Glamour Returns to the Hotel Chelsea

El Quijote, the mainstay Spanish restaurant, reopens.

El Quijote, the mainstay Spanish restaurant around Chelsea and the Village, and while it was possible to argue over which had the best paella, there was no serious debate about which was the grandest. It was El Quijote, in the Chelsea Hotel.

When El Quijote opened in 1930, the Depression had begun but the nightclub era was still blossoming along. At an upping, stretching from the curb on West 23rd Street to the red neon sign above the door, protected left hands and fur coats from the elements. Inside, captains dressed in scarlet blazers and runners wore black vests over white shirts. Murals and framed paintings inspired by Don Quixote, bullfight or some other idea of old Spain looked down on everyone.

As the years extended their price, El Quijote's original glamour had to contend with drop ceilings, scuffed checkerboard linoleum and dusty sculptures. The paella could have the consistency of yesterday's oatmeal. The taste of the saffron, however, the pitcher under several inches of fruit salad, might be best described as purple. But faded splendor is still splendid. The critic Craig Claiborne, no fan of kitch, allowed in a capsule review in The New York Times in 1967 that El Quijote had "a certain tawdry appeal." No doubt some of its rakishness was dragged along in the wake of the hotel's guests and residents, who could enter through a door in the lobby.

Patsy Snitka, who lived upstairs, wrote in her memoir "Just Kidding" that she walked into El Quijote's bar on a hot afternoon in 1969 to find "musicians everywhere, sitting before tables laid with mounds of shrimp with green saucen, paella, pitchers of sangria and bottles of tequila." Jefferson Airplane was there. So was Janis Joplin and her band. Jimi Hendrix sat by the door.

That particular tableau, occasioned by Woodstock, was never repeated. El Quijote continued, though, to draw musicians, artists, writers and others who appreciated its combination of surrealism, tradition and prices that barely changed from one decade to the next. El Quijote could almost always turn an evening into an event, a rare quality in a restaurant whose playlist consisted of elevator-music arrangements of songs by the Beatles and Led Zeppelin. It was a dreamy ghost ship becalmed in Manhattan's swirling currents.

Places like that can't be replaced, and when El Quijote closed for renovations four years ago by the hotel's owners, the city's antiquarian-bohemian sets feared it would be destroyed or at least cleaned up beyond recognition. Now that the restaurant has been back in business for two months, most of those worries are forgotten.

The biggest loss is the disappearance of the Daily News reporter who roamed the back. Those spaces were dreamt as the front room and its bar, but they did account for nearly half the space, it was easier to walk in on the spur of the moment or throw together a last-minute birthday party. A new private dining room won't serve the same purposes. The tighter quarters become an issue when it's time to make reservations and the only slots available are 5 or 10 p.m.

The space that remains, though, has been handled with all the sensitivity any urban nostalgist could ask for. The room-length windmill mural, painted in calligraphic white strokes on a dark caramel-colored background, looks like a museum piece after its cleaning. The binsom was filled to reveal tiny ceramic floor tiles that are probably original. The white tablecloths are gone, and servers now wear soft cotton jackets instead of blazers, but the color is still as red as a bullfighter's cape.

The old recipes have been retired, as they should have been. Jaime Young, a former of the restaurant group Sunday Hospitality and its culinary director, oversaw the menu with Byron Hogan, the chef de cuisine, whose resume includes three years as executive chef of the United States Embassy in Madrid. Together they have completely rethought the kitchen's connection with contemporary Spanish cooking.

Paella used to be steamed in deep aluminum pots now the rice is stirred in actual paella, shallow and as wide as a hob cap, for an aromatic rice and more and much richer crunch factor. Saltfour is used now, a welcome change from the annatto that used to dye the rice without adding much flavor. The current version is dotted with all oil, the mid-1960s emulsion, and seasoned with both saltshill and salt, a meat much lower in the mushroom-paella-eat.

Lobster, cooked on a plancha and draping with smoky pimenton butter and sherry, is a far cry from the garlic-scented chow torners of former times. Achaquita olive oil, distinctly fruity and flavorful, oozes in the bite of garlic in the gambas al ajillo, griddled in their pink shells. Tuna is stewed with Espolet pepper in warm olive oil until it attains the tenderness and richness of braised beef chowder.

The chefs give simple tapas and pintxos extra layers of flavor. Most of the time this is a benefit. Making a tomato confit to smear on a slice of tomato is a smart approach to out-of-season produce. Marinating a mix of Spanish olives with paprika peppers gives them an appealing ticker of heat. Stuffing bacy with tuna, flutty morcilla before cooking them under squid-take sauce makes for a bonding intense version of the traditional hot tapa.

The North African-influenced spice rub on chicken skewers in the style of pizzamba morro is strong enough to bite it, I'm not sure I see the point of brushing fish sauce over them. And whatever umami-gooing mix-ins are being added to the faldap (aged Mesclun for one) only muddy the flavors.

Thankfully there has been no mucking around with the formidable tall glasses Basque, which is flavored with rum and served with a sparkling orange paddle of Cara Cara marmalade. The glasses of traditional Spanish cooking lies in knowing when to leave well enough alone. It's a principle the bartenders at El Quijote could stand to study. Cocktails that originally called for two or three ingredients get five or six; the fillers, a blend of red wine and cola that is one of Spain's great party tricks, has wine, um and two kinds of amaro when it just needs a Coke.

The new-more approach works better with the sangria; infused with cinnamon and spiced with Balinese "chup" it does go down something like a chili liqulid wine, and is a huge improvement over its prede- cesor. It does, I suspect, a flavoring mix, which is brief but manages to ripen in a fair sampling of Mediterranean backgrounds. Like Bandolere, it has a Piero and more traditional outfits like CVNE.

I came away more impressed with the atmos- phere of the old El Quijote than I did with its food. Toward the end, even El Quijote's Furbish administration prices weren't quite enough to make anyone forget that a number of restaurants served far better Spanish food. Now it is one of them, and that's OK.


PHOTOGRAPHS BY CLAY WILLIAMS FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

A one-time musicans' hangout retires its old recipes.

EL QUIJOTE
226 WEST 23RD STREET (EIGHTH AVENUE), CHELSEA, 212-514-3440, ECOQUIJOTE.COM

Atmosphere One of Manhattan's oldest restaurants, with its light red booths, decorative mirrors and wall-length mural of Don Quixote's world, has been cleaned up and brightened with all the care a nostalgic could ask for.

Service Bright, cheerful, well informed.

Sound level Moderate.

Recommended Pat con tomate; croqueta de jamon and patatas bravas; escudella con morcilla; butifarra casera; bagouetine Quijote; gazpacho; Basque.

Drinks and wine: The concise list of Spanish wines, not under $70, makes a better intro- duction to the hotel dining than the somewhat overcomplicated cocktails.

Prices Appetizers, $9 to $24; main courses, $22 to $40; paella for two, $72.

Open Daily for dinner.

Reservations Accepted.

Wheelchair access The dining room and access corridors are on the second floor.

What the stars mean: Because the restaurant's prices are not given star ratings.

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THE NEW YORK TIMES, WEDNESDAY, APRIL 13, 2022

RESTAURANTS | PETE WELLS