

Distrito: A modern Mexican restaurant from Chef Jose Garces

Written by Written by Melissa Larsen/Photographed by Cassandra Tomei

An “Iron Chef” turns an ever-changing restaurant space into a modern Mexican mainstay with Distrito.



At the corner of Scottsdale and Indian School Roads is a spot that has occupied several identities over the past few years, from the Scottsdale Mondrian with the hip fusion eatery, Asia de Cuba, to Hotel Theodore with Italian restaurant, Cielo. As of December, the corner now hosts its new tenant: The Saguaro hotel and its signature restaurant, Distrito. This time, though, a certain “Iron Chef” might just keep the corner from yet another too-quick turnover.

Distrito is a modern Mexican restaurant from Chef Jose Garces, who was named an “Iron Chef” in 2010. The lauded culinary luminary has opened restaurants in Philadelphia and Chicago, with Distrito and The Saguaro’s two other dining destinations, Old Town Whiskey and Garces Trading Company, being his first projects in the Southwest.

Distrito is inspired by the divine street fare of Mexico City, and much of Mexico’s brightness, beauty and vibrancy is also depicted in the restaurant’s bold design. Throughout the restaurant, diners can feast their eyes on neon green booths, purple dining chairs, glittery table tops in fire-engine red and gold, patchwork-inspired ottomans and eye-popping partitions and chandeliers. Distrito’s chic patio would even make an impressive spot for pre-bachelorette-party margaritas. Good looks also seep into the restaurant’s food presentations.

The Distrito menu features items that you might expect on a Mexican menu (tacos, guacamole, enchiladas) as well as plenty of scrumptious surprises, from interesting salads to finger-licking ribs and seasonal fish dishes. (Order several items to share, or, better yet, allow the chef to do the choosing and opt for a multi-course tasting menu.) To start, the salsa and guacamole are traditional and delicious, served alongside Distrito’s house-made corn tortilla chips. For something out of the norm, the guacamole can be prepared with the addition of crab meat.

After indulging in tortilla chips and the restaurant’s spiced nuts (which are served in lieu of a bread basket), a light and flavorful ceviche is in order. Distrito’s yellowfin tuna is a favorite. The dish’s divine serrano-coconut sauce gives it a Thai twist, and it is topped with a dollop of lime sorbet, a refreshing finish. Though it packs a pucker, the Granada salad also crams in plenty of fresh fruits and veggies (pomegranate, honeydew, orange and jicama) and a subtle crunch, courtesy of pepitas. A cooling mini scoop of granita tops off the petite salad.

For heartier fare, the huarache de costillas is a delectable flatbread topped with braised short ribs, queso blanco and morita chili barbecue sauce. The flatbread is fit for sharing and is presented on a sleek pedestal. Barbecue fans will also lick their lips at the sight of the Berkshire pork spare ribs, smothered in chipotle-cider-mustard sauce, and the snappy, smoky chorizo rojo, which features 17 ingredients including beer and Mexican chocolate. (If ordering the ribs or chorizo, opt for a side as well—as they are all by their lonesome on the plate. The pinto beans with tomato and bacon are tops.)

Though there are several seafood-friendly plates on the Distrito menu, a favorite is the sweet-and-spicy hamachi tacos, which offer a smorgasbord of flavors and textures: zesty chipotle remoulade, pickled red cabbage, creamy avocado and crispy hamachi.

When it comes to the sweet stuff, Distrito whips up desserts that might be traditional (think tres leches cake and churros) but are far from boring. The threesome of warm, crispy churros are served alongside two heaven-sent dipping sauces: cajeta crema and a spicy Valrhona chocolate sauce. Though the sauces more than suffice, the churros are also delish when dunked in Distrito’s mmm-inducing cappuccino. A fruity favorite is the frutas con crema, a velvety panna cotta crowned with a huckleberry-apple-guava curd and a scoop of house-made granola.

And don’t forget to bring your thirst to Distrito. Chef Garces knows margaritas, as evidenced by the Distrito house margarita, which can be jazzed up with fresh fruits. The spirits list also spotlights numerous tequila brands. The best part? You can feel free to drink up—you’re already at a hotel, after all.

TO LEARN MORE

Distrito

The Saguaro, 4000 N. Drinkwater Blvd., Scottsdale.
480.970.4444, www.thesaguaro.com.

Chef: Jose Garces

Hours: Monday through Friday, 7 to 10:30 a.m., 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.;

Sunday through Thursday, 5 to 10 p.m.;

Friday and Saturday, 5 to 11 p.m.;

Saturday and Sunday, 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.