

CORAL GABLES NOW

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CORAL GABLES

DINING

Tastes of Spain

FROM FRESH CATCH AT LA DORADA, TO AROMATIC RED WINE AT COPAS Y TAPAS, TO CUSTARDY CREMA CATALINA AT POR FIN, OPTIONS ABOUND

BY VIRGINIA GIL
U/Miami News Service

Spanish tradition, highlighted in Coral Gables in its street names and historic landmarks, also is reflected in the City Beautiful's cuisine.

The city's Spanish restaurants, says Mark A. Trowbridge, president and CEO of the Coral Gables Chamber of Commerce, "carry forth the original vision of George E. Merrick as he dreamed up Coral Gables over 80 years ago. I think Merrick would be thrilled to know that places exist today where people can come together to do business, connect with friends and experience a terrific meal."

La Dorada of Coral Gables is an American adaptation of Restaurante La Dorada in Spain, which started more than 30 years ago in Madrid, said Domingo Gandara, one of the restaurant's three owners.

Like its Spanish counterpart, La Dorada is a seafood haven — from menu to decor. Authentic artifacts and nautical navigation devices taken from antique ships fill the large space at 177 Giralda Ave., while naval-inspired paintings line the interior walls.

Since opening 11 years ago, the restaurant has flown in all of its seafood daily from the Mediterranean Sea and various parts off the coast of Spain — from the white anchovies used in appetizers to the shrimp and shellfish served in stews to the signature Dorada a la sal, a whole royal sea bream baked and spiced with sea salt (\$35).

Internationally renowned for its cuisine, the restaurant gets a steady flow of diners, Gandara said. Customers often make reservations from abroad prior to arrival.



CHARLOTTE SOUTHERN/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

ON MIRACLE MILE: Owner Miguel Valbuena serves Elmer Garcia of Miami Beach at Copas y Tapas, one of three authentic Spanish restaurants in the Gables.

SPANISH DINING IN THE GABLES

● **La Dorada:** 177 Giralda Ave., 305-446-2002. Upscale seafood restaurant features fish and specialties from Spain. Hours: 11:30 a.m.-3:30 p.m. Monday-Saturday

for lunch and 6:30 p.m.-11:30 p.m. for dinner.

● **Copas y Tapas:** 98 Miracle Mile, 305-443-2408. Traditional Spanish tapas and wines. Hours: Noon to 10 p.m. Monday-Thursday; noon to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

● **Por Fin:** 2500 Ponce De Leon Blvd., 305-441-0107. Upscale Spanish cuisine. Hours: 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Monday-Wednesday and Sunday; 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m. Thursday; 11:30 a.m.-midnight Friday-Saturday.

"We are proud to have clients look for hotels nearby the restaurant just so they may dine here everyday of their stay in Coral Gables," said Gandara, a native of Pontevedra, Spain.

At Copas y Tapas, owner Miguel Valbuena, a native of the Basque country, creates what he considers the ultimate tapas experience at the restaurant, which he opened four years ago at 98 Miracle Mile. In Spain, a tapa is a small portion of food or often simply an appetizer.

Decorated in the tradition

of Spanish "vinotecas," a library of wines, so to speak, Copas y Tapas has floor-to-ceiling shelves stocked with wines, rustic tables and dark wooden floors to match. The small, window-lit dining area also features a flat-screen TV that airs programming from Spain.

"I like Copas y Tapas because it gives the illusion of being in Spain," said Alejandro Iglesias, 28, of Little Havana, crediting the Tortilla Española (\$4.95) for his frequent visits. "The simple interior is just what I remember

from restaurants while vacationing in Spain, and the food is absolutely delicious."

Prices range from \$3.95 for Aceitunas Aliniadas, black olives in paprika and veggie mix, to \$18.95 for Tabla de Lomo Enbuchado, cured pork loin platter. Wines are all from Spain, including a bottle of white Ilo Albariño for \$25 and a red Rioja Muga for \$29.

Valbuena says he took the time to fashion the menu and hasn't changed it since opening in 2004.

"I have people who haven't been here in two years and



come back for the same thing they had then," he said. "I want them to be able to enjoy just what they came back for."

The Gables' newest Spanish restaurant is **Por Fin**, 2500 Ponce de Leon Blvd., where dining area has been a buzz since opening in February. In English, "por fin" means at long last, a sentiment shared by some Gables residents who have witnessed the slow rebirth of downtown restaurants.

"I've been a fan of Spanish cuisine for years, so I was thrilled when Por Fin was finally open for business," said Erin Carter, 23, of South Miami. The restaurant sees a mix of locals and out-of-towners, and hosts a variety of corporate events in the private upstairs dining area.

With crisp linen tablecloths and dark wood trimmings, Por Fin is the prize for all those diners who patiently waited, says owner Carlos Centurion, a Cuban American who grew up in Spain. Por Fin, he said, adds a gourmet twist on traditional Spanish cuisine.

"We want to give our clients something that tastes very good, like nothing they've ever had," said general manager Taka Nishimura.

For example, the Eggs entree at Por Fin (\$10 or \$20, depending on portion size) pairs fried eggs with potato crème and is served with potato crisps, serrano ham and truffle oil.

The dish is a favorite of Jeannett Slesnick. She and her husband, Coral Gables Mayor Don Slesnick, frequent the restaurant.

"Por Fin is wonderful, very elegant, and a great ambience," the mayor said.