



311 West 17th Street • New York, NY • 212.243.1333

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Sueños

Fact Sheet

Concept:	Acclaimed chef, Sue Torres, brings her dream of a vibrant, innovative Mexican restaurant to life in this Chelsea neighborhood eatery. From the menu to the décor, Torres' passion for Mexico exudes from every detail.
Location:	311 West 17th Street (between 8th and 9th Avenues) New York, NY 10011
Phone:	212.243.1333
Chef/Owner:	Sue Torres
Date Opened:	July 7, 2003
Menu Style:	Innovative Mexican cuisine
Wine & Spirits:	Award-winning beverage consultant Steve Olson, a.k.a. the Wine Geek, assisted in the creation of a special tequila and mezcal list, featuring many small artisanal producers. The wine selection offers perfect pairings with Torres' dishes, while signature cocktails complete the festive atmosphere.
Décor:	Using a color palette reminiscent of the art of Frida Kahlo, Bogdanow Partners Architects created a vibrant space out of a tucked-away location. Dioramas and artwork throughout the restaurant's three dining spaces evoke Mexico, while a raised platform puts a <i>cocinera</i> on display as she prepares fresh tortillas and guacamole.
Hours:	Sunday to Wednesday, 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. Thursday to Saturday, 5 p.m. to Midnight Sunday Brunch, 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Saturday cooking classes, 12 p.m. to 2:30 p.m.
Private Parties:	A private glass-enclosed dining room holds a party of 12. Private or corporate lunch parties are available for groups of 15 or more with advanced reservation.
Price range:	Dinner entrées range from \$17 to \$23 Five-course chile tasting: \$50
Credit Cards:	AmEx, MasterCard and Visa

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Mexican Dreams

Chef Sue Torres Brings Her Dream To Life In Sueños

A really good dream transports you to another world where every discovery is captivating and delightful. So it is with Sueños, which means "dreams" in Spanish. Pass through black wrought-iron gates at 311 West 17th Street in New York City, and slip into another world, a world of authentic Mexican ambiance and innovative cuisine as dreamt by Executive Chef/Owner, Sue Torres. Opened in July 2003, Sueños immediately earned accolades from the national culinary press, including renowned food writer Jeffrey Steingarten who named it one of the "lasting monuments of 2003" among the year's new restaurant openings.

While Torres' family was the first to expose her to the world of food, her love affair with Mexico and its culinary heritage began when she became sous chef at Arizona 206 and Arizona Café, under the tutelage of Chef Miles Angelo. Within little more than a year, this Culinary Institute of Americagraduate, who was still in her early 20s, was ready to become the chef at Rocking Horse Café. Her dishes inspired the *New York Times* to call it, "the most exciting Mexican food in the city." In 2000, she became the executive chef to open Hell's Kitchen on 9th Avenue. Once again she wowed audiences with her interpretations of Mexican cuisine, earning herself the attention of *Working Woman* magazine who named her one of "20 Under 30" to watch. By the start of 2003, Torres was ready to bring to life her dream of a Mexican restaurant that would showcase her interpretive and innovative style.

Sueños reflects Torres' love of all things Mexican. From the décor, to the selection of tequilas, to the insistence on a true *cocinera* — or tortilla lady — working on a *comal* in the main dining room, Torres pays homage to the centuries of tradition that have woven together Mexico's flavors and ingredients. Dishes such as smoked duck breast mini tacos with fingerling potato and ancho vinaigrette; banana leaf steamed pork tamale with grilled shrimp and ancho beurre blanc; and tortilla crusted Chilean sea bass with chile rajas tamale, reflect Torres' understanding of the country's regional diversity, as well as her classical culinary training. Torres also incorporates Mexican ingredients into her dessert menu, which features lemon-lime crepes with caramelized bananas and cajeta sauce, and sponge cake with mixed berries, Crema de Mezcal whipped cream and raspberry sauce.

At Sueños, chiles are celebrated with their own \$50 prix-fixe tasting menu featuring four courses (including dessert). The ever-changing dishes, which are each prepared with one chile as its star, will include fava bean and drunken goat cheese empanada with tomato-smoked jalepeno coulis; pan-seared grouper with guava-costeno puree and plantain chips; chile rubbed goat steamed with Negra Modelo, and lemon-lime crepe with caramelized banana.

To develop her beverage menu, Torres turned to nationally acclaimed beverage consultant, Steve Olson, who has shaped the wine and spirits menus of many of the country's top restaurants. With Olson, Torres selected an array of New World wines that fit both her culinary creations and her price range. Tequilas and mezcals will take center stage at Sueños, with many that are handcrafted by small producers using 100 percent organically grown agave.

