Spanish Explorers Land in Chelsea

A tapas restaurant offers everything but coziness.

I can't remember what we were eating at Toro, the new tapas restaurant in western Chelsea, when one of the people at my table looked up in wonder.

It could have been when we were savaging like drunken sailors over the saca de marisco, a chowder by way of Catalonia with cool sea urchins and warm lobster bobbing in paprika-infused milk. Or when we had finished the last shrimp in the gamba al ajillo and were scraping up the last bits of a sauce for which a tank full of lobsters must have given their shells.

Or when we were crunching through croquetas of ham mixed with unmistakably earthy meat from a pig's head. Or when we were cutting into another croque- ta, this one filled with unusually flaky and moist salt cod sitting under two golden hoops of fried lemon peel. Or when we had ensnared a saritine tin of its raw mackerel marinated in a Thai-derived green curry, rich with coconut milk and sharpened with lime juice.

But I remember its smile and his question: "How can a place this big have food this good?"

Toro, opened in September by the chefs Ken Oringer and Jamie Bissonette and based on their enduringly popular Bston original, has factory-length ceilings, an industrial-chic design and 120 seats at long communal tables and smaller, unvarnished ones. It isn't all that large compared with Morimoto across 10th Avenue, or Buddakan on the east side of the same building, or the teeny menu halls of the meat-packing district a few blocks south. By local standards, it is a bungalow in a neighborhood of McMansions.

But by the crazy standards of the Barcelona tapas joints that inspired Mr. Oringer and Mr. Bissonette, Toro might as well be a Home Depot. It sells almost as many items. The beverage list alone is a major treatise on Spanish drinking.

There are spins on Spain's beloved gin and tonic, dressed up with lemon grass syrup or yellow Chartreuse, although my Veuve Clicquot was a bit flat and cloying, as if the tonic came from a bartender's home.

More inviting at the start of a meal are the foie and autumn-crop hard candies or the cavas, a few of which settle any doubts that Spain is making world-class sparkling wine. Moving beyond bubbles, Toro stocks the garnachas and tempranillass you'd expect, but it has discoveries in store, too, from underappreciated grapes like xarel-xo.

At Toro in Chelsea, the menu of some 90 dishes seems to fit the huge space. The beverage list is a treatise on Spanish drinking. Above left, grilled red shrimp. Above right, whitetail fish.

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The octopus and blowfish gave me a hunch that later meals confirmed: The seafood at Toro can be spectacular. Can be, but not always: A whole sole grilled on a planoza could have used a kick of acid or salt, while delicate threads of sea cucumber were kicked around by acrid bits of over-fried garlic.

But grilled red shrimp from Galicia were wildly delicious, from the tips of their tails to their heads packed with butter orange fat. A blood-red run of fresly pressed cranberry juice made an exciting vinaigrette for oysters, briny and raw. The clams, mussel and shrimp in paella Valenciana had plenty of character, and this time that irresistible layer of golden rice had fused to the pan. There were delicious oddities, too, like softly springy cold stomachs flavored with some intensely fusty stuff from inside the head of an octopus; it occupied its own wonderful niche between mild and extremely weird.

A third question: Would this food taste even better if the place weren't so big?

Tapas in Spain are intimate, communal bites. They're snacking, sometimes running into meals, that you eat during hours when you fall into a bar for an hour or two of purposeless hanging out. New Yorkers aren't so good at that. We order tapas in restaurants where the casual, offhand moment of unplanned deliciousness gives way to the wait list, the crowds, the reservation before 6 or after 8, the uppel, the table smallingly offered with the condition that "we'll need it back in an hour;" a host at Toro told me one night.

To their credit, Mr. Oringer and Mr. Bissonette do not cook as if they are in a huge restaurant. Toro's food isn't so stagy or gimmicky; it's honest and thoughtful, and it can feel a bit lost in this space. There are times when eating tapas here is like watching card tricks at Yankee Stadium.

And if I ever get to one of these dishes in a smaller room, I can just go to Boston. The original Toro is less than half the size, and for the eight years it's been in business, people haven't stopped complaining about how hard it is to get a table.