

DINING OUT: MAKING MEMORIES IN SUNNY SPAIN

01:00 AM EDT on Thursday, May 21, 2009

By Michael Janusonis
Journal Arts Writer

Basque-style filet of sole entree is among the offerings at Spain in Cranston.

The Providence Journal / Sandor Bodo

CRANSTON — One of the nicer things about the Ocean State is that even on a cool, dreary day you can drive to Spain for a quick pick me up. Steps from the restaurant's parking lot on Reservoir Avenue and suddenly you're in a courtyard in Old Spain. The place is almost always crowded. On our first of two recent weekday visits, there was a 45-minute wait for a table. Owner Felix Rodriguez, who once was a partner in the Spain restaurant in Narragansett and opened the Cranston facility in 1994, believes customers have kept coming, even in these trying times, because of "reputation and value." Portions are generous and many customers left with leftovers. Prices are surprisingly moderate.

One of the best things about Spain — besides the delicious, expertly prepared menu — is the bustling, efficient and very knowledgeable wait staff that makes one feel like a Spanish grandee. We were served by two waiters plus a meal server plus another waiter who turned up at the end. On our first visit there was a half pitcher of red Sangria (\$13; \$14 for white), enough to carry through the entire meal. We loved the mild garlic, parsley, white wine and clam sauce on the Mariscada Salsa Verde (varies by market price) which included a half lobster and a goodly portion of clams, mussels, squid, shrimp and scallops.

There also was a wonderful, very large Paella Valenciana (\$22 for one; \$36 to serve two) with shrimp, tender sea scallops, clams, mussels, chicken, squid, saffron rice and mild spices. We were delighted with an appetizer of artichoke hearts stuffed with a winning blend of smoked ham, spinach and herbs (\$10.50).

But this time it was the littlenecks in a garlic, parsley and white wine sauce (\$9) and the Vieras Rellenas (\$10). The latter has scallops with crabmeat and diced shrimp served open faced on a scallop shell and topped by Mahon cheese, a slightly sharp, semi-firm cow's milk cheese from Spain. It came out of the oven with the shellfish very moist under the cheese which had an au gratin consistency.

I thought twice before ordering the littlenecks, thinking the sauce would be exactly like what had previously been enjoyed on the Mariscada Salsa Verde. But it was quite different, denser and darker with a more robust flavor, surrounding eight plump clams topped with shards of fried onion. A waiter explained that for appetizer orders, the sauce is given a heartier flavor because the chef adds a little more garlic and parsley. The onions didn't hurt either.

Spain has a vast menu selection, but the only thing on the menu from the first visit that was a MUST ORDER AGAIN was the house-made potato chips (\$4). It's a big plate of crispy, not-too-greasy chips cooked to a golden turn with a rich taste of the potato and just enough seasoning — "a little paprika, cayenne, hot paprika and sea salt" — to tickle the taste buds. Rodriguez said that when the president of the Dominican Republic was once feted at a big feast at Spain, in a later thank-you note he singled out the potato chips for praise.

They also turned up on my dish of Basque-style filet of sole, a very large, very moist piece that sat in the fragrant white wine, garlic and parsley sauce, this time lighter and slightly saltier than the heartier sauce served with the clam appetizer. It was topped with four big littlenecks, five mussels, several medium shrimp and slices of roasted red peppers, an intriguing mix of flavors.

Three large slices of extraordinarily tender pork tenderloin were the key to the Solomillo de Cerdo (\$18). When cut, they looked like pieces of a very good steak. Charbroiled, they'd been cooked to perfection in a sweetish port wine wild berry shitake mushroom sauce. They sat atop a mound of mashed potatoes and green beans, with slices of zucchini and yellow squash on the side.

A dessert tray included a big slice of Tres Leches (\$7.50), a light sponge cake soaked in three kinds of milk — evaporated milk, condensed milk and heavy cream — with a lot of air bubbles so it does not seem soggy despite all that milk. A favorite of Spanish-speaking countries, it seemed a fitting choice. Rodriguez said it's one of the few desserts at Spain that is not made on the premises, but comes from a bakery in New York. The warm apple tart (\$7.50) was rich, with lots of apple slices, a thin crust and ground nuts on top. On the side, a scoop of vanilla ice cream with sliced grapes, raspberry sauce and powdered sugar. I don't think an apple tart is a particularly Spanish dessert (though it's made in house at Spain). Nevertheless, as I walked outside into a drizzle, it was a sunny memory, just like sunny Spain.

Spain, 1073 Reservoir Ave., Cranston. (401) 946-8686. spainrestaurantri.com. Dressy. Wheelchair accessible. Child seats. Reservations for six or more. AE, MC, V, DIS. Parking lot. Dinner 4:30 to 9:30 p.m. Mon. and Wed-Thurs.; to 10:30 p.m. Fri.-Sat.; 1 to 9 p.m. Sun. Closed Tuesdays. Appetizers \$8.50 to \$10. Entrees \$16.50 to \$26.95. Wines are \$6.50 to \$9.00 by the glass; \$15 to \$200 for a bottle. BILL OF FARE

Dinner for two at Spain might look something like this:

Half pitcher of red Sangria...\$13.00

Clams Salsa Verde...\$9.00

Pork tenderloin...\$18.00

Basque filet of sole...\$20.00

Potato chips...\$4.00

Tres leches...\$7.50

Total food and drink...\$71.50

Tax...\$5.72

Tip...\$15.00

Total bill...\$92.22

mjanuson@projo.com