugly, and a restaurant that will cook only with fire - he may earn it yet.



*A 40-seat patio more than doubles El Rey's capacity to 70.*

El Rey Mezcal Bar is located at 2A Kensington Ave, open 6p-2a, 7 days a week.