Who

NEW YORK

Becomes a

"MURDERER"

in Post-Roe America?
FOOD

A Spanish Revival on 23rd Street

The Hotel Chelsea’s El Quijote is back and better than ever.

By Adam Platt

Over the past few years, we’ve all become familiar with the disheartening death notices for hundreds of dive bars and diners and “beloved” dining institutions that have closed their doors around town. The closings continue, many of them quiet and not memorialized, though as the city began its long, slow recovery from the great covid nightmare, we’ve noticed that here and there, as winter turns to spring, some of these former institutions have begun to come back to life. A new team of cooks/waiters are trying their luck in the grand dame former Del Posto dining room this spring, and the slammed-down version of the Gotham Bar and Grill, now called Gotham, has been doing a brick-neighborhood business on 12th Street, down in the Village, with new owners, the same name sake’s in the front of the house, and the former pastry chef running the kitchen.

Few of these revivals have been more successful or unexpected than that of the 1930s-era El Quijote, which served jug of sangria and a roster of old Spanish classics for close to 30 years at the bottom of the Hotel Chelsea on 23rd Street before shuttering in 2016. Prior to its demise, generations of disheveled crackpots and doomed geniuses lived above (Dylan Thomas, Hendrix & Joplin: Sid and Nancy, of course) and got famously bistro in the famous room with its glass etchings of giant broadcasters and mural of Don Quijote on the walls, though if you’d wandered by during the depths of the lockdown, at 4 a.m., and peeped through the dark window at the stacks of chairs and the dusty, deserted bar, it would have felt as if you were looking back in time into the state room of a wrecked Spanish galleon.

But thankfully a combination of intermittent hospitality incompetence has rescued this venerable room from the sudden deep. Many of the original toadstool remains intact and are in some cases freshly exposed—the dazzling tile floors, the rocky lampshades chandeliers hanging from the distressed, smoke-stained ceiling—but the dining area is smaller and more intimate and the bar emits a soft, 1930s glow. The waitstaff wear regalia of the original teddy waitresses’ jackets, with rows of pins stuck in their pockets, and they portage wheels of paella around the room along with other Spanish favorites (pata negra, iberian ham, truffled sausages, head-on shrimp), all of which seems to taste better than they ever did la Jolla at chef de cuisine Byron Hegan, who spent years cooking in Madrid before switching up back here in New York. I don’t recall properly crunchy salt-and-cod croquetas with generous dashes of fresh fennel when I used to drop in to the crowded bar back in the 90s and 00s, but the current team of cooks here have upped their game, making sure the paella is perfectly cooked and the croquetas are crispy and flavorful.

The wine list is an impressive selection of Spanish wines to choose from, with a nice selection of reds and whites and a good selection of rosé, with a lot of interesting and unique varietals. The cocktails are also well-executed, with a nice selection of unique and interesting options. The service is friendly and attentive, with the waitstaff making sure that you’re comfortable and well taken care of. The atmosphere is cozy and inviting, with warm lighting and comfortable seating. Overall, El Quijote is a great option for a relaxed and enjoyable dining experience.

The Underground Gourmet

This Pasta Granny Relishes the Spotlight

As the world continues its current path of crazy, it’s tucking into a plate of pasta followed by another plate of pasta and calling it dinner before the next move of the future. You’d think, judging by the crowd at Noma’s Pasta Bar (100 East 13th Street, in the basement), that it’s a pandemic thing. During the pandemic, pasta became the go-to comfort food, and so it’s not surprising that this year’s Pasta Bar—run by the team behind Noma—has become a hot spot. And who are you going to believe considering the woman behind the pasta is the celebrated pasta granita Donna Moscarillo.

For 27 years at her son Nicolas’s restaurant, T’Reilly, Donna rolled and shaped pasta with the lightning speed of a three-card monte man earning her the nickname the Human Pasta Machine. But it’s only since her 2020 appearance in a Pasta Granita YouTube video that she’s become an internet star. During the pandemic, she pivoted to frozen pasta kits, and when Nicola shuttered the restaurant to focus on his Tuscan wine estate, she was left with the pasta. So she found a space nearby and made her main attraction, expanding the pasta roster to 20 selections supplemented by a killer Negroni sauce, antipasti (the gnocchi is divine), and a good Italian wine list. Then she built a glass-walled cobblestone kitchen where Donna, who just celebrated her 90th birthday, could do her stuff.

Having gobbled our way through a good chunk of the menu, we can happily direct you to the mini-calzone called pomodoro, the springy fava bean pasta, and especially Donna’s signature—perfectly textured cannelloni with broccoli rabe and pork, chewy tender cannelloni with pork ravioli. Donna is also the only place besides Trulli where we’ve ever encountered a regional specialty that includes fresh and dried squares of thin pasta sheets in an elemental sauce of chicory and tomatoes. As for Donna’s cannelloni—best-filled ravioli doused with brown sauce and poppy seeds—down the pastries do and have a plate for dessert.

Bites

RECOMMENDED DISHES: Porcini and fennel tostado, blackened calamari, and boquerones, head-on prawns, licorice a la plancha, pinchos moruno (chicken or beef), chuletón (beef), green beans, flatbread, and a proper Sid and Nancy drink.

NOTE: Table reservations 1 hour in advance, and please don’t show up at the bar 10 minutes before the next seating begins, which is at 5:30 p.m. in a seated only. This is a bumper to the beat, and if you are a tad late, you may need to do to another restaurant.

PRICES: Appetizers, $14; main courses, $23 to $35 for the pastas de temporada (for two for four).