(more)

To create the right setting for her menu, Torres hired Bogdanow Partners Architects, who took advantage of the Chelsea property's recessed entrance located through a short passageway. By drawing guests into this hidden door, Sueños furthers the sense of discovery for its guests. And to ensure that the restaurant doesn't go undiscovered, Bogdanow refashioned the storefront on West 17th Street, to display Sueños' bustling kitchen.

Within the restaurant, guests discover not one, but three spaces, each with its own dream-like quality. A palette of colors reminiscent of the paintings of Frida Kahlo is used in the deep blue bar area, the Southwestern peach courtyard, and the magenta dining room. Within the center of the restaurant sits a glass-enclosed oasis featuring a tranquil fountain flowing into a small pond surrounded by river rocks, trees and foliage. Sunlight filters through the floor-to-ceiling windows to further brighten the peach and magenta dining areas. And as if onstage, the *cocinera* appears on a raised platform in the corner of the main dining room, where she tends to the *comal* and prepares fresh guacamole and other treats. To further evoke Mexico's artistic styles, Torres commissioned New York artist Lucas Moran to create pine dream boxes to hang on the walls.

Chef Torres' passion for Mexico knows no bounds, and with annual trips to cook beside some of the country's culinary stars as well as beside her friends' mothers and grandmothers, she is able to continually hone her knowledge of this country's expansive culinary range.

Sueños is located at 311 West 17th Street in the Chelsea neighborhood of New York City. The restaurant serves dinner from 5 p.m. to 11 p.m. Sunday through Wednesday, 5 p.m. to midnight Thursday through Saturday. Sunday brunch is available from 11:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Private or corporate lunch parties are available for groups of 15 or more with advanced reservation. For reservations, call 212.243.1333.

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Sue Torres

Executive Chef/Owner, Sueños

Sue Torres finds Mexican cuisine endlessly fascinating. So much so that she's devoted her entire culinary career to it. And diners in New York City have benefited enormously — getting to eat what *New York Times*' writer Eric Asimov once called, "the most exciting Mexican food in the city." In 2003, she's poured all of her passion, knowledge and talent for this beloved ethnic cuisine into a place that's all her own. Spanish for "dreams," Sueños is the realization of Torres' dream to open her own restaurant where she can devote herself to creating and exploring innovative Mexican dishes.

In just 10 years since obtaining her degree from the Culinary Institute of America, Torres' star has risen at a steep incline. A protégé of chef Miles Angelo, the king of Southwestern fare, Torres' discovered her love for Mexican ingredients while working as his sous chef at Arizona 206 and Arizona Café. She learned to creatively compose flavors, textures and presentation, and was introduced to the wide array of chiles and their breadth of possibilities. A decade later, she displays that knowledge in Sueños five-course chile tasting menu. Each dish celebrates a different chile.

Torres began receiving acclaim for her Mexican cooking when she became the chef of New York's Rocking Horse Café Mexicano in 1997. In addition to praise from the likes of Asimov, Torres' skill earned the restaurant three and a half stars from the *New York Post*, and a place on *Time Out New York's* "Restaurant Critics' Top Picks."

Torres' understanding of her favorite cuisine was further developed by a trip to Mexico in 1998 to study with Mexican-cooking authority and cookbook writer, Diana Kennedy, who taught her the roots of Mexican food. By learning the classics, Torres was able to apply her creativity and innovation to produce contemporary interpretations. She explores the individuality of ingredients and will often develop dishes that feature sauces containing no more than five ingredients, concentrating on an individual flavor. She uses traditional Mexican techniques to get the most flavor out of ingredients and is not afraid of big contrasts, such as sweet and spicy or sweet and smoky, as well as contrasting textures. In the words of *Vogue's* Jeffrey Steingarten, "Torres sacrifices none of the assertiveness and depth of Mexican flavors as she recasts traditional dishes or uses Mexican techniques with ingredients of the north."

From Rocking Horse, Torres moved to Hell's Kitchen in 2000 and in no time she had caught the eye of such publications as *Working Woman*, who wrote of her in their "20 Under 30" feature: "Blending creativity, dedication and ambition, Torres has managed to stand out in the cutthroat world of New York's food professionals." *The New Yorker's* assessment was equally complimentary: "The chef, Sue Torres, has a modern touch with traditional ingredients which gives them a worldly air." *The New York Times'* Asimov followed her to her new post and remarked, "If you're interested in what Ms. Torres can do when she's inspired, head directly for the interpretations of Mexican dishes."

