

DINING

BEACHSIDE SPICE

With Viva La Playa, chef Jeremy Hanlon and restaurateurs Lee and Max Lipton bring artisanal Latin American cuisine with Basque influences to Lake Worth Beach. *BY LUIS R. RIGUAL*

One could say the new Viva La Playa is a restaurant 16 years in the making. That's how long chef Jeremy Hanlon and partners Lee and Max Lipton have been fine-tuning the concept—subconsciously anyway.

The trio met when Hanlon was hired for Lee's 50th birthday celebration in New Jersey in 2005, a who's-who affair at which Hanlon served a nine-course small-plates tasting menu that solidified what he calls his "food relationship" with the Liptons. Some years after that, father, son and chef entered into business together when in 2013 they took over Benny's on the Beach, a casual American and seafood-heavy eatery on the Lake Worth pier. And when the space just steps from Benny's became available last year, the three men decided to re-create the success of their first venture again—albeit with a completely different flavor profile inspired by Hanlon's travels through Spain, Mexico and Peru.

"I am passionate about my ties to the Basque region of Spain, as well as to modern Mexico City cuisine and the bright flavors of the home of ceviche, Lima," says Hanlon. "I wanted to share the many flavors I studied, as well as inspirations from countless South American countries. Our menus are led by my creativity with ingredients available in South Florida."

Open for lunch and dinner, as well as Saturday and Sunday brunch, Viva La Playa offers selections that include mojo pork sandwich with cabbage slaw and pickled onion; tail-on yellow snapper with artichokes, baby carrots, salsa verde and brown butter sauce with capers; and grilled cactus with cauliflower puree, crispy hearts of palm and tomatillo vinaigrette, a dish that might sound peculiar to those unaccustomed to legitimate Mexican cuisine, but one that Hanlon insists all diners should try.

"Technique is very important to me," says Hanlon. "How we treat each ingredient is the basis for how we cook."

Also notable is the eatery's cocktail program, one that relies heavily on agave as overseen by Alexandra Dupuis. When



Clockwise from top: The check-in desk at Viva La Playa; yellowtail snapper stew; grilled shrimp.

it comes to desserts, simplicity is key—simplicity as defined by Hanlon, that is. "We make chocolate tortillas to act as our crispy sopaipilla [a fried pastry] and our amazing horchata and dulce de leche to pair with our freshly baked dessert breads," he says. "We also make our own dulce de leche and stuff cookies with it to make classic Argentinean *alfajores*."

As one would expect from its name, the restaurant's look is best described as beach house-chic. Lifestyle designer Cheryl Gaydas-Eng worked with Hanlon and the Liptons to create a look inspired by the Caribbean and the coasts of South America.

As to what's ahead for Hanlon and company? "A continuous evolution," he says. "We open our doors with a direction and broaden our horizons as we listen to our guests." 10 S. Ocean Blvd., Lake Worth Beach, 561.247.7245, vivalaplaya.com