

Eating Out

RESTAURANT REVIEW

A new jewel on University

Presenting contemporary Latin cuisine, Joya lives up to its name, 'gem'

by Dale F. Bentson

What better economic and social commentary than turning a bank into a restaurant? Yesterday's tender has segued into a more reliable currency of today, despite restaurants being amongst the riskiest of ventures.

When US Bank abandoned its downtown Palo Alto branch, property owner Alex Giovannotto seized the opportunity to open a contemporary Latin-style (Central, South American and Iberian) restaurant. His family already owned La Strada Italian restaurant next door.

He installed Fabrice Roux as executive chef. Roux, who hails from Laon, in France's Champagne district, absorbed rustic cooking from his grandmother and spent many of his youthful summers vacationing in Spain.

After completing culinary school, Roux cooked at top-notch properties throughout France. Eight years ago, he and wife Murielle migrated to America. Before being appointed executive chef at Joya, he cooked in San Francisco and Las Vegas. Murielle is currently the pastry chef at the Four Seasons Hotel at University Circle in East Palo Alto.

Joya opened its doors mid-August. The interior is chic, yet classic, with lofty wood panels, exposed steel, and a glassed-in wine cellar near the front entrance. The lighting is subdued but huge articulated windows swing open on warmer days, flooding the inside with a rich luster. A row of tables lines the exterior for al fresco dining.

Inside, the space is broken into two dining rooms and a small private banquet room in what used to be the bank vault. There is a segregated lounge as well that serves a reduced menu into the wee hours. The plan is for live Latin music and DJ's on weekends. "It's the best corner in Palo Alto," Roux said.

The lunch and dinner menus vary only slightly in composition, not at

all in price. Several sandwiches are offered only at lunch, a few more entrees at dinner. The nearly dozen and a half tapas dominate both the menus.

The tapas sampler (\$22) one evening consisted of ceviche with shrimp and watermelon; marinated olives; mussels with white wine, sweet onion and lime; two versions of Spanish sausage; two versions of Spanish ham; a mushroom empanada; and a piquillo pepper stuffed with toasted almonds, scallions, valderon (Spanish blue) and queso fresco cheeses. Without dissecting every morsel on the plate, I can say it was an appetizing offering.

The three varieties of seared Spanish sausages (\$9) were irresistible. The cantimpalitos were mini chorizo links, a mini but mighty flavorful sausage. Buttifarrita, the most popular sausage around Barcelona, is found in most every tapas bar along the Rambles. Morcilla, or blood sausage, is made from pig's blood, rice, onions and spices. Light in color, Joya's version was on the mild side. In Spain, morcilla can be black, bulky and pungent, definitely an acquired taste. Together, the medley of sausages was robust and rustic, topped off with a dollop of garlic aioli. I considered ordering another round of sausages and canceling the rest of my order altogether, but duty prevailed.

The posole soup (\$7.50) with pork, onion, cilantro, lime, cabbage, peppers, cloves, cumin, anise and cinnamon was seriously wonderful. Thick and hearty, almost a meal in itself, posole is native to Jalisco, Mexico. Roux's version added a contemporary twist, substituting cabbage for corn.

The dense Cuban sandwich (\$12) was made with slow-braised, marinated pork, caramelized red onion, Black Forest ham and Dijon mustard. The thick, filling sandwich was served with fabulous sweet potato fries.

Braised short rib tacos (\$9.50),



Joya's jerk-marinated chicken is served with a Nicaraguan vegetable medley and a glass of pineapple sangria.

with jicama salsa and horseradish cream, on thick corn tortillas, was almost too pretty to eat. The artistic rendition was plated on a dark oblong plate with the three tortillas as tantalizingly lined up as an Old Master's still life. The meat was succulent, and the jicama and horseradish cream added a cool, spicy infusion atop the supple tortillas.

Baked King salmon (\$17) was a thick, fleshy colored, fresh-tasting fillet. The fish was served with roasted butternut squash and Brussels sprouts, and topped with a mellowed-out Scotch bonnet chili-

cream sauce. Scotch bonnets are one of the hottest peppers on the planet. No fear here though; the cream tamed the heat leaving only a slight peppery taste. A timbale of annatto rice accompanied. All sat handsomely atop a banana leaf.

The jerk chicken (\$17) was perfumed and suggestive. Marinated in a dozen spices including tequila, the half chicken was charred on the outside, juicy and sweet inside, and expertly cooked. Served with a medley of chopped fruits and vegetables including potatoes, Mexican squash, raisins, pineapple and olives, it was the most Caribbean

of dishes.