(more)

Despite the success Torres experienced in other restaurateurs' kitchens, she was itching to fulfill her dream, and in 2002 she left Hell's Kitchen and began the daunting task of creating her own restaurant from scratch. Where did this drive come from in a woman barely into her thirties? A native of Long Island, Torres is the daughter of an Italian mother and Puerto Rican father, both of whom celebrated the foods of their homelands with their children. Torres grew up between the smells of fresh basil and cilantro leaves. Her mother, a chocolatier and cake decorator, passed on her love of cooking and taught her daughter to put her heart into everything she creates. Her maternal grandfather's dedication to growing tomatoes, herbs and vegetables taught her to revere the importance of fresh ingredients.

With Sueños, Torres is able to put all her passion for Mexico on display, not just on the menu, but on the walls where artist Lucas Moran created 'dream boxes' that feature items Torres has collected over the years. Torres also decided that, though it would be more expensive to do so, her restaurant would feature a raised platform on which a *cocinera*, or tortilla lady, would prepare fresh tortillas on a traditional *comal*, as well as make fresh guacamole. In this way, Torres is able to share with her guests the beauty and art of Mexican cooking — and thereby share her dream.

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VOGUE

NOVEMBER 2003

taster's choice

This fall, as Manhattan becomes the new headquarters of some of the world's finest chefs, many of the city's own are also expanding their empires. Jeffrey Steingarten tastes—and rates—the best of everything.

The lasting monuments of 2003, besides Jean-George's *66*, are four: Schiller's Liquor Bar, wd-50, Sueños, and Mix. And now that we've been taught how to order a meal at Grand Sichuan Eastern, we can decree it one of the very best Chinese restaurants in the city.

For years, Josephina Howard and Zarela Martinez have cooked Manhattan's most interesting Mexican food, and now Sue Torres joins them with Sueños (Spanish for "dreams") and a style of *nueva cocina*, or *nueva Latina*, that she developed at Rocking Horse Café, not far away. Torres sacrifices none of the assertiveness and depth of Mexican flavors as she recasts

traditional dishes or uses Mexican techniques with ingredients of the north. You reach the entrance down a short flight of stairs and a narrow passageway off fabled Seventeenth Street (that's where I live) and enter a very happy bar and a larger square dining room behind it, all painted in hot Latin colors. The menu would take several visits to explore, beyond what I have already enjoyed: lobster-and-corn fritters with smoke jalapeño cream, fava bean-and-goat cheese empanadas, smoked-duck mini tacos, and squash blossom enchiladas (which accompany the roast chicken). There are reports that service flags when Sueños is crowded. But I was in no hurry, aided as I was by the fine collection of tequilas, which helps you


I was in no hurry, aided as I was by the fine collection of tequilas, which helps you forget about time, about everything until you pay the bill and try to stand up

forget about time, about everything but conversation, until you pay the bill and try to stand up and then remember that standing up is overrated.

GOTHAM

NOVEMBER 2003

GUILTY PLEASURES



A close-up photograph of a hand holding a margarita glass. The glass is filled with an orange-colored drink, has a thick white salt rim, and is garnished with a lime wedge. The background is blurred, showing a person in a dark shirt.

IN YOUR SUEÑOS

Chef Daniel Boulud raised Manhattan's price bar with a \$30 burger, so it's no surprise that outrageously priced cocktails have popped up around town. *Santitas*, the uptown Chelsea Mexican newcomer, has just introduced the most expensive cocktail in town, a premium \$10 margarita that's bound to please die-hard tequila fans. Appropriately titled *Los Sueños* (the drink of your dreams), the concoction comes innocently disguised in a martini glass. With a magically potent mix of one hundred fiftieth anniversary Grand Maquis, limited-edition Herradura Selección Suprema, a smoky floater of Del Maguey Single Village Mezcal 100-percent Tuboñ paired with fresh blood orange and lime juices, the potent brew doesn't have the sweet taste of your average margarita, but packs more of a smoky bite. "It's like the cocktail I've ever had," says chef Sue Torres, whose inventive cuisine is the real one of her first solo venture. And be sure to wash down the liquid gold with Torres' rare *empanada*, like chili-rubbed goat wrapped in avocado leaf or a drunken goat cheese and beef *empanada*. *Santitas*, 311 West 17th Street, 212-243-1333. —SARA BLISS

NEW YORK

JANUARY 5, 2004



MEXICAN EXCESS

Before tackling a robust dinner of potato-and-chorizo quesadillas followed by chili-rubbed goat at **SUEÑOS**, in Chelsea, you might want to fortify yourself with the house “Double Secret Probation” margarita, which costs \$30 and is almost worth every penny.

