



Ultra-chic gourmet food hall at Paseo Caribe

El Mercado is a place for people to enjoy the best of what Puerto Rico has to offer

By **AMY GORDON**

There's never been a better time to experience the best of Puerto Rican gastronomy and culture than right now, thanks to El Mercado de Paseo Caribe in San Juan. This ultra-chic gourmet food hall in the multifaceted Paseo Caribe opened in October 2016 and draws hundreds of visitors each day.

In the heart of San Juan and just steps

from the scenic waters of Condado Lagoon, Paseo Caribe is a luxury mixed-use development of high end boutiques, shops, restaurants, and residences. Paseo Caribe offers a perfect place for visitors to meet, shop, and dine. The lifestyle hub appeals to guests of all ages with activities ranging from interactive scavenger hunts to family-friendly entertainment to weekly Sunset Rhythms live music concerts.

And now, Paseo Caribe also boasts El Mercado, its very own indoor-outdoor swanky culinary market open 365 days a year with even some food stands operating as early as 7:00 a.m. and closing at 1:00 a.m.

"El Mercado is a place for people to enjoy the best of what Puerto Rico has to offer – nature's bounty, delicious food and drink, contemporary

fashion, art, music, and culture – all in one incredible oceanfront setting," said Sam Kirschner, a partner at CPG Real Estate, which developed Paseo Caribe.

The impressive marketplace houses epicurean food stands from 15 of Puerto Rico's best chefs, bakers, and purveyors. Spread over 19,000 square feet, El Mercado conveys an inviting trendy artsy atmosphere



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reflecting the Latin tradition on the island where guests can dine on a variety of delectable dishes ranging from piping hot Asian noodles to Jamaican-spiced jerk chicken. Walk around to check out your choices, and get ready for a chic meal with a view.

Start at La Hacienda, a well-known gourmet purveyor of cheese, meats, and produce. Hacienda tempts carnivores at The Meat Shop with burgers, terrines, and charcuterie. Or, diners can opt to eat at The Cheese Shop for cheese boards, sandwiches, macaroni and cheese and more, all prepared with a Puerto Rican flair.



Old-world Italian flavors waft from the kitchen at Nonna, a rustic dining experience that combines fresh simple ingredients, delicious

recipes, and cutting-edge cooking techniques. Another mouthwatering eatery is Napolitana, which dishes out Italian staples like cheesy lasagna, tasty loaded calzones, pasta varieties, and Neapolitan style brick oven pizza topped with a variety of the freshest ingredients and homemade sauce. Mediterranean Market focuses on cuisine from its eponymous region, ranging from Greek dishes like pan-seared octopus to gnocchi and other Italian specialties.

For meals of Asian persuasion, try The Noodle Merchant or Himalaya Co. The former serves noodle-based dishes that draw upon the flavors of Thailand and Vietnam, while the latter features a menu of bento boxes and steamed buns made with proteins like beef short rib, braised pork and crispy chicken.

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El Pescador offers a fresh seafood menu.



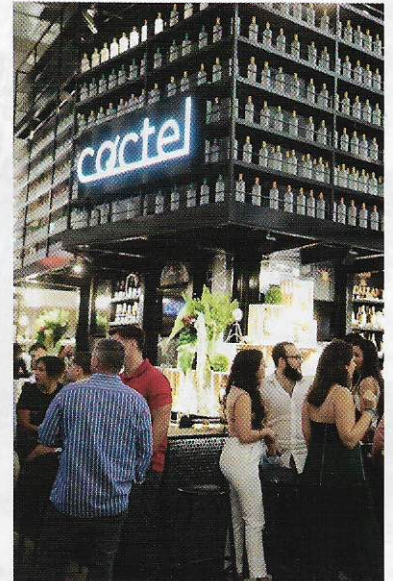
Fresh breads and pastries are center stage at Levain Bakery.



The Noodle Merchant draws upon the flavors of Thailand and Vietnam.



Nonna Cuisine dishes out Italian staples and specialties.



Coctel Bar creates killer concoctions using fine liquor and natural ingredients.



Double Cake satisfies the sweet tooth with home-made treats.



El Pilon de Ana by Restaurant Doña Ana serves up mouth-watering local cuisine.



Aroma Latino offers dishes inspired by islands across the Caribbean.

Diners can almost taste the passion that's in every bite at the farm-to-table, Puerto Rican-style restaurant Finca, which features a menu that changes seasonally depending on what's available from local farmers. Stop by Aroma Latino for cuisine inspired by islands across the Caribbean, with dishes like Jamaican-style jerk chicken and Cuban-style *ropa vieja*.

For seafood prepared using time-tested, family recipes, try El Pescador. This stand offers a fresh yet light seafood menu that includes fish and Caribbean or Maine lobster tapas that are prepared in front of you in ways that honor its delicate flavors and textures. Also on the menu are steamed oysters, clams and mussels.

Or, if you love traditional Puerto Rican *mofongo*, you're sure to enjoy El Pilon de Ana by Restaurant Doña Ana. From the minds behind Cafe de Doña Ana in Bayamon, the eatery uses local ingredients like yucca, sweet plantains, and breadfruit to make this celebrated island dish.

Fresh breads, flaky croissants, delicate pastries, and hearty sandwiches take center stage at Levain Bakery, which expands its Puerto Rican presence with this new outpost. Carb-aholics can satisfy their sweet tooth at another local bakery, Double Cake, which makes from-scratch treats in signature flavors like *dulce de leche*, almond tiramisu, and maple bacon. Senor Paleta, the artisanal gelato and sorbet popsicle

which draws crowds to its stores across the island, even created a special menu just for El Mercado.

Visitors above drinking age are sure to cozy up to the bar at Coctel, the centerpiece of the market. The bartenders here are true cocktail mixologists, creating killer combinations using fine liquor, fresh juice, and natural ingredients. Coffee connoisseurs can follow their noses to the rich flavors that waft from behind the counter at Alto Grande Coffee Bar, which sources its beans from the highest mountains on the island.

Just as enticing as El Mercado's food is its striking ambiance featuring four magnificent murals inspired by artists

of Puerto Rico. Renowned artist Tom Christopher of New York recruited art students from Escuela de Artes Plasticas y Diseño de Puerto Rico to help create the masterpieces that celebrate the hardworking men and women of the island. The market also hosts art exhibits curated by local artists, museums, galleries, and collectors as well as local musicians to further provide a festive ambiance. "The continually rotating art exhibits and music of El Mercado will give visitors a reason to return to Paseo Caribe again and again," said Jacob Manevich, vice president of leasing for CPG.

Be sure to stop by during your stay in Puerto Rico – and don't forget to bring your epicurean appetite. **B**