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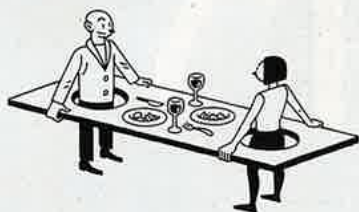
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# NEW YORKER



Drooker





## TABLES FOR TWO

**El Quijote**  
226 W. 23rd St.

In Patti Smith's dream-state memoir "Just Kids," from 2010, she devotes a chapter to the Hotel Chelsea, where she lived from 1969 to 1972: "like a doll's house in the Twilight Zone, with a hundred rooms, each a small universe. . . . I loved this place, its shabby elegance, and the history it held so possessively." Before her, Dylan Thomas, Thomas Wolfe, and Bob Dylan had all found creative expression there, and the young Smith and her roommate Robert Mapplethorpe fervently strove to manifest the same for themselves, even as they barely scraped together enough money to make rent. (To their consternation, the hotel manager, known for accepting art as payment, didn't go in for the portfolios they offered as tender.) They whiled away the hours in El Quijote—the hotel's aptly divey canteen, accessible from the lobby—which had been open since 1930 and dealt reliably in shrimp with green sauce, Pollo Villaroy (chicken breast coated in béchamel, then breaded and fried), all manner of steaks and seafood, and boozy sangria.

El Quijote was popular for decades

as a stalwart cool place for a decadent night out, where you could eat and drink lustily and no one would mind. In 2018, the restaurant closed for renovations, and now El Quijote has reopened, spiffed up and fancified, under new management. (The hotel, closed since 2011, is now partially open, with plans to open fully in the late summer.)

The iconic red-neon marquee remains, as do an array of intriguingly mediocre vintage paintings and a room-spanning brown-and-white mural of Don Quixote and his windmills. The space has shrunk to less than half its earlier size, with just two rows of tables. They're adjacent to the handsome original bar, glowing crimson and most certainly attracting barflies once again, albeit with fancier cocktails: a Quijote G+T in a giant goblet, with pear, aloe, and celery; a fruity Kalimotxo, with rum, amaro, and iced grapes.

The old menu had scores of dishes; the new one, designed by the chefs Jaime Young and Byron Hogan, is a relatively concise list of Spanish hits. *Pan con tomate*, for which grilled bread is rubbed with tomato, included, on a recent evening, unwieldy tomato skins mixed in with the fruit's pulp. The cod croquettes were ideal, though, packed with the correct ratio of *bacalao*, or reconstituted salt cod, to potato (more cod, less potato), fried to a pleasingly shattering crunch, and served piping hot with copious aioli, making the case that every bite should include a generous swipe.

If only all salads were as fresh and alert as El Quijote's *ensalada mixta*: crisp leaves

of Little Gem, radicchio, frisée, and dark-green spigarello, piled in a pyramid and studded with pine nuts and garlic chips. Tuna crudo, bathed in refreshing Cara Cara-orange juice and layered with pickled Fresno chilies, was unexpectedly lovely. *Patatas bravas*—mandatory when offered—resembled steak fries, overwrought but acceptable thanks to more aioli and a tomato-and-choricero-pepper sauce.

*Gambas al ajillo* arrived as four head-on jumbo shrimp in the shell—more work than they were worth unless you used your hands, a Catch-22 with no towelettes in sight. A delicious, earthy bowl of pork sausage, baby butter beans, and grilled bread in a tomato-pepper sauce was supposedly, undetectably (unnecessarily) laced with truffle, but it wasn't missed whatsoever. The paella, fortified with mussels, cockles, shrimp, and rabbit, benefitted from tableside dollops of yet more aioli. The highlight, a smoky and tender lobster special—which the genial waitress, in a formal red waiter's coat, said had been deemed "a religious experience" by one diner—was halved, grilled, and spread with roasted garlic, accompanied by drawn butter with a pimentón kick.

There's still sangria, red or white, but only by the pitcher, for fifty-four dollars. It would have cost closer to four back in Smith's day, when she and Mapplethorpe would scavenge El Quijote's discarded lobster claws to make necklaces. Mapplethorpe would string them together, and Smith, she wrote, "would say a little prayer to thank the lobster." (Dishes \$9–\$58.)

—Shauna Lyon