BON APPÉTIT

JANUARY 2004

AMERICA'S FOOD AND ENTERTAINING MAGAZINE

The Restaurant Reporter

Special Edition: The Year in Review

BY TANYA WENMAN STEEL

THE BUZZ WE POLLED SOME OF THE COUNTRY'S TOP RESTAURANT CRITICS FOR BOTH THE BEST AND THE MOST OVERRATED NEW PLACES OF 2003. HERE'S WHAT THEY SAID.

• NEW YORK •

From William Grimes; The New York Times

BEST COCKTAIL LIST

The inventive tropical cocktails at **SUEÑOS** in Chelsea light up the room.

NEW YORK

SEPTEMBER 8, 2003

RESTAURANTS SUEÑOS

Sweet Sueños

Sueños means “dreams” in Spanish. With potent margaritas and fresh south-of-the-border cuisine, the restaurant may well inspire visions. **BY ADAM PLATT**

“**Y**ou’re the first,” the bartender said as I bellied up to the little bar at **Sueños**, the aptly named new Mexican restaurant in Chelsea. Moments before, I’d pointed, with hesitant, quivering fingers, to an item on the cocktail menu called a “Double Secret Probation Margarita.” The drink, made from a single shot of designer tequila, cost an astonishing \$30, and according to the bartender, no one had dared order it before me. The concoction (an even more rarefied version is available for \$69) arrived in a small cocktail glass (I’d imagined something the size of a communal goldfish bowl) and had the dense, swirling quality of antifreeze. After two sips, I had trouble locating my tongue. After four sips, my wife became a little alarmed. “Say something,” she commanded. But it was too late. I’d already lapsed into a pleasantly dreamy, addled state.

Of course, sueños means “dreams” in Spanish, and if the drinks don’t help you achieve some beatific approximation of Mexican-restaurant nirvana, then chef Sue Torres’s inventive cooking just might. The small, subterranean space on West 17th Street used to be occupied by a darkly lit dating destination called Alley’s End. But the new owners have blown a skylight through the roof and painted the room in jolting tones of fuchsia and peach. There’s a glassed-in Mexican rock garden along one of the walls, and a kind of raised D.J. platform in another corner, where a merry lady mashes fresh

guacamole in an anthropologically correct volcanic mortar while dexterously spinning out a steady stream of fresh hot tortillas.

Ms. Torres, who was formerly executive chef at Rocking Horse, cooks in a similarly dramatic style. Our first dish, I woozily recall, was a pair of lobster fritters leavened with fresh corn, flavored with citrus salsa, and placed in a pool of cream sauce spiked with chipotle. After that came a pair of small, crunchy tacos filled with diced fingerling potatoes, then topped with a tasty chopping of cold smoked duck breast. There are two serviceable types of fusion empanadas on the menu (one stuffed with smoked pork, the other filled with goat cheese and fava beans and made to resemble fancy French puff pastry), as well as gummy quesadillas filled with sautéed huitlacoche (that’s a fungus found on Mexican corn, in case you didn’t know) and dexterously rolled in the shape of cigars.

Much of this food is available on an elaborate “chili tasting” menu as well as à la carte, and not surprisingly, some dishes are more successful than others. Torres’s superior chorizo quesadilla is spiced with chili rajás, stuffed with potatoes and hot chorizo, and decorated with tangy slices of McIntosh apple. Her pork tamale is almost as tasty (it’s a satisfying amalgam of smoky sliced pork and shrimp wrapped in a banana leaf), and my wife’s fine order of chili-rubbed goat contained enough minced garlic to rouse me from my margarita stupor. But the restau-

rant’s fish dishes tended to be a little bland (underdone tuna, overwet Chilean sea bass covered with limp crumbings of tortilla), and the aggressively gourmet roast-chicken enchilada (it’s filled with squash blossoms) could have been dressed with something more vigorous than pumpkinseed sauce.

