

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Top marks for tapas

★★★ Cava

1560 Yonge St., 416-979-9918

BY GINA MALLET

In January, I was grousing about the paucity of good Spanish food in Toronto. Then I ate a great chile relleno at Chimichanga in Yorkville, followed by a good paella at Embruja Flamenco on the Danforth. Finally, I got an invitation I couldn't refuse — a paella and Ontario wine tasting at Cava, Chris McDonald's tapas bar in DeLisle Court, and I happily ate my words.

Cava's paella — duck, snails, savory cabbage, chorizo dotting fluffy bomba rice fragrant with garlic and saffron — was so good that it sent me back to the restaurant for another meal. Restaurant reviewing is a first impression business. But as I've learned, it's the second impression that really counts, when a place has time to fulfill, or not, its potential.

I wasn't very enthusiastic about Cava back in 2007. I wasn't sold on tapas as a meal, and I was irritated by having to wave for the waiter to translate the menu. What a difference a few years make. Shaking the kaleidoscope, the disparate components of Cava have come together as an impressive whole. It was a restaurant that was ahead of its time — now shared plates are ubiquitous and charcuterie's the rave. Don't forget that's a recent phenom. To put things in perspective, two years ago Manhattan superchef Daniel Boulud, while visiting Toronto, asked me: "Oh, do you have charcuterie here?" Do bears like honey?

As far as location goes, Cava exemplifies what may be the best advice ever — Got a lemon? Make lemonade. A mini mall isn't the most cheerful place and the space's low ceiling magnifies noise. But the cave is made warm and welcoming, a refuge from the city, and McDonald exudes welcome from a bar backed by an array of hams.

The food, too, is self-confident, a fanciful spin on Spain — including the

newly introduced paella, for two or more (\$23 per person), and tripe Basquaise (\$13), smoothly executed by Doug Penfold whose kitchen has gained a rep for consistency. True, I still need the waiter's help with anticuchos (skewers) and I almost ordered albondigas, which sounded so exotic until I learned it meant meatballs, but I accept the lingo as a charming idiosyncrasy. Anyway, do I have to know exactly what I'm going to eat? Spanish food, like Spain, is still an enigma, an adventure. The waiter's great — knowledge, advice about wine and cheese at his fingertips.

We start with a crisp Terra Alta white and a perfect snack: pinchos of gamay-poached foie gras with pear mustard (\$6.75), a thick slice of terrine on crisp baguette with a subtle pear flavour spiked with mustard. Then we gild the lily with a plate of Cava charcuterie (\$16.50), Genoese salami, chunky spicy chorizo, a purple duck bresaola (air-dried) and more foie gras, this time whipped up with chicken livers into a sublime mouthful.

The next plate to slide into view is a pale Japanese eggplant, chopped into

chunks, fried and plunked into a sweet honey and slightly sour tomatillo sauce, matched with strips of creamy queso (cheese) given a whiff of fish from sprinkled bonito flakes (\$8.75). An inspiring combination of flavours and textures.

The cauliflower and kabocha squash tagine, with medjool dates and Spanish saffron, makes spoonfuls of sweet mash, a good set-up for the surprise of the evening: amazingly juicy venison on a skewer (\$9.75) on a bed of crunchy red cabbage. I'd have liked a gamier taste to the venison, which has the blandness of un-hung game, but it is superbly tender.

Can't leave without a sweet from Xococava, McDonald's chocolate shop right next door. At the paella feast, we ate ice cream studded with candied Seville oranges. I'm glad to say dessert tapas (\$9) doesn't let us down at all — small deep-fried doughnuts with a melting cream heart and raspberry compote, a little candied ginger shell embracing ice cream made from milk chocolate, prunes and powerfully rich sherry, not to mention a brownie with wild blueberry sauce. Great return match.

■ Wheelchair accessible. Dinner for two, six dishes plus tax: \$76. Top yums for bucks.

■ For an incredible dish and how Biff's Bistro handled it, go to ginamallet.com.

National Post



JOHN GUNN

Toasting the paella! A little goes a long way at Cava, with tapas done right.

★★★★ Mustn't miss • ★★★ Must go • ★★ Good eats • ★ So so