

TAPAS

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of Spanish life. Consumed before lunch and again before dinner, tapas are rarely a meal replacement. But that's Spain. Americans have begun ordering a number of tapas for a satisfying, casual meal.

SANGRIA

When Sangria opened in Royal Oak in October 1999, it was ahead of the tapas popularity curve. Owner Luigi Cutraro did not rest on early accolades. He made some strategic updates, such as the creation of a 42-seat cafe room, that can be opened to the outdoors in warm weather, and the addition of Flamenco dancing, performed by Patricia Argentina from 8:30-9:30 p.m. on Thursdays.

Executive Chef Lee Vulaj, a Culinary Institute of America grad, who has headed Sangria's kitchen from the beginning, has become a local chef celebrity. Each Friday on WDIV-TV at 12:25 p.m., he demonstrates preparation of a Spanish dish that will be served at Sangria as a weekend special. Since the early days, his tapas have become more adventurous and creative.

Among cold tapas, there's the truly unique Hummus de Alubias Negras, black bean hummus served with assorted crackers that brings the hummus concept to new heights. Aguacate a la Reina is avocado stuffed with chicken, grapes, celery and onions.

As the evenings turn colder, hot tapas are very satisfying. Chef Lee's Langosta con Salchicha, lobster and sweet sausage with tomatoes, garlic and light cream, accompanied by a glass of one of the many Sangria list, will chase away any chills. If you're a ribs lover, Costillas con Pina Colada, pork ribs served with a Pina Colada barbecue sauce take ribs over the top. Gambas al Pil Pil, shrimp sautéed with olive oil, garlic, pancetta, banana peppers and tomatoes is authentically Spanish.

The Detroit Red Wings organization knows that for two years running Sangria has been named as one of the top



Rolitos de Pollo Rellenos, front, with, from left, Langosta Con Salchicha, Red Sangria, Pastel de Esplanacasy Queso, and a bottle of Marques de Caceres.

50 Spanish restaurants in the U.S.

On the night of the 2002 Stanley Cup victory, they held their celebration at Sangria. Were tapas the season-long secret ingredient to victory? Or was it Creme Catalana, the famous Spanish flan for dessert?

ALEGRIAS

"I come to Alegrias for the

authentic Spanish food," said advertising/marketing executive and Southfield resident Will Horwath. "The variety and quality of the tapas are excellent. They are nicely spiced and some have a heavy emphasis on garlic, which is uniquely Spanish. The Spanish waitstaff offers authenticity which I also like."

Alegrias does not offer the same high-toned ambience as Sangria, but as Horwath noted,

"In Spain, I've been in many tapas bars with a similar decor, decorated with Spanish tiles and sangria pitchers."

At 8:30 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, Alegrias comes alive during a 45-minute Flamenco dance performance by Lisa and Mari Montes, daughters of Alegrias' owner Jose Montes. The Montes sisters were taught authentic Flamenco dancing by their grandmother, the well-

TAPAS RESTAURANTS IN METRO-DETROIT

■ SANGRIA

401 Lafayette (corner of Fourth Street), Royal Oak (248) 543-1964.

Hours: Lunch —11:30a.m.-4p.m. Tuesday-Friday;

Dinner —5-10 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday, 5 p.m.-midnight Friday and Saturday, 4-10p.m. Sunday

■ ALEGRIAS

38123 W. 10 Mile Road (at Grand River in the Holiday Inn) Farmington Hills (248) 478-7780.

Hours: 5-10 p.m. Monday-Saturday and 6-9 p.m. Sunday

Cost at both: \$4-9.

known Maria del Carmen, who continues to choreograph the Flamenco and Spanish classical dancing of Maria del Carmen Grupo Espana. They have performed at special Detroit Symphony Orchestra events and the Michigan Opera Theater.

Executive Chef Roberto Caceres graduated from culinary school in Barcelona. Before coming to Alegrias, he cooked in Spanish restaurants in Miami, where he perfected not only his tapas recipes but Sopa de Frijoles Negros, Cuban-style black bean soup, served with green plantains on the side.

Popular among tapas at Alegrias are Gambas al Ajillo, shrimp sautéed in garlic sauce and Calamares Fritos, marinated deep fried squid, a decidedly different taste than Italian-style calamari fritti. Tortilla a la Espanola has no resemblance to a Mexican tortilla. It's the traditional Spanish omelet with eggs, potato and onion.

Queso de Cabra Gratinado, goat cheese au gratin with fresh grilled tomatoes, is a sizzling delight as are the Caracolis Provençal, escarpot in garlic butter. Saltadillo de Res, tender beef strips, mushrooms and caramelized onions in Rioja wine sauce, can be accompanied by any of the Spanish red wines on the list.

Currently, Spain is one of the hottest European travel destinations. If you can't make it to Madrid and the Calle de la Cava Baja, famed for its tapas bars,

beat to the Spanish pulse at either Sangria or Alegrias. Going for tapas with a group, as is the Spanish custom, is great fun.

Eleanor Heald is a Troy resident who writes about restaurants, food, wine and spirits for the Observer & Eccentric Newspapers. To leave her a voice mail message, dial (734) 953-2047 on a touch-tone phone, mailbox 18648.

CITY BITES

Jeepers

A kids eating out treat is as close as Jeepers, 4240 Baldwin Road, Auburn Hills (248) 972-1261.

Hours: 11a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Friday, 10 a.m.-10 p.m. Saturday and 11 a.m.-8 p.m. Sunday.

For kids 2- to 12-years-old, Jeepers has the rides and excitement of an outdoor amusement park and indoor convenience rain or shine.

From snacks such as popcorn, cotton candy and pretzels to hot dogs, salad, French fries and nachos that cost \$3-5, to a freshly-baked 12-piece pizza at \$12-14, these parent-pleasing prices offer a special weekend or family night out treat. It's also an ideal spot for kids' birthday parties with no at-home mess.

—Eleanor Heald

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