Not that the boisterous crowd at Sueños seemed to notice. The little margarita bar was mobbed on the evenings I staggered in (it’s decked with baskets of fine, not-too-greasy tortilla chips and pots of spicy, fresh-made salsa), and the rest of the restaurant was packed to the brim with eager, chattering Mexican-food enthusiasts. For dessert, they dined on sweet puff-pastry empanadas filled with guavas and cream cheese, platters of un-Mexican profiteroles bursting with copious amounts of pistachio ice cream, and a decoratively layered sponge cake that tasted mild but was fun to look at. These sweet dishes tend to blend together after a while, so ask for one of each and pass them around the table. Or just skip the desserts altogether. Take a little nap, visit one of the ATMs down the street, and order another drink.

Sueños, 311 West 17th Street (212-243-1333). Tuesday through Sunday, 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. Appetizers, \$7 to \$10; entrées, \$17 to \$23. All major credit cards.



DREAMY: Sueños’s fuchsia-and-peach dining room.

“IF THE DRINKS DON’T GET YOU TO MEXICAN-RESTAURANT NIRVANA, THEN CHEF SUE TORRES’S INVENTIVE COOKING JUST MIGHT.”

The New York Times

WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2004

RESTAURANTS

WILLIAM GRIMES

It's Mexico in Chelsea: Cue the Iguanas

INDOOR STREET SNACKS Tortillas and guacamole are made in the dining room at Sueños, a new-wave Mexican restaurant.

THERE aren't too many restaurants that make a better first impression than Sueños, Sue Torres's latest excursion into the new-wave Mexican cuisine she pioneered at the Rocking Horse Cafe Mexicano. What could have been a murky underground lair has been craftily decorated, with a hot tropical color scheme and folk-art dioramas in

place of windows on an otherwise forbidding blank wall. In a small niche between the restaurant and the building next door, there's a little piece of Arizona, a rock garden open to the elements. All it needs is a violent lightning storm.

The restaurant's small stage offers color, drama and, at the back of the dining room, action. Throughout the meal, from an elevated station,

Alejandra Macatl operates what looks like a street vendor's stand, shaping and cooking tortillas, mixing guacamole and delivering the finished product to diners. Again, Ms. Torres pulls off a small surprise. The tortilla dough, mixed with mild árbol chilies, takes on a red ocher hue. The finished tortillas look like sandstone, and they make a perfect visual complement to the

artificial desert outside.

Ms. Torres is one of those chefs who manage to build a big reputation working in small places. At the Rocking Horse Cafe Mexicano, she won a devoted following with her ingenious updating of traditional Mexican cuisine, which she approached with respect and, just as important, restraint.

The same sensibility permeates Sueños, whose small menu is happily inventive but, in most cases, knows when to leave well enough alone. Guacamole is a perfect example. Sueños does not fiddle with a proven classic. Instead, it concentrates on balancing the flavors and getting the texture just right: rough-hewn but neither too lumpy nor too smooth. It's those red tortillas that spring the mild surprise.

Ms. Torres keeps things light and subtly spicy. She also likes the idea of a two-way exchange between Mexican and American foods. Salmon picks up a sweetly smoky flavor after marinating in mezcal, tequila's country cousin. The fish is served as a tartare with an avocado-grapefruit salad and plantain chips. A light cream sauce flavored with smoked jalapeños picks up the richness in lobster and corn fritters, while offering some resistance to the sweetness of the ingredients.

Likewise, a pile of crisp, crunchy jicama makes a bright contrast to the rich,

spicy smoked-pork stuffing in a flaky empanada. Fat fava beans add heft and an earthy flavor to the goat-cheese filling in another empanada, rescuing it from cloying creaminess. A pool of acidic tomato coulis flavored with smoky chipotle chilies offsets the blandness of the ingredients while picking up the tang in the cheese.

Fluffy corn bread spiced with green chilies makes a disarmingly simple accompaniment to grilled salmon in poblano sauce, and there's nothing tricky at all about the tart tamarind glaze on a nicely charred sirloin, served with a fat, hamburger-size pancake of sweet plantains and goat cheese.

Crushed coriander lends sweetness and perfume to a pristine slab of tuna, a dish aimed at diners who fear spice. The accompaniment, too, is conservative but satisfying, a small heap of black beans and buttery avoca-

do. A better alternative, though, is an enchilada stuffed with chicken and squash blossom, smothered in a mildly spiced pumpkin seed sauce.

