

RESTAURANTS | PETE WELLS

Glamour Returns to the Hotel Chelsea

El Quijote, the mainstay Spanish restaurant, reopens.

THERE USED TO BE dozens of Spanish restaurants 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 Hotel Chelsea.

When El Quijote opened in 1930, the Depression had begun but the nightclub era was still rolling along. An awning, stretching from the curb on West 23rd Street to the red neon sign above the door, protected felt hats 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, bullfights or some other idea of old Spain looked down on everyone.

As the years extracted 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 sangria, served by the pitcher under several inches of fruit salad, might be best described as purple. But faded splendor is still splendor. The critic Craig Claiborne, no fan of kitsch, 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 tawdriness was dragged along in the wake of the hotel's guests and residents, who could enter through a door in the lobby.

Patti Smith, who lived upstairs, wrote in her memoir "Just Kids" that she walked into El Quijote's bar one afternoon in 1969 to find "musicians everywhere, sitting before tables laid with mounds of shrimp with green sauce, 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 was closed for renovations four years ago by the hotel's owners, the city's antiquarian-bohemian axis 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 can be forgotten.

The biggest loss is the disappearance of the Dulcinea and Cervantes rooms in the back. Those spaces weren't as dreamlike as the front room and its bar, but they did account for nearly half the seats, and made it 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 quar-

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Above, an interior view of El Quijote in the Hotel Chelsea. Left, Byron Hogan (in dark pants) and Jaime Young in the kitchen. Far left, serving sangria. Below, paella. Below left, cod croquetas. Bottom, butifarra sausage.



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ters 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 linoleum was lifted 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 founder of the restaurant group Sunday Hospitality and its culinary director, oversees the menu with Byron Hogan, the chef de cuisine, whose résumé includes three years as executive chef of the United States Embassy in Madrid. Together they have completely re-

A onetime musicians' hangout retires its old recipes.

EL QUIJOTE

226 WEST 23RD STREET (EIGHTH AVENUE), CHELSEA; 212-518-1843; ELQUIJOTENYC.COM

Atmosphere One of Manhattan's oldest Spanish restaurants, with its tight red booths, decorative ironwork and wall-length mural of Don Quixote's world, has been cleaned up and brightened with all the care any urban nostalgist could ask for.

Service Bright, cheerful, well informed.

Sound level Moderate.

Recommended Pan con tomate; croquetas de jamón; confitada de atún; chipirones en su tinta con morcilla; butifarra casera; bogavante Quijote; gâteau Basque.

Drinks and wine The concise list of Spanish wines, most under \$70, makes a better introduction to Iberian drinking culture than the somewhat overcomplicated cocktails.

Prices Appetizers, \$9 to \$24; main courses, \$22 to \$49; paella for two, \$72.

Open Daily for dinner.

Reservations Accepted.

Wheelchair access The dining room and accessible restrooms are on the sidewalk level.

What the stars mean Because of the pandemic, restaurants are not being given star ratings.

freshed the kitchen's connection with contemporary Spanish cooking.

Paella used to be steamed in deep aluminum pots; now the rice is stirred in actual paellas, shallow and as wide as a hub cap, for a more intense flavor and much higher crunch factor. Saffron 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 i oli, the garlic-olive oil emulsion, and strewn with both shellfish and rabbit, a meat much loved by Valencian paella-eaters.

Lobster, cooked on a plancha and dripping with smoky pimentón butter and sherry, is a far cry from the garlic-scented chew toys of former times. Arbequina olive oil, distinctly fruity and flavorful, softens the bite of garlic in the gambas al ajillo, grid-dled in their pink shells. Tuna is stewed with Espelette pepper in warm olive oil until it attains the tenderness and richness of braised beef cheeks.

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 pan con tomate is a smart approach to out-of-season produce. Marinating a mix of Spanish olives with piparra peppers gives them an appealing flicker of heat. Stuffing baby squid with loose, fluffy morcilla before cloaking them under squid-ink sauce makes for a broodingly intense version of the classic chipirones en su tinta.

The North African-influenced spice rub on chicken skewers in the style of pintxos morunos is strong enough to take it, but 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 fideuà (aged Moscatel, for one) only muddy the flavors.

Thankfully there has been no monkeying around with the formidably tall gâteau Basque, which is flavored with rum and served with a sparkling orange puddle of Cara Cara marmalade.

The genius 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 kalimotxo, a blend of red wine and cola that is one of Spain's great party tricks, has wine, rum and two kinds of amaro when it just needs a Coke.

The more-is-more approach works better with the sangria; infused with cinnamon and spiked with balsamic vinegar, it goes down something like a chilled mulled wine, and is a huge improvement over its predecessor. So, I suspect, is the wine list, which is brief but manages to rope in a fair sampling of modern winemakers like Ramón Jané and more traditional outfits like C.V.N.E.

I miss the sprawling, sheltering atmosphere of the old El Quijote, but not much else. Toward the end, even El Quijote's Ford 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.