

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.



OLE GROUND Exiles from the Spanish Civil War took over the restaurant at the Hotel Chelsea in the 1930s and renamed it El Quijote in a nod to the hotel's literary cachet. F. MARTIN RAMIN/ THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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El Quijote—a Kitsch Masterpiece—Is Open Again in Manhattan's Hotel Chelsea

The famously bohemian hangout—old haunt of Janis Joplin, Andy Warhol and countless others—is back and timelessly intact—but now the sangria is top shelf

For the [Time Capsule](#) series, we spotlight a cherished restaurant, hotel or landmark that's changed remarkably little over the years. This week, we visit El Quijote at Hotel Chelsea in New York City.

THEN

IN THE 1930s, exiles from the Spanish Civil War, living in New York, leased the [Hotel Chelsea](#) Restaurant, an eatery inside the decades-old apartment-hotel and artists' cooperative on 23rd Street. They renamed the space after Don Quixote, a nod to the hotel's literary cachet and created a fantasy shrine to their homeland. Highlights: a mural of Miguel de Cervantes' fictional hero tilting at windmills, paintings of bullfighters and flamenco dancers, and private dining rooms including one named after Cervantes himself. The 200-seat El Quijote also had a door next to the Chelsea's lobby, luring guests like Arthur Miller and Dylan Thomas with hearty portions of Spanish fare served by waiters in scarlet blazers.



WHERE ART MEETS GAMBAS Andy Warhol at El Quijote in the 1960s.

PHOTO: DAVID MCCABE/HOTEL CHELSEA

The 1960s ushered in the restaurant's real heyday, when then-unknowns Patti Smith and Robert Mapplethorpe could settle into a red-vinyl booth, subsist on cheap appetizers —“shrimp in green sauce” was a favorite—and rub shoulders with Leonard Cohen, Allen Ginsburg, Andy Warhol and other notables. (As Ms. Smith recalls in her memoir, “Just Kids,” the pair would turn the lobster tails left over from their repasts into necklaces for sale, an enterprising example of “found art”).



CLAWS FOR APPLAUSE El Quijote closed for refurbishment in 2018 and finally reopened earlier this year.

El Quijote remained a neighborhood favorite into the 21st century, despite its slide from shabby-chic to merely shabby, its linoleum floors and vinyl booths fraying, the statuettes of the Man of La Mancha over the bar coated in dust.

NOW

RIPPLES OF CONCERN ran through nostalgic bohemian circles when El Quijote closed for refurbishment in 2018. But when it reopened last March, following the reopening of the revived Hotel Chelsea itself, fans found its essence preserved and distilled.



SPANISH REVIVAL In its 1960s heyday, El Quijote was less renowned for its quality than for its generous portions and artist-friendly prices. Today's dishes and refreshments, including the paella de mariscos, sangria and gin & tonics, are far pricier and more refined.

Diners still enter from 23rd Street beneath the original yellow metal awning and a neon sign. Although the sprawling restaurant has been reduced to a more intimate 45 seats (with 16 stools at the bar and 55 seats outside for seasonal dining) and only one private dining room, its spirit endures. The wooden bar still houses an array of Spanish tchotchkes and lobster-engraved mirrors. The red vinyl booths have been reupholstered, but the chandeliers, distressed ceiling and pastoral paintings are intact. Waiters still wear red, but sport snappy cotton jackets instead of formal blazers. The Don Quixote mural has been restored to its muddy glory and a wooden statue of the novel's hero still greets hotel guests coming in from the lobby.

Among the most noticeable changes: The multipage menu of yore has been reduced to a single page with more contemporary (and pricier) Spanish dishes. The signature paella de mariscos is now cooked in a traditional Spanish pan rather than a pot. Once basic brews, the red and white sangrias are elaborate multi-ingredient concoctions, while the Quijote G+T is garnished with shavings of celery and pear. In a sign of optimism, the EXIT sign now reads EXITO—Spanish for success.

Sangria-Fueled Synergy

Artists, writers and musicians staying at Hotel Chelsea have long used El Quijote as their meeting place, giving it a louche cachet.

● **1884**

Chelsea Association Building opens as a Utopian cooperative with artists's studios, literary pretensions and communal dining rooms.

● **1930**

After opening the eatery as the Hotel Chelsea Restaurant, the manager hires artist John McKiernan to paint murals; he chooses satirical images of American politicians, scandalizing hotel management. Soon after, refugees from the Spanish Civil War paint them over and rename the restaurant El Quijote.

● **1945**

Peggy Guggenheim introduces Jackson Pollock to art collectors in a dining room.

● **1969**

Woodstock performers Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Jefferson Airplane gather at El Quijote to fuel up on shrimp, sangria and tequila before driving Upstate.

● **1978**

Nancy Spungen is murdered in Room 100, boosting the hotel's notoriety and creating a sense of malaise and decline, although the restaurant thrives and even offers an informal delivery service to hotel guests.

● **2018**

After the Chelsea is purchased by trio of hoteliers, they acquire El Quijote and close it for renovation.

● **2022**

El Quijote reopens under new Brooklyn-based management.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/hotel-chelseas-el-quijote-is-open-again-kitschy-as-ever-11664379300>