

FOOD + WINE



CULINARY MASTERPIECE

Chef Roberto Cortez realizes his ultimate New Year's Eve affair

Whipped foie gras with fig paper and dried-fig gel.

"I WANT TO BE ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO'S NOT JUST COOKING FOOD, I want to give you an experience you've never had before," says chef Roberto Cortez, whose fluency with cutting-edge "molecular gastronomy" techniques (see "Why Foam?" page 156) and exotic ingredients tickled Paul Allen's palate for five years (he was the Microsoft billionaire's personal chef). It doesn't hurt that his name rolls off the tongue like honey and he's every bit as cool as the rock stars who've savored his food—Mick Jagger, Bono, and Peter Gabriel, among others.

Originally from El Paso, Texas, Cortez has traveled the world honing his culinary skills. With educational stints at Le Cordon Bleu, L'Ecole Lenôtre, Bellouet Conseil de Paris, and the Ritz Escoffier School, he has a five-star pedigree. A decidedly modern chef who wields sharp knives and organic chemistry with equal aplomb, Cortez also has a soft side—witness the dancing line of symbols tattooed on his arm that represent love, passion, and creation.

Ring in 2010, he plans a gastronomical magic show for an intimate New Year's Eve soiree. As a nod to the ancient Babylonians, who welcomed each year with an 11-day feast, Cortez devised

NEW YEAR'S EVE

menu

HORS D'OEUVRES

LIQUID ONION RING

Onion consommé
Buttermilk sabayon
Lager tempura cracklings

OSETRA CAVIAR

Gold beets
Thyme chantilly
Aged maple syrup

CHICKEN TERRINE

Leek confiture
Smoked mushrooms
Thai basil

SALT

WHIPPED FOIE GRAS

Chinese cardamom caramel
Scallion mille-feuille
Dried figs

BRIOCHE AROMATIC

Spice butter
Rosemary oil
Murray salt

LOCAL HALIBUT

Coriander pistachio oatmeal
Crème fraîche tapioca
Cranberry-pink peppercorn butter

CARNAROLI RISOTTO

Mint powder lobster
Smoked bacon paper
Lemongrass and leaves

PRAWN BALLOTINE

Tarragon avocado
Pine nut oil mousse
Black truffle juices

VEAL BELLY RAVIOLIS

Vadouvan spice
Cabrales mousse
Honey rye crumbs
Coffee oil

SUGAR

LEMON CURD MOUSSE

Crunchy buckwheat crepes
Mint oil

CHOCOLATE SURPRISE

Amedei Chuao cream
Cappuccino
Elements of banana
Frozen malt
Herb salad

an 11-course tasting menu to celebrate the arrival of the new decade. Commencing with his signature Liquid Onion Ring and culminating with his swoon-inducing Chocolate Surprise, guests are to be treated to a stunning parade of edible tableaux, each carefully conceived to delight the eye, entice the nose, and surprise the tongue.

Part of his success is restraint; Cortez never gives his audience too much of a good thing. He carefully avoids the physiological effect of palate fatigue, where a flavor's intensity diminishes with each mouthful. So he layers his food, breaking down the components and presenting them as separate tastes. In the end, he notes, "you're going to have a different combination at each bite, and when you're done, each bite is a different experience." A good example is his Liquid Onion Ring, a shot glass filled with three distinct layers: a rich dark onion consommé on the bottom, followed



by frothy buttermilk foam, and topped by delicate tempura cracklings made with dark beer. "So when you drink it," the chef says with a satisfied grin, "you get the texture of an onion ring but the flavor ingredients are all in liquid form."

Cortez's creativity extends beyond the kitchen to the table. He totes his own stash of china (Hermès, Bernardaud, Rosenthal) and crystal (Spiegelau). He's designed silverware—in collaboration with German silversmith Katja Bremkamp—for the prefatory amuse-bouche. He'll even put together a soundtrack to be "tasted" along with his food. It's much more than a fine-dining experience, it's performance art you can eat. ■

why foam?

One of the hallmarks of the culinary movement called molecular gastronomy—scientific methods are used to modify the chemical structure of food, changing its texture and maximizing its flavor—is foam, a combination of air molecules and liquid. Foams trigger the taste sensation because the tongue cannot taste anything that hasn't been dissolved in a liquid. One example is the sabayon, created by whipping egg yolks with sugar and wine over heat until a thick foamy sauce results. The whipping process integrates air molecules into the mixture. The molecules are then trapped and stabilized by the egg proteins as they thicken and bond together from the heat. Modern cooks create foams using a pressurized canister with nitrous oxide. The result: light, airy, and flavorful.



THE 70% SOLUTION Chef Cortez's favorite chocolates (all 70% cocoa): the Italian brand **Amedei** as well as **Michel Cluizel** and **Valrhona** from France, available at Chocolate Maya, 15 W. Gutierrez St., Santa Barbara, 805-965-5956, chocolatemaya.com.

The Amedei Chuao cream element of the Chocolate Surprise.