Ms. Torres's light hand can mysteriously disappear. Huitlacoche, or corn smut, combined with queso añejo makes a fudgy, murky stuffing for fried pastry flutes, and grilled asparagus only deepens the gloom. Pork tamale, wrapped in a banana leaf and steamed, is a doorstop, weighed down by a beurre blanc sauce spiced with ancho chilies. On the dessert side, a dark, glassy layer of caramelized sugar, nearly as thick as a windowpane, totally obscures the bananas that come with lemon-lime crepes. You don't need a spoon or fork for this dessert. You need a hammer. And profiteroles, the centerpiece of another dessert, should not be the size of tennis balls. Ms.

Torres regains the high ground with a simple sponge cake piled with fresh berries and topped with a cloud of mezcal-accented whipped cream, and she triumphs with a dense bittersweet chocolate cake. It's matched, ideally, with cherry compote and a scoop of spicy cinnamon ice cream.

My first meal at Sueños was my best. The restaurant had just opened, and the crowds had not arrived. When they did, the kitchen and the dining-room staff buckled under the strain. The service simply falls apart when the dining room fills up. I saw diners get up and leave after being seated and waiting eternally, almost existentially, for a waiter to appear. Meals that should take an hour and a half at most can drag on for two hours or more. The kitchen, often, does not execute well.

Sometimes, Sueños seems like two businesses, a jolly bar up front dispensing great tropical cocktails and a rickety restaurant in back, filled with frustrated patrons dying to get their forks into some chili-rubbed goat. Half of them are no doubt giving a silent prayer of thanks to the guacamole goddess in the back, their only defense against starvation.

Sueños is Spanish for dreams, and at the moment, the name is uncannily apt. The restaurant has all the makings of a gem, but it badly needs some polish.

Sueños

311 West 17th Street, Chelsea; (212) 243-1333.

ATMOSPHERE An ingeniously decorated subterranean dining room that has its own desert rock garden outside is the setting for modernized Mexican cuisine.

SOUND LEVEL Medium.

RECOMMENDED DISHES Mezcal-cured salmon terrine; fava bean and goat-cheese empanada; guacamole with chile de árbol tortillas; lobster and corn fritters; tamarind-

glazed sirloin; chicken and squash blossom enchiladas; bittersweet chocolate cake.

SERVICE Overwhelmed.

WINE LIST Minimal, with a long list of tequilas and Mexican beers.

HOURS 6 p.m. to 2 a.m. daily; Sunday brunch, 11:30-3:30.

PRICE RANGE Appetizers, \$5 to \$10; entrees, \$17 to \$23; desserts, \$7 to \$8.50.

CREDIT CARDS All major cards.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS Steps down to front door. Restrooms on dining level.

The New York Times

DINER'S JOURNAL

William Grimes



A view of the new restaurant Sueños on West 17th Street, where an updated Mexican cuisine is served.

Sueños (the name is Spanish for dreams) does have an air of enchantment about it. The tiny dining room, a few steps below street level, is decorated in hot tropical colors, with glass-enclosed displays of folk art substituting for windows on one wall. On the other, an open-air desert rock garden occupies the space between the restaurant and the building next door. When it rains, the thirsty desert drinks. When the sun shines, it bakes. A few reptiles would add a nice touch.

Sue Torres, formerly the chef at the Rocking Horse Cafe in Chelsea, specializes in what might be called new Mexican cuisine. Her updated takes on traditional

Mexican dishes include a steamed pork tamale stuffed with shrimp in a beurre blanc flavored with ancho chiles, and desserts like sponge cake with Crema de Mezcal whipped cream.

The room may be small, but the kitchen has big ideas. Appetizers include spicy lobster and corn fritters in smoked jalapeño cream sauce, and new-wave empanadas filled with unconventional ingredients like goat cheese and fava beans, surrounded by a coulis of tomato and chipotle chiles. Grilled salmon in poblano sauce with green-chile corn bread, one of the simplest entrees on the menu, holds out hope for fearful diners. Adventurous palates will jump

for innovations like plantain and goat cheese pancakes, the side dish that comes with tamarind-glazed sirloin steak, or chicken and squash blossom enchiladas in pumpkin-seed sauce.

The profiteroles, filled with pistachio ice cream and dribbled with chocolate-mulato sauce, are enormous and numerous. They can feed two. And there is one last empanada, too, this one stuffed with guava and cream cheese in mango sauce. The cocktails, also inventive, match the wall colors.

