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An Abundance of Choices, Defying Expectations

By DAVID CORCORAN

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YOU arrive for dinner, shoulder your way into the tiny foyer through a flock of waiting customers, give your name to the cheerful but feverishly multitasking hostess, and hope for the best. (No reservations are accepted.) At length, she calls your name and escorts you to a cramped table.

An equally upbeat server greets you and begins reciting a list of specials — five appetizers, five entrees, each of them with enough moving parts for a clock factory. Daunted, you consult the printed menu, only to find 52 more dishes, many with long descriptions of their own. As the ambient noise rises, your concentration wanes. Is this going to be a meal or an endurance test?

Astonishingly, Vivas — a 10-month-old restaurant in a weary-looking Belmar strip mall a few blocks in either direction from the Atlantic Ocean [beaches](#) and the marinas of the Shark River Inlet — manages to bring it off. Dinner here is an exuberant experience, a lesson in shaking expectations.

The shaker in chief is Will Vivas, the 31-year-old chef and co-owner (with David Pollack, a builder). Born in Venezuela, Mr.

Vivas came to the United States at 19, learned the trade at the New York Restaurant School and, in 2002, opened the lively, urban-pioneering Bistro Olé in downtown Asbury Park.

Needing a break, he returned to South America in 2005 and traveled for two years, soaking up the vibrant flavors and techniques of culinary cultures that know how to make great food with humble ingredients. Hence, a dish like pork serrano, which Mr. Vivas learned in Colombia: essentially, pork stuffed with ham and [cheese](#).

There, he says, they use a pork chop, farmer's cheese and thick, floury espagnole sauce. Here, diners will spring for pork tenderloin, Manchego cheese and a distinctly non-Colombian garnish of shiitake demi-glace. The upscaling suits this dish: It comes out generous and juicy, with a beguiling interplay of flavors and textures, from the smoky ham to the faintly sharp cheese to the deep, earthy mushrooms.

Now and then, Mr. Vivas's instincts fail him. Two special seafood appetizers — tuna sushi and salmon "bites," really croquettes — were fussy and unsatisfying, and a main-course short rib was salty and tough, in a viscous brown sauce.

But most of his combinations are as unexpected, bright and winning as the multicultural folk art on the walls. Polenta with shrimp and garlic-poblano-pepper sauce. Halibut with bacon sofrito (a sauce based on chopped tomatoes, peppers, onions and garlic). Duck with sofrito and pineapple ratatouille. And, towering over about half the dishes, a whimsical, sculptural but

compulsively edible fried plantain chip.

A "surf and turf" appetizer salad combined tender, fatty skirt steak and a skewer of fried shrimp over greens and slivered red onions with a high-powered mustard vinaigrette — all of it in a tostada basket. Enough for a main course, but never mind: These dishes are for sharing. Strike up a conversation with the jovial foursome at the next table, and maybe you can pull off a trade.

Entrees continue in this high-spirited vein. First-rate rack of lamb was turbocharged by a cumin-and-cream sauce. A seafood combination — lobster tail, calamari, scallops and white-fleshed fish, along with vivid green spinach — came in a brick-red sofrito sauce that left a hot afterglow. And a tuna special with yellow-pepper-chipotle sauce, peppercorns, capers, roasted-tomato salsa and (don't stop!) mushroom risotto with blue cheese was a diva of a dish, a [Patti LuPone](#) showstopper.

Desserts, as you might expect, were delightful and almost, but not quite, over the top — particularly berry cheesecake and tres leches cake with three sauces, passion fruit, berry and chocolate. As we were finishing them, the heavens opened and Belmar was swept by a late-spring storm. Then the rain quit, the sun appeared and out over the Atlantic a giant rainbow formed. Clearly, we'd found the pot of gold.