

May 20, 2011

Evoking Old Madrid, Down to the Décor

By JOANNE STARKEY

ESPAÑA is the real thing, as authentic a tapas bar and Spanish restaurant as one will find on Long Island. Diners at this two-month-old St. James spot may feel as if they are in Madrid; indeed, the dapper host, Julio Caro, is from there.

España is owned by Mr. Caro and Mauricio Oliveros, who is from Colombia and is also the proprietor of the nearby [Mauricio's Orlando II](#). Mr. Caro is the face of España, greeting diners and later reciting the specials to them.

Those recitations are dotted with enticing descriptions and personal asides. When he told us about the garlic soup, he said: "Don't be afraid. It is not too strong. It's delicious. It tastes like my mother's."

Mr. Caro also proudly tells diners that he created the menu, the wine list — he was a former wine salesman — and the décor. Posters from Spain adorn the walls, along with silk shawls and fans.

The restaurant is casual, with a long wooden bar dominating the main room; there is a separate dining room behind French doors. Place mats are paper, but napkins are cloth, and the flowers on the tables are real.

The menu has five sections: soups; [salads](#); cheese and cold meats; seafood and shellfish tapas; and other tapas. Every night there are around a half-dozen entree specials. Diners can make a meal of tapas or go the American route and order a main course.

The entree specials always include paella (\$13.95) and a strip steak (\$19.95). That steak was a steal: juicy, beefy and cooked precisely to order. Diners were offered a side of salad, fries or vegetables with it.

One night we took Mr. Caro's recommendation and tried the garlic soup. It was indeed tasty, made with bread, shards of egg, mellow garlic and Spanish paprika. Another good opener was the ensalada manchega, a green salad topped with grilled asparagus and slices of smooth, creamy manchego cheese.

The menu offers four cheeses, paper-thin slices of Serrano ham and thinly sliced dry-cured chorizo (flavored with smoked paprika). Mr. Caro put together a sampler platter (\$16.95) of all of them, with a centerpiece of Spanish olives and pimiento, which made a fine opener for four to share.

The best choice from the tapas menu is the Galician-style octopus. The most tender octopus I've ever tasted was nestled with slices of potato, sweet and spicy paprika olive oil and grains of sea salt, which popped in the mouth. It was a huge portion, made hearty by the potatoes, that could easily serve as an entree. In contrast, pinchos morunos, a skewer of assorted meats with peppers and onions, for the same price (\$8.95), was a skimpy dish.

Other picks from the tapas roster were better: tasty small shrimp in garlic sauce; mussels steamed in wine and finished with chopped fresh tomatoes and basil; piquillo peppers stuffed with a creamy codfish paste; and small chunks of fried chicken on the bone, bathed in olive oil and garlic.

An outstanding entree from the list of specials consisted of slow-cooked pork shoulder with chickpeas; the meat, served in chunks, was fork-tender. The plate also included boiled potatoes and crisp-tender broccoli. A seafood casserole in green sauce was difficult to eat; the lobster claw in the mix had not been cracked, and no cracker or small seafood fork was provided.

The best dessert was the poached pear, cooked with red or white wine. (We liked it both ways.) The satiny flan also stood out, as did a dish called torrijas, or Spanish French toast.

Noticing that we were not eating the rice pudding, Mr. Caro said: "Americans find our rice pudding thin, and the rice al dente. That is absolutely authentic. That is how it is in Spain." For once, authenticity didn't impress. But nearly everything else at España did.

España

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St. James

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WORTH IT

THE SPACE Long, narrow bar and separate, brighter dining room. Restrooms are not wheelchair accessible.

THE CROWD Casual couples and small groups. Few children on my visits. Waiters are attentive and helpful.

THE BAR The long, shiny wood bar dominates the main room. There is also a line of eight high tables for two. Well-chosen international wine list of about 40 bottles (\$24 to \$69) and 14 wines by the glass (\$6 to \$9).

THE BILL Lunch specials Monday through Friday (including soup or salad and coffee) are \$9.95. At dinner, tapas are \$6.95 to \$13.95, entrees \$12.95 to \$19.95. Prices are very reasonable. American Express, MasterCard, Visa and Discover are accepted.

WHAT WE LIKED Ensalada manchega, garlic soup, sampler platter of cheese and meats, octopus, mussels, shrimp in garlic sauce, stuffed piquillo peppers, chicken in garlic, slow-cooked pork with chickpeas, strip steak, flan, poached pear, torrijas.

IF YOU GO Open Monday to Wednesday, noon to 11 p.m.; Thursday to Saturday, noon to 1 a.m.; and Sunday, 2 to 10 p.m. Reservations are needed on weekends. There is ample parking behind the building, and the restaurant has a rear entrance.