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Thursday, October 23, 2008

Molly Abraham: Restaurant Review

Tasca de Plata sets up shop in the unlikely of spots



It's almost a guarantee that you've never encountered a restaurant quite like Tasca de Plata, an authentic Spanish restaurant in a retro diner setting.

Proprietor Jose Montes, whose Alegrias Restaurant in the Holiday Inn in Farmington Hills had a fling from 2000 to 2003, had been looking for another location ever since it closed.

And he saw the possibilities in a defunct diner with a sleek silver exterior in an out-of-the-way location in Canton Township.

The typical red and chrome swivel stools and sturdy matching chairs remain, as does what was once the soda fountain, now the bar that offers a view of the kitchen as a backdrop.

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But all around the room, the fringed Spanish shawls and flamenco costumes draped over the windows and along the walls, the vintage photographs of flamenco dancers, the colorful tiles, all contribute to the metamorphosis.

The tiles, each marked with the name of a city in Spain, fill the gaps left behind when jukeboxes were removed from the booths.

Although the bones of the diner remain, Montes has done a remarkable job in transforming the place into an appropriate setting for tapas and paella, and for the flamenco performances that fill the place with music on weekends.

In the kitchen, chef Benito Espinosa works with ingredients imported from Spain, including manchego cheese, Serrano ham, chorizo, olives, piquillo peppers, white anchovies and, of course, rice, the fundamental ingredient for paella.

The list of 30 hot and cold tapas is the place to start. They range from fresh mushrooms sauteed with garlic, olive oil and wine, to marinated pork or lamb kebobs and empanadas filled with tuna, to chickpea and spinach stew.

Although tapas are traditionally small, they are somewhat more substantial here. Three or four of the prettily presented small plates are enough to be an entree for one, or a shared appetizer assortment for two or more.

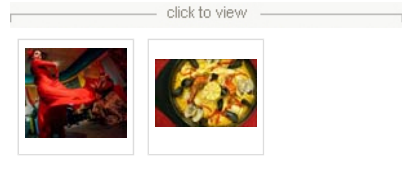
Paella, the classic dish of saffron-scented rice heaped with an assortment of seafood and chicken, is prepared to order, and it is brought steaming from the kitchen in the traditional flat pan in which it is cooked. It's quite a showstopper.

Still, there's more on the menu, including marinated and grilled lamb chops, shrimp in a fiery sauce, and a melange of grilled squid, scallops, shrimp, fish, clams and mussels in lemon butter sauce.

Montes is no stranger to the kitchen. He prepares some of the sauces, as well as the classic flan and rice pudding desserts, and perhaps his biggest achievement is the fragrant, fruit-dotted sangria. It's the best in



Flamenco dancer Maria Montes performs at Tasca de Plata in Canton Township. The restaurant features Spanish entertainment in a retro diner. (Madalyn Ruggiero / Special to The Detroit News)



More information

Tasca de Plata

6600 N. Canton Center Road,
 Canton Township
 (734) 459-7685

Rating: ■■■

Hours: 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Tues.-Thurs. and Sun., 11 a.m.-10 p.m. Fri.-Sat. Closed Monday.

Prices: Tapas \$4.95-\$8.95, paellas (serving two to six) \$26-\$32, entrees \$14.95-23.95, desserts \$4.50-\$5

Credit cards: AE, MC and Visa

Liquor: Full bar

Smoking: No

Parking: Attached lot

Wheelchair access: No barriers

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town.

About those photographs of flamenco performers: Many of them are of Montes' mother, the late Dame Maria del Carmen Montes, the longtime dancer and teacher whose beautiful face at the age of 15 is the subject of one of the most evocative portraits.

Her granddaughters, Lisa and Julie, carry on the art as the principal performers in the flamenco shows at 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays.

Tasca de Plata -- it means silver tavern -- is by no means a "fancy" restaurant. Tables are uncovered and napkins are paper. Service is friendly and down-to-earth.

Its fresh and vibrant personality makes it an appealing addition to the local restaurant scene.

You can reach Molly Abraham at (313) 222-1475 or abraham67@comcast.net.

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