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At Cambridge's La Royal, a party thrown by your coolest friends

KARA BASKIN

March 10, 2022 at 4:57 PM ET

Where to La Royal in Cambridge's Huron Village.

Why To share Peruvian food and strong cocktails in electrifying surroundings.



Owners JuanMa Calderón and Maria Rondeau in their newly opened La Royal in Cambridge.

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The backstory You might know Maria Rondeau and JuanMa Calderón from Celeste, a 600-square-foot sliver of a restaurant in Somerville's Union Square, where they serve ceviche and stews. They also run a rural Vermont restaurant, Esmeralda. Both places have been named one of Esquire's best new restaurants of the year.

Calderón is a filmmaker, Rondeau an architect. Both are lively presences in the La Royal dining room, which is spacious and loud, with groovy tunes on the speakers, an exposed industrial ceiling and patchwork brick walls, and big windows overlooking Concord Ave. Rondeau transformed the original building, once a printing press, into an inviting space.

The duo float around the dining room, mingling, as day fades into night, hugging regulars and visiting tables. Even on a recent snow-strewn evening, the joint is packed.



Chupe de Langostino, a prawn bisque with yellow peppers, lima beans, rice, cheese, and poached egg.

What to eat I'll say it right now: La Royal's scallop ceviche with blue cod is the best dish I've eaten in recent memory. The wild, large scallops are shiny and sliced thin, fresh from Foley Fish, with healthy chunks of blue cod swimming in salsa madre (a golden blend of ají amarillo, ginger, onion, celery, lime, garlic), and a drizzle of olive oil. It's like eating a sunset.

Scallops au gratin arrive on the half-shell, baked with buttery Parmesan and garlic. The smoky aftertaste? That's Worcestershire. Portobello "sashimi" features thinly sliced, fleshy ribbons of mushrooms swimming in soy.



Jalea La Royal, a plate of fried blue cod, mussels, shrimp, and squid.

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My dining companion and I also try seared duck breast on cilantro rice with an onion-tomato relish. The rice-to-duck ratio is a bit lopsided (there's lots of rice); I ate it with a fried egg the next morning. Jalea La Royal is their version of a fried seafood platter: crunchy, lime-splashed nubs of squid, scallop, cod, mussels, and yucca, with a creamy homemade tartar sauce on the side. It's big enough to share.

Next time, I'll order the burger, made with Vermont-raised alpaca meat, on a bun from Hi-Rise down the block.



Leche de Tigre.

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What to drink Drinks are complex and herbaceous, and cocktails focus on macerated liquor: horseradish-macerated pisco with dry vermouth; pomegranate-macerated pisco with egg white and lime; purple-corn-macerated mezcal with lime and orange liqueur. They are bright, dainty, and pack a punch. There are also local and Peruvian beers; an assortment of orange wines; and classic cocktails by request, served from behind a bar backlit in neon pink. It's nearly full by 5 p.m.



Bar program manager José Saravia prepares a sour cocktail at La Royal.

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The takeaway A portal to a buzzier universe, your most plugged-in friend's dinner party, or a special night out, overseen by two effervescent hosts who know how to work a room.

221 Concord Ave., Cambridge, 617-909-9855, www.laroyalcambridge.com