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Make a Night of It

Menlo Park's Iberia is a great place to settle in for dining, Spanish style

By Cheryl Sternman Rule

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MUCH HAS changed since 1984, the year Iberia Restaurant first opened its doors in Portola Valley. Back then, the Police filled music venues, Republicans ruled the White House, and the *Transformers* animated film was in theaters. See how far we've come in 23 years? *Transformers* is now a live-action movie.

In 2000, the upscale Spanish eatery and tapas bar relocated to Menlo Park, where its owner, Jose Luis Relinque, formerly operated the English-themed Garden Grill. Relinque was born in Seville, and the story of his journey to Northern California at the age of 20 is a juicy one. After lying to his parents for years about why he left a prestigious Spanish university to come to the States (academic high-jinx were involved), Relinque worked his way up the chain of command at several restaurants. With Iberia, he focuses squarely on the cuisine of his homeland, and his menu is a love letter to Spain's diverse culinary regions.

Swap your stress for sangria as soon as you enter the cheerful blue-and-yellow dining room. After a single glass of this kick-ass elixir, a mix of Burgundy, triple sec, brandy, vodka and (surprise!) orange soda, you'll barely notice the vibrations from the passing Caltrain right outside the door. After a second glass, you may not notice much of anything. You're on Spanish turf now, so take a load off and settle in.

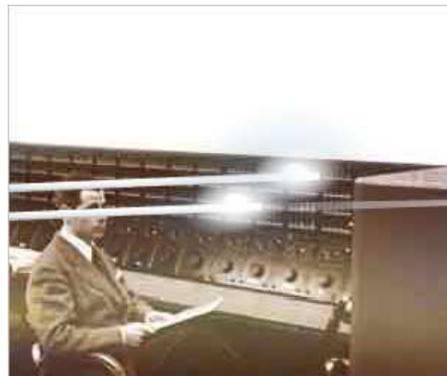
Tapas, of course, are small dishes designed to accompany libations, and in Spain patrons often nibble one or two at a bar and then move on to the next, making the rounds in a sophisticated version of a collegiate pub crawl. With few tapas places in Menlo Park, however, count on making a night of your visit to Iberia. Why? Because the food is very good and the service is very, very slow. Keep in mind that the Spanish invented the siesta, so relaxing is integral to the culture. This is a place to come, eat and, above all, linger. If you don't like your dining companions, don't bring them here.

The cheap tapas menu is available at the bar anytime or in the dining room at lunch, but these nibbles alone are worth the trip. Several deserve a special shout-out, including the *datiles endiablados* (\$2.85), plump dates stuffed with chorizo and wrapped in bacon. Each little morsel delivers a mouthful of sweet, spicy and salty goodness. Moist *pinchitos morunos* (\$2.95), grilled, marinated pork skewers, and *albondigas de cangrejo* (\$4.85), fried crab dumplings, are also excellent—juicy, beautifully seasoned tidbits that disappear far too quickly. Grilled shell-on prawns (\$3.95), spicy fried potatoes with aioli (\$2.85), mushrooms with garlic-parsley oil (\$2.65), Spanish potato omelet (\$2.55)—all are carefully prepared, full of flavor and easy on the wallet. (Order several at once to avoid waiting eons between each plateful.)



Photograph by Felipe Buitrago

The works: Paella tipica comes fully loaded at Iberia.



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As for dinner, must-try starters include the *canelon a la catalana* (\$10.75), Spanish cannelloni stuffed with chicken, veal and pork, broiled until bubbly and served with creamy béchamel sauce. Those feeling adventurous might consider the *caracoles en hojaldre* (\$11), an intense medley of snails, almonds and chorizo beneath a glorious puff pastry toque. You have to like snails to be a fan of this strongly flavored, highly textured dish. The chewy, ash-gray creatures aren't for the squeamish. *Gazpacho malagueño* (\$6) is a safer choice—cool, creamy almond-garlic soup punctuated with sweet red grapes is ideal for warm weather.

The *paella típica* (\$26.50 per person for a minimum two-person order) arrives piping hot, the golden rice blanketed with generous amounts of calamari, chicken, shrimp, peas, red peppers, clams and scallops. Realizing that this single item adds \$53 to the tab is a bit jarring, but Iberia doesn't skimp on the good stuff. (What's really sobering is the 19 percent service charge tacked onto every check.)

Desserts, like the rest of the dishes, are well-executed. My favorite was the *brazo de gitano* (\$7), a decadent pistachio-chocolate sponge cake topped with ganache and served with crème anglaise. It's the perfect sweet finish to a long, lingering meal.

Iberia offers lovely patio seating, but unpredictable staffing levels mean this space isn't always open. Call ahead if you have your heart set on al fresco meal. And for those who just can't get enough of Iberia, Relinque operates a take-out joint right next door. At Rock of Gibraltar, you'll find sandwiches, gigantic paella pans, olive oils and enough chorizo to open your own tapas bar.

Iberia Restaurant

Address: 1026 Alma St., Menlo Park.

Phone: 650.325.8981.

Hours: Lunch Mon–Sat noon–2pm and dinner nightly 5:30–10pm.

Cuisine: Spanish.

Price Range: Tapas \$1.75–\$5; entrees \$12–\$26.50.

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