Sueños, 311 W. 17th St. Chelsea; (212) 243-1333. Dinner Entrees, \$17 to \$23

Andy Warhol's Interview

November 2003

ALL THE DISH BY BRAD GOLDFARB

AS IF CHANNELING THE SPIRIT OF VIRGINIA WOOLF, A NUMBER OF RISING WHISKS ARE WHIPPING UP RESTAURANTS OF THEIR OWN



Sueños

311 W. 17th St.;
212-243-1333

Over the years, Sue Torres has introduced scores of Mexican food lovers to the creative possibilities of cooking from this region. It's a del-

icate balancing act she nails once more at her latest outpost, Sueños, a subterranean operation lightened up with gallons of peach and fuschia paint. Given the restaurant's name (*dreams* in Spanish), it is a sage assumption that having a place of her own has long been a goal of Torres's—a bit of guesswork supported by the gusto of the cooking currently coming out of her kitchen. Starter standouts include a fava bean-and-marinated goat cheese empanada, mini tacos stuffed with smoked duck breast and fingerling potatoes, and little flautas stuffed with sautéed huitlacoche (a kind of fungus found on corn). But as inventive as these items may be, Torres knows not to mess

with the tried-and-true—her guacamole, prepared on a raised platform in one corner of the dining room, is a bit of live theater, as well as an exceptional rendition of a Mexican classic. Entrées include a terrific tamarind-glazed sirloin, fine roast chicken-and-squash blossom enchiladas, and grilled salmon with a wonderful green-chili corn bread. Only a too-dry pork tamale disappoints. Desserts range from the too sweet to the somewhat muddled, though guava-and-cream cheese empanadas prove a consistent favorite at my table—a nostalgic twist for those who grew up in a Latin household, or for those who just dream they did.

NEW YORK

AUGUST 4, 2003

ASK GAEL

Authentic? I don't care. Good is what counts.

WE FOLLOW CHEF SUE TORRES following her dream—i.e., **Sueños**—to this eccentric, hidden warren off Eighth Avenue. Surrender your senses happily to fava-bean-and-drunken-goat-cheese empanadas and the pork tamale with grilled shrimp and ancho beurre blanc. The accent of the chili tasting menu and the face of the woman pressing superior tortillas in one corner of the room signal Mexico, setting the stage for Torres's skillful fusion. We can't get enough of her giveaway peppery black-bean dip with triangles of warm homemade corn bread. It's an early shakedown night, and service drags. With repeated prompting, the space-cadet waiter sends a runner with a single order of guacamole. (We'd asked for two; he charges for four.) Mezcal-cured-salmon terrine with avocado-grapefruit salad is pleasantly nueva cocina, as is grilled salmon with green-chili corn bread and poblano sauce. More south-of-the-border: chili-rubbed goat, steamed with beer in an avocado leaf. (311 West 17th Street; 212-243-1333.)



HEY GRIDDLE GRIDDLE: Tortilla-making at Sueños.

Time Out New York

JULY 10-17, 2003

Eat Out

THE CITY'S BEST RESTAURANTS, BARS AND CULINARY RICHES

JUST OPENED



Third party Sue Torres, who introduced us to her feisty brand of Mexican cooking at Rocking Horse Cafe and, more recently, Hell's Kitchen, has taken over Alley's End in Chelsea and opened **Sueños**. Here, she combines authentic food — a *cocinera*, or “tortilla lady,” cranks out handmade tortillas on a *comal* in the dining room — with the fiesta factor of an

extensive tequila list and a \$50 daredevil chili-tasting menu. Expect the sort of lively dishes Torres has been dreaming up in her other kitchens, like fava bean and drunken-goat-cheese empanadas with tomato-and-smoked-jalapeno coulis and pan-seared red snapper with tomatillo-mango salsa (pictured). 311 W 17th St at Eighth Ave (212-243-1333). —Andrea Strong

NEW YORK

JULY 21, 2003



OPENING SPICY DREAMS

Call it a homecoming of sorts for chef Sue Torres, who made a name for herself and her inventive Mexican cooking at Chelsea's Rocking Horse. She's returned to her old neighborhood to open **Sueños** ("dreams" in Spanish), where as an owner she was able to make lots of big decisions, like hiring Larry Bogdanow to the design the space and star sommelier Steven Olson to assemble the New York wines and organic-agave tequilas and mezcals. She's even employed a designated tortilla cook to operate a griddle in the dining room. But all the really important choices—like whether to order the lobster-corn fritters with chipotle cream sauce, the chicken-and-squashblossom enchiladas, or to brave the \$50 four-course chili-tasting menu—she's happily left to us. (311 West 17th Street; 212-243-1333.)

Dining In

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In Chelsea, Mexican Is in the Details

By ERIC ASIMOV

MOST restaurants have their ups and downs. Chefs leave, the economy escalates and dives, inspiration wavers. I'm sad when a restaurant I like loses its vitality, but I'm excited if it rebounds.

