

DINING



Beyond Tapas and Tortillas

B44 Ignites Catalan Cuisine

BY MARIA PICCININNI

WHAT DO SIZZLING paella skillets, squid ink delicacies, festive outdoor dining, and world record-breaking human pyramids have in common? They are all part of the Catalan dining experience that is B44. Chef Daniel Olivella, of Thirsty Bear and Zuni Café fame, bears homage to his native Spanish region of Catalonia, introducing San Franciscans and tourists alike to the vibrant region's culinary delights. Daniel is from Vilafranca De Benedes, about 25 minutes outside of Barcelona, and proudly proves there is more to Spanish cuisine than tapas. In fact, Catalonia showcases its distinctive regional culture not just through the unique language, which differs slightly from traditional Castilian Spanish, but with its recognized cosmopolitan atmosphere and international reputation for good food and wine.

Our host, manager Zack Bezunarte, excitedly introduces us to the Catalan way of eating. The dishes focus on Catalonian staples of simplicity – tomatoes, extra virgin olive oil, saffron, salted cod, and rice. Dishes artfully marrying seafood and meat are common, as well as sweet touches of currants and pine nuts. The more exotic menu items, such as the cod cheeks, squid dishes, and roasted rabbit are adventurous yet approachable, as noted by my dining partner, Elizabeth. Where else can one try sausage-stuffed baby squid as well as a simple Jamón Serrano with Catalan toast (brushed with olive oil, garlic, and tomatoes)? We decided to take no prisoners on our Catalan adventure. Bring us your simple, complex, bizarre, we demanded of Zack, just as long as we try some yummy paella along the way.

B44, named for its address along quaint Belden Lane, has a cozy yet hip atmosphere. While the architecture is cold and chic, the warmth of the rich walls, authentic Catalonian hanging

prints, and airily placed votives make this a perfect first date or group dinner spot. Some of the prints and the hallway video screens depict the Catalan centuries-old tradition of human pyramid building – quite a sight. These images give a touch of whimsy and humanness to the stark decor. The diverse crowd spans Financial District bankers to young hipsters to visiting families seeking respite from standard tourist traps.

Belden Lane is basking in a “rebirth,” of sorts, attracting both tourists and natives. The festive alley is lined with several gourmet eateries that span cultural tastes – French, Italian, Spanish – and Zack tells us they view each other as partners not competition, harmoniously contributing to the lane's atmosphere. Colorful awnings reach side by side from the storefronts, protecting rows and rows of sidewalk tables and Campari umbrellas from the afternoon sun and evening breezes. Turn the corner onto this lane and you might be met with a sharply dressed man leaning on his Vespa – you are literally transported to a stroll through Europe. The street is packed on warm evenings with crowds enjoying good food and wine, even on weeknights. Neighboring hotels often direct their clientele to this festive strip.

Our trip into the B44's rich Catalan cuisine begins with several appetizers. The tiger shrimp sautéed with garlic and adobo, or smoked paprika, ignites with a smoky, spicy pop. Cinnamon, crunchy garlic, and cumin polish off this tangy delight. Shredded salt cod salad with tomato puree and red wine vinaigrette, served cold, has a mild, salty, olive taste. Salted cod is a Catalonian specialty and B44 does it right – they make their own by salting, drying, and reconstituting the cod in cold water for three weeks. The cured white anchovies with pears and Idiazabal cheese, a smoked sheep's milk, have a potent, salty taste. The three distinct flavors blended a bit awk-

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wardly and the pear was not quite ripe enough to mellow the mix. Sautéed Atlantic cod cheeks were buttery and smooth.

And the deliciously simple Jamón Serrano with Catalan toast is a subtle version of bruschetta, with soft bread, crunchy crust and a nice counter-balance of mixed greens.

Feeling bold, we tried the baby squid stuffed with fennel sausage, cooked in its own ink. The peas added a nice, fresh break from the thick seafood and meat. This is a surprisingly subtle dish, but definitely not for the faint of heart.

B44's mantra is "simple done well," and you find it everywhere. Even the pre-meal bread is elegant – thin slices served in a silver pail, accompanied by a lovely dipping of extra virgin olive oil, anchovies, black olives, and tarragon. The paellas by far live out this promise of simplicity. With eight to

choose from, we sampled the traditional B44: rice, chorizo, chicken, shrimp, squid, mussels, clams, green peas, and red bell pepper. Served in a personal skillet that can be shared by two people, this flavorful mix of meat and seafood was seeped in saffron and just melted in our mouths. This is probably the best traditional paella I have ever tasted. We also tried the Fideua, a noodle-based paella (as opposed to rice), consisting of monkfish, sepia, squid, shrimp, mussels, clams, and green peas. This "comfort food with squid" was delicious, but tasted a little too basic compared with the rest of the menu. The fish taste was not overpowering and might be a good next step for those less adventurous types trying to branch out.

The romescada, an operetta of fresh fish and shellfish cooked with romesco sauce, was intriguing. In a city of seafood cioppinos, this

stands out. Served in a paella skillet, the sweet, light sauce of red wine, almonds, and roasted tomatoes was excellent, but the fish was a tad on the dry side.

Our foray into the depths of Catalan cooking just begged for some wonderful accompaniment. Throughout our meal, we sampled the restaurant's extensive wine list, which Chef Olivella has been working on for years. We tried the Txakolina from the Talai Berry vineyard first. This green grape wine is from the Basque coast and is poured high and tall like cider to get a bubbly effect. It was a wonderful acidic and tart complement to our seafood appetizers. Next we tried a 2002 Gessami from Penedes. This Catalan wine is a form of Muscat but fairly dry with a floral quality. With paellas, Zack had us try a 2001 Guelbenzu EVO from Navarra. This wine blends cabernet, merlot,

and tempranillo – very nutty and bold.

If there's room, you must try the Catalan "postre" or desserts. Mel i Mato, ("honey and cheese") is a simple dish of mato cheese, similar to ricotta, drizzled with honey and walnuts. Cream sherry served in a borronet (a small glass decanter with a spigot) accompanies this delight. Light, airy, and not too sweet, the cheese and honey harmonize perfectly.

If you're looking to try traditional and exotic Catalan cuisine in a lively location, B44 is the spot. Unlike many places with unique regional foods, you walk out feeling satisfied. Spain is so much more than tortillas and tapas, and Chef Olivella beautifully dishes this vibrant cuisine to the masses. B44, 44 Belden Pl.; 986-6287. ■

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