

dining with tolf

By Robert W. Tolf

THE FOOD FROM SPAIN FALLS VERY FAR FROM PLAIN

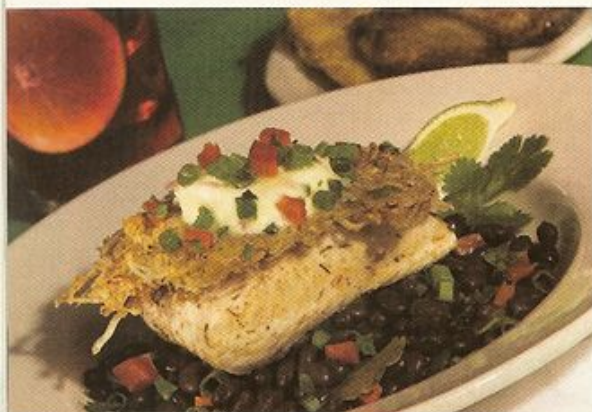
A new wave of Spanish food has arrived in Florida.

There's no doubting Florida's pre-eminent place in the country's Spanish culinary landscape, and there are outstanding practitioners of the fine art of preparing the classics

7400) providing ever more exciting introductions to the kind of cuisine he championed at his La Maison Basque, famous for its classical Spanish entrees and the parade of tapas that marched out of its kitchen.

Tapas also are an essential element of the menu across the state in a hard-to-find, non-décor New Smyrna Beach strip mall restaurant, the Spanish River Grill (737 E. 3rd Ave., 386/424-6991), where executive chef and co-owner Henry Salgado, with help from co-owner wife Michele, serves his own interpretations of modern Spanish cuisine. He relies on locally available freshness for his yucca-crustured fresh fish, his chorizo- and langostino-filled calamari, his chimichurri-marinated filet and the paella made with orzo.

A far more elaborate and considerably more ambitious pioneer of New Spain is the Cabana group promoting Nuevo Latino. It started in New York, in Forest Hills, and then expanded to Cabana Midtown and Cabana Seaport at South Street's Pier 17. From there it was a long sail to sun and surf to Cabana Las Palmas in West Palm Beach (118 Clematis St., 561/833-4773). And then a short swim this year to Delray Beach,



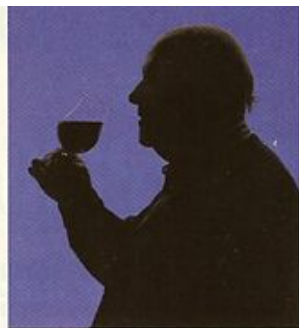
FRESH FOCUSED: Yucca-crustured fresh fish, Spanish River Grill, New Smyrna Beach

from the Old World as well as New — everything from the basic caldo gallego to the most overloaded paella, in settings as lively and low cost as Miami's Versailles (3555 S.W. 8th St., 305/444-0240) to Tampa's elaborate and elegant centennial celebrant Columbia, with seven locations statewide (Celebration, Clearwater Beach, Sarasota, St. Augustine, St. Petersburg, Tampa and West Palm Beach).

Most recently there's been a new wave of Spanish food, not to challenge and usurp the traditional, but to supplement and strengthen, fortified by a new wave of wonderful wines. Riding the crest is the bold and resourceful team assembled by chef-owner Felix Piedra at Tampa's Vizcaya Restaurante & Tapas Bar (10905 N. Dale Mabry, 813/968-



NUEVO LATINO: Cabana El Rey, Delray Beach



EPCOT WINE FESTIVAL

Wine Rack

The wines of Spain have been featured in a new wine school along with the Italy Wine School, the Advanced Aussie Wine School and the Advanced Bordeaux Wine School USA as integral features of the 10th annual Epcot International Food and Wine Festival through Nov. 13. The world's largest, this year the festival features more than 300 wines from around the world with an astounding 33,000 bottles being poured and discussed by vintners, chefs, experts and all kinds of enthusiasts. Holding, sniffing, swirling and tasting a total of 337,500 wine glasses!



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where the group opened Cabana El Rey (105 E. Atlantic, 561/274-9090), an indoor-outdoor delight with a sensational setting on Old School Square.

An easy-on-the-eyes, efficiently laid out operation with a staff that is as friendly as it is well-informed, and with a display kitchen that does not dominate but which allows a good look-see at the cleanliness and cooperation of back room and front. Delivering wonderful menus noon and night.

My favorite noontime break starts with one of the best mojitos to be found as prelude to Coco Cabana Vegetables, a grand assemblage of broccoli, carrots and Caribbean root vegetables (calabaza, yautla and yucca) sautéed with lightly curried coconut milk and a judicious sprinkling of habañero peppers, at \$9 the least expensive item on the menu, along with picadillos and the empañadas, those traditional pastry dough turnovers filled with picadillo, chicken sofrito or shrimp criollo.

The quartet of sandwiches is also \$9, served with soup or salad and marvelous plantain chips with garlic mojo. The choice includes the classic Cubano, a Carmencita, which translates to chicken breast marinated with fresh Caribbean fruit juices and spices, grilled and basted with jerk barbecue sauce and served on a Cuban roll. I like my Cabana chicken roasted after rubbing with what's known as adobo — garlic, lime, oregano and extra virgin olive oil.

The dinner menu is considerably more extensive: 11 tapas and appetizers topped by a knockout \$12 ceviche mixto, fresh calamari, octopus, shrimp and scallops marinated in aji amarillo, hot rocoto peppers quieted with just the right amount of cilantro, garlic and lime juice.

There are 14 Platos Tradicionales (\$14 to \$22), including ropa vieja, picadillo, the half roasted chicken, arroz con pollo, churrasco and paella, which is served every day, and a half-dozen Platos Nuevo Latinos, ranging from chicharrones de pollo for \$15 (dark meat chicken marinated in garlic and oregano then fried to a crisp) to \$25 for a pan-seared fillet of Chilean sea bass with a saffron-enhanced beurre blanc salsa, some leaf spinach sauté and yucca-manchegeo cheese mash, and \$32 for 10 ounces of Black Angus filet mignon seared with a rioja red wine demiglace reduction and served with purple Peruvian potatoes mashed with Serrano ham.

A word of caution — be sure to save space for the terrific dessert of tres leches, a real stunner in appearance and taste. □

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