

RESTAURANTS

PAMELA SILVESTRI / *Dining out*

For Iberian fare: España is tops

Atmospheric Annadale eatery sets stage for great expectations, and delivers

At this moment, España Restaurant in Annadale is tops for Spanish food on Staten Island. It arguably produces the best sangria. And with respect to its customer service and general attention to detail, España is a great value for dining in the borough.

Sammy Demiri owns España along with his wife **Zoe**. Executive chef **Carlo Barrenechea** directs the kitchen while **Ridvan Zeneli** manages the front-of-the-house. Pride and discipline for food service, so rarely seen these days, was evident with Espana's crew, even with their bus staff.

HANDSOME TOUCHES

A Spanish-tiled roof, tree planters rimmed with brick borders and cheery geraniums and petunias lent curb appeal to España. Inside, luxuries such as comfortable chairs and double-lined table linens added to the restaurant's sophistication. Handsome touches came from paintings framed with an egg-and-dart pattern and dark wood punctuated by colorful tiles. At evening meals, tapered candles flickered from tall holders on each table.

Appetizers on the menu such as Baked Clams, Tapas for two with a smattering of Italian-style food (oreganata shrimp, clams, etc.) and Crabmeat Stuffed Mushrooms were satisfying. Iberian and Mediterranean starters were quite good such as a plate of chorizo sausage discs — with or without a sinful layer of melted Manchego cheese — and Clams España with whole grain mustard sauce speckled with capers.

With Escargot Ajilla, about a dozen plump snails blanketed a fried

"paella cake," a rectangular rice form with a slightly crunchy crust dressed with roasted red pepper and basil oils. An excellent, yet simple special featured juicy mango segments carefully wrapped with Serrano ham, a cured Spanish meat similar to prosciutto. These sweet-salty bits circled a hunk of creamy goat cheese along with a necklace of halved cherry tomatoes caught in a single, neat ring of balsamic glaze.

Soups generally disappointed. Black bean wowed one evening with terrific layers of flavor yet fell flat on others. Gazpacho was also inconsistent and never chilled perfectly.

WIG OUT OVER THE PIG

España's Suckling Pig, undoubtedly the restaurant's best item, could prompt an out-of-town foodie to swim the Kill van Kull. Chef Barrenechea carved a neat square of succulent, slow-roasted meat with an awesomely crunchy skin. The item lay atop garlic-laced broccoli rabe with tomato concasse.

Zarzuela (shellfish and fish) spooned over black linguini made from squid ink, offered zesty, tomato sauce enhanced by a blast of fresh basil. Moist Veal Villeroy folded twin pieces of pan-fried veal around a blend of chorizo sausage and Manchego cheese. Servers ladled Paella Valenciana from an attractive crock. Bay leaf, saffron strands and seafood broth imparted a beautiful essence to the steaming combination of rice, shellfish, chicken, chorizo and vegetables.

Side dishes included addictive, thick-sliced potato cottage fries, rice cooked with vegetables and vibrantly colored veggies cut with care. One evening, the kitchen processed carrots, zucchini and yellow squash into



Sammy Demiri, owner of España in Annadale, makes his own wine for the restaurant's sangria—which he ages for about a month with dried fruit.

an attractive tumble of al dente noodle-like strands mingled with slivers of garlic.

Homemade flan and crème brûlée yielded creamy pleasure for the palate. Tableside flambé of bananas or strawberries produced an enjoyable dessert as well as a show. A waiter coaxed liqueur into ribbons of blue flames and made cinnamon burst into fireworks. In the end, the warmed fruit mixture was poured over scoops of vanilla ice cream.

BEST SANGRIA

España pays careful mind to its sangria which was outstanding. The red variety was best with its smooth blend of homemade wine spiked with strawberry liqueur and Grand Marnier. Servers apprised guests that Demiri ages the concoction for about a month with dried fruits. Value-conscious Staten Islanders were in mind with an ice-free sangria "pitcher." Cubes and fresh fruit garnishes were packed separately into massive balloon goblets.

The wine list, organized by place of origin, focused mostly on red wines. A respectable variety of Spanish and Portuguese varieties were featured, and the restaurant was heavy on California reds.

Lunch time offers a big bargain for the leisurely lunching crowd: A limited menu with three courses includes coffee and dessert for \$9.95.

Plate presentations on core menu items were inconsistent at times. And while the restaurant has a distinct, romantic atmosphere, some might consider it dark and noisy.

★ ★ ★ 1/2

España Restaurant

833 Annadale Rd.,
Annadale
(718) 966-4040

Hours

Monday–Thursday: Noon to 3:30 p.m., 4–10 p.m.;
Friday: Noon to 3:30 p.m., 4–11 p.m.
Saturday: Noon–11 p.m.
Sunday: Dinner only, 2–9 p.m.

Prices

Appetizers: \$5.95 – 11.95
Soup: \$5.95 – 8.95
Entrées: \$15.95 – 29.95
Dessert: \$5.00 – 7.00

Food

Spanish/Mediterranean

Liquor

Full bar with bottled beer, wine list, by the glass

Credit Cards

Mastercard, Discover, Visa and American Express

Seating

60 seats

Take Out

Yes

Reservations

Recommended on weekends

Wheelchair access

Yes

★★★★★ An exceptional find
★★★★★ Heads above the rest
★★★★ Valuable choice
★★★ Worth a visit
★ Has promise

Nonetheless, España offers Spanish food well above the norm in the borough. We hope to see it thrive and maintain its high standards.

Pamela Silvestri is the Advance restaurant editor. She can be reached at silvestri@sadvance.com