Case in point is Rocking Horse Cafe in Chelsea. In the mid-1990's, Rocking Horse was one of the most exciting Mexican restaurants in New York, offering contemporary dishes that remained true to the Mexican spirit. But Sue Torres, the chef, who was instrumental in Rocking Horse's ascension, left and the restaurant seemed to lose its way. Dishes that were once unmistakably Mexican became muddled, the source of their inspiration no longer clear.

Happily, in the last year, Rocking Horse has regained its footing. The chef, Jan Mendelson, has sharpened the flavors and restored the clear tie to Mexican regional cooking while slowly integrating his own dishes.

The small, bright bar and dining room exude energy and liveliness without descending to the tequila-fueled rowdiness typical of many Mexican restaurants. Yes, Rocking Horse offers an excellent list of tequilas and makes a particularly good margarita (I recommend the Chinaco blanco, straight up, no salt), but it does not make a sport of drinking. It also has an appealing wine list.

Beginning with the basket of salty house-made chips and chipotle-cilantro salsa, starters are a high point. Little tamales imbued with subtly earthy huitlacoche (\$6.95), a funky corn fungus, are a wonderful counterpoint to a spicy poblano chili sauce. Skewers of pork, a special, were served with a fruity salsa of grilled jalapeños and charred tomatoes (\$8.95) that was so complex I wanted to deconstruct it right away.

Little, rich lobster turnovers (\$9.95) go beautifully with a sweet corn sauce, while duck confit with epazote, wrapped in blue corn tortillas (\$8.95), is deep and earthy. I was not so fond of shrimp, marinated in chili-spiked citrus juices like a ceviche and served in a cocktail glass with mango and sweet corn (\$9.95). The sum total of the diverse ingredients still added up to bland. But a salad of crisp corn-meal-swathed calamari, with frisée, tart orange sections and cubes of chorizo (\$8.95) is a superb combination of flavors.

Mr. Mendelson's main courses are more mellow than striking. He builds layers of flavors that sneak up without overwhelming, offering quiet pleasures. Mixiote (\$17.95), a slow-roasted pork stew, practically falls apart with the touch of a fork. Despite its chili rub, it is more soothing than spicy, served with a sweet plantain mash and collard greens. Birria de pollo (\$15.95), another traditional stew, is made with flavorful chicken thighs, which stay moist through prolonged marinating and braising, stand up to the mild spice and go well with the tangentially related ball of creamy polenta. Chicken breasts served as a good vehicle for a coarse pipian sauce (\$15.95), which, with pumpkin seeds, tomatillos and chipotle chilies, had a nutty, smoky flavor.

A special of salmon flavored with avocado leaves (\$18.95) was unpleasantly metallic. Much better are shrimp with papaya and poblano chilies (\$18.95) in a light chipotle sauce, served with spelt tortillas, an odd option with a pleasing nutlike flavor. Chicken enchiladas (\$14.95), wrapped in the more traditional corn tortillas, are the most familiar dish on the menu, yet, with their balance of fruit and spice flavors, are far better than the usual messy, cheese-dripping version.

Not all the desserts (\$6.95) work, but I give Rocking Horse points for creativity. Buñuelos, airy little doughnuts, come alongside a coffee cup of chocolate pot au crème, just right for dunking, while flan has a pronounced coconut flavor that is delicious with thick caramel sauce and candied pistachios.

Like some other restaurants in Chelsea, the Rocking Horse doubles as an art gallery. Currently the walls are hung with the abstract works of Steven Miller, which look like nothing so much as a series of Rorschach blots. Given the ascendant state of the kitchen, they lend themselves to bright interpretations.

Rocking Horse Cafe

182 Eighth Avenue near
19th Street, Chelsea,
(212) 463-9511.

BEST DISHES: Tamalitos de huitlacoche, pork skewers with tomato-jalapeño salsa, lobster turnovers, duck confit crepes, calamari-citrus salad, mixiote, birria de pollo, chicken with pipian sauce, shrimp with papaya and poblano chilies, chicken enchiladas, buñuelos, coconut flan.

CREDIT CARDS: All major cards.

PRICE RANGE Dinner: appetizers, \$6.95 to \$9.95; **main courses**, \$14.95 to \$22.95.

HOURS: Sunday through Thursday, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; Friday and Saturday, 11 a.m. to midnight.

WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Restrooms are downstairs.