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RESTAURANTS | PETE WELLS

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 far western Chelsea, when one of the people at my table looked up in wonder.

It could have been when we were swaying like drunken sailors over the suquet de mariscos, a chowder by way of Catalonia with cool sea urchin and warm lobster bobbing in parsnip-infused milk. Or when we had finished the last shrimp in the gambas 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 croqueta, this one filled with unusually fluffy and moist salt cod sitting under two golden hoops of fried lemon peel. Or when we had emptied a sardine tin of its raw mackerel marinated in a Thai-derived green curry, rich with coconut milk and sharpened with lime juice.

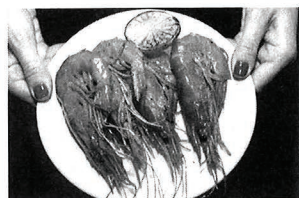
But I remember his smile and his question: "How can a place this big have food this good?"

Toro, opened in September by the chefs Ken Oringer and Jamie Bissonnette and based on their enduringly popular Boston original, has factory-height ceilings, an industrial-chic design and 120 seats at long communal tables and smaller, unshared 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 teeming mess 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 cozy standards of the Barcelona tapas joints that inspired Mr. Oringer and Mr. Bissonnette, 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 Vauvert Elixir was a bit flat and cloying, as if the tonic came from a bartender's hose. More inviting at the start of a meal are the feisty and autumn-crisp hard ciders 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 tempranillos you'd expect, but it has discoveries in store, too, from underappreciated grapes like xarel-lo

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At Toro in Chelsea, the menu of some 60 dishes seems to fit the huge space. The beverage list is a treatise on Spanish drinking. Above left, griddled red shrimp. Above right, blowfish tails.

and menca.

You may need a drink before ordering dinner, because the menu gives you something like 60 choices. Some are fully traditional Spanish classics like toast spread with raw tomatoes that shimmer with olive oil; others are non-Iberian interpretations like yellowfin tuna in white soy sauce with tissue-thin vinegared cucumbers.

This presents a corollary to my dinner companion's question: How can a menu this big have so many excellent dishes, and so few disappointments?

I've certainly tasted things at Toro I wouldn't be in a hurry to order again. One November night, I stayed cool to several dishes that could have used more warmth themselves. Chilly deviled eggs were somewhat generic despite being topped with a slip of preserved tuna belly. A \$36 plate of streaky jamón Ibérico should have been warmer, too, to help soften the flavorful fat. This was an oversight I didn't expect from a restaurant that goes to the

trouble of hand-slicing the tagged Spanish hams that it proudly hangs from the ceiling. And while I loved the way mint yogurt brightened the wintry sweetness of rutabagas, sunchoke and carrots in a vegetable paella, I had no luck finding the soccarat, the crunchy bottom layer of browned rice that our server had promised would be the best part. The pan had been hustled off the flame before the crust had set.

But there were fewer misfires each time I went, suggesting that the kitchen is settling down to business. I was happy to sink into the profoundly Spanish flavors of a vegetable stew called escalivada, with smoked eggplant in olive oil that carried the sweetness of simmered red peppers and onions. I immediately wanted more of the hot blowfish tails seared in a crust of North African spices. And I wondered how the simple combination of potatoes, octopus, harissa and charred onions could result in a contender for the best octopus dish in a city that's gone cephalopod-mad.



TORO ★★

85 10TH AVENUE (ENTRANCE AT 11TH AVENUE AND 15TH STREET), CHELSEA; 212-691-2360; TORO-NYC.COM.

Atmosphere A vast, dim, loftlike, industrial-chic dining room; partial views of the Hudson River; full views of the West Side Highway.

Service Impressively well versed on the vast menu; quick and genial, but sometimes prone to rushing and upselling.

Sound level At peak hours it sounds like the running of the bulls.

Recommended Tortilla Española; bocadillo de erizos; escalivada; caballa tartare; rabbit and snail paella; suquet de mariscos; croquetas de jamón y cabeza; croquetas de bacalao; panza de cerdo; gambas al ajillo; pulpo; pez globo; zanahorias.

Drinks and wine Spanish discoveries abound on the wide, varied list of ciders, sherries and wines.

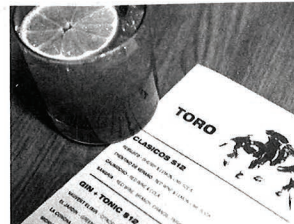
Prices Tapas, \$6 to \$50; paellas and large plates, \$30 to \$90.

Open Monday to Saturday for dinner.

Reservations Accepted.

Wheelchair access Separate entrance with a ramp at 85 10th Avenue leads to the back of the restaurant.

What the stars mean Ratings range from zero to four stars and reflect the reviewer's reaction primarily to food, with ambience, service and price taken into consideration.



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 griddled on a plancha 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 griddled red shrimp from Galicia were wildly delicious, from the tips of their tails to their heads packed with buttery orange fat. A blood-red run of fresh-pressed cranberry juice made an exciting vinaigrette for oysters, briny and raw. The clams, mussels 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 cod stomach flavored with some intensely funky 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, convivial bites. They're snacks, 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 eat 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 10, the upsell, the table smilingly offered with the condition that "we'll need it back in an hour," as a host at Toro told me one night.

To their credit, Mr. Oringer and Mr. Bissonnette do not cook as if they are in a huge restaurant. Toro's food isn't 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 want to try some 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.

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