Desserts were equally delightful. Strawberries Madrilene (\$7) was a recipe from Roux's grandmother. The custard was deceptively light, yet thick as tapioca and certainly as flavorful. Topped with fresh-chopped strawberries and served with a sweet tortilla tuile, it was easily my favorite dessert.

The mini churros (\$8) were fun to eat. Cloud-light, hot from the fryer, dipped in Spanish hot chocolate, they made for a most filling dessert. Chocolate cake (\$9) with house-made ice cream was lush and gooey. It's a recipe Roux brought from France.

Roux also assembled the interesting wine list. Selections are from Spain, South America and the West Coast, many available by the glass. One lovely example was the Spanish Marqués de Riscal, Reserva, 2003 (\$48). This Tempranillo-based wine was soft and well rounded, ruby-red color, and went well with both meat and fish.

Joya abounds in character. Not only aesthetically pleasing, the food is bold and beautiful as well. My fondest hope is that the culinary standards are upheld when the restaurant devotes more energy towards being a nightclub in the near future. The three visits I made to the restaurant were not enough. I want to go back and try everything on the menu and then, perhaps, start all over again. ■

Joya
339 University Ave., Palo Alto
650-853-9800
Hours: Sun.-Wed. 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m.; Thurs.-Sat. 11:30 a.m.-midnight
Website: www.joyarestaurant.com

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| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reservations | <input type="checkbox"/> Catering |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Credit cards | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Outdoor seating |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Lot Parking | Noise level: Moderate |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Full Bar | Bathroom Cleanliness: Excellent |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Takeout | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Highchairs | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Wheelchair access | |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Banquet | |

NOW SERVING

Following are condensed versions, in alphabetical order, of longer restaurant reviews published in the Weekly over the past several years. This week's reviews begin where the list ended one week ago.

Mike's Cafe Etc., 2680 Middlefield Road, Palo Alto (650) 473-6453

Owner Mike Wallau has been in the restaurant business for a quarter century and has decided simply to serve his favorite dishes at his popular Midtown eatery. Many of the

dishes are Italian. Mon.-Fri. 11 a.m.-9 p.m.; Sat.-Sun. 8 a.m.-9 p.m. (Reviewed July 3, 1998)

Mike's Cafe Menlo Park, 150 Middlefield Road, Menlo Park (650) 321-7377

Mike Wallau follows up his popular Palo Alto cafe with this handsome neighborhood restaurant serving mostly Italian-American dishes. Brunch on the patio is good for kids or dates, and those with big appetites will enjoy the omelets and sides. Mon.-Fri. Breakfast 7-11 a.m.; Lunch 11 a.m.-4 p.m.;

Dinner 4-9 p.m.; Sat.-Sun. Brunch 8 a.m.-4 p.m.; Dinner 4-9 p.m. (Reviewed July 2, 2004)

Ming's, 1700 Embarcadero Road, Palo Alto (650) 856-7700

This highly regarded giant of a restaurant is known for its dim sum and chicken salad. Southern Chinese cuisine, power-lunching businesspeople. Mon.-Sat. 11 a.m.-9:30 p.m. Sun. 10:30 a.m.-9:30 p.m.

Mint Leaf, 452 University Ave., Palo Alto

(650) 321-7888

Mint Leaf Asian Noodle House offers a Thai and Vietnamese menu with more than 60 choices. Particularly good are the chicken pot stickers, beef massaman curry, Thai spicy prawns and shaking beef. Open, airy, bistro-styled restaurant. Beer and wine. Tue-Sun 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.; 5-9:30 p.m. (Reviewed June 6, 2008)

Miyake, 140 University Ave., Palo Alto (650) 323-9449

Hip, raucous, crowded, generous sushi in

dizzying array of options. Not the place for a quiet meal. Sit at the sushi bar and watch the plates of raw fish creations float by. Mon.-Thu & Sun 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m.; Fri-Sat 11:30 a.m.-11 p.m. (Reviewed Jan. 2, 2004)

Mountain Mike's Pizza, 2000 W. El Camino Real, Mountain View (650) 694-7800

This mini-chain offers specialty pizzas, such as "The Everest" and "Mt. Veggi-more," and sandwiches, such as the "Cliff Hanger." Daily 1 a.m.-11 p.m.