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SPAIN RESTAURANTE

A trip to Spain cures the mid-winter blahs

See what's on the menu

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CRANSTON -- I had been waiting to review Spain, an enormously popular Spanish restaurant, during what I thought would be a slow period for a restaurant in Rhode Island. An after-holiday malaise sets in this time of year, and restaurants often suffer from their patrons' lack of interest in leaving the comforts of home, even if it is to indulge in a well-prepared meal.

From the hordes of customers at Spain one recent Saturday evening (and a two-hour wait -- the restaurant takes reservations only for parties of six or more), I should've waited until the twelfth of never -- because that's apparently when this Rhode Island favorite might not be busy.

I've never waited so long for a meal. And it was worth it.

We passed the time catching up over drinks, taking in the decor in the comfortable lounge, decorated in warm auburn tones. A foyer, embellished with hand-painted maps of old Spain, opens to a high-domed ceiling and tiled floors from which the view of the magnificently tiled floor-to-ceiling fountain can be taken in.

The main dining room is like an enclosed courtyard, with a balcony replete with archways that serve as enclaves for tables upstairs as well. It was here where we were seated.

Well-choreographed

The waiters at Spain bustle about as if in a well-choreographed dance -- the restaurant scene from Hello, Dolly! comes to mind. Everyone appears to have a specific purpose and place to be.

We were disappointed to find the restaurant was out of chorizo, the Spanish sausage, but an appetizer of tender shrimp, sauteed in garlic, olive oil and hot spices was a commendable consolation. Veneras rellenas (stuffed scallops) were delicate, fleshy, sweet scallops filled with succulent crabmeat, diced shrimp and provolone cheese with a hint of Tabasco-like seasoning.

Gazpacho is one of those Spanish dishes I always have to try; so often the art in making it lies in the the cook's personal touch rather than just the ingredients. Because of this, it can vary greatly from cook to cook.

Spain's version was robust with the sweet flavor of tomato, as well as onions, served chilly, but not cold. A pipirana salad was as refreshing as the gazpacho: sliced red peppers, onions, cucumbers and tomatoes were colorfully arranged and gently doused with an astringent, but full-bodied, vinaigrette.

I was in the mood for meat, but the dish I had my eye on -- solomillo al jefe -- had a menu note that it could only be served for two. Still, it didn't take much persuading for the waiter to arrange a solo version for me. The dish was a combination of tender beef medallions arranged with tart artichoke hearts in a Rioja wine sauce laced with garlic and mustard flavors.

Gallineta Serrano was a dish of delicately flavored Cornish hen, filled generously with wilted spinach, pine nuts and the salty, rustic flavor of Serrano ham. Both dishes were artfully arranged with add-ons of red bliss mashed potatoes, sliced potatoes, carrots, green beans and a thinly sliced potato gaufrette (a thin slice of lightly fried potato).

For dessert, we tried a chocolate concoction layered with rich mousse and cake, then stacked inside a decorative chocolate wrap. It was chocolate, so how bad could it be? But the real reason for dessert was the poached pear in red wine with a quenelle of vanilla ice cream.

A more tender, perfectly poached pear I've never had: It was at that perfect point of tenderness that allowed it to still maintain a little firmness, and yet was so tender it could be cut with a dull knife. The deep, rich flavor of the wine penetrated its soft flesh without overpowering its buttery flavor, and the delicately spiced sauce made from its poaching liquid pooled around it -- a perfect match for the creaminess of the ice cream.

CLASSIC SELECTIONS

There are many classic Spanish selections at Spain -- arroz con pollo (chicken and rice) and paella, for example -- as well as varied pasta selections, fish, chicken and veal dishes. Appetizers, soups and salads are \$4.25 to \$8.95; entrees are \$7.95 to \$20.95 (for a trio of lamb chops). Desserts are \$4.95 to \$5.95.

The wine list is delightfully filled with Spanish wines, particularly Spanish reds, as well as Californian, Chilean and French. Bottles range from \$14 to \$32.

Of course, I'm not sure why I'm even telling this. From what I experienced, I hardly think that anyone in Rhode Island hasn't yet eaten, and enjoyed, the food at Spain. I'd wager that more than half the state was there on this Saturday evening -- seeking refuge from the winter in this oasis of a restaurant.

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