



España RESTAURANT & TAPAS

BY KAREN MILLER • PHOTO BY WILLIAM RASER

España Restaurant and Tapas is a foodie's gem, a restaurant that is brimming with authentic traditional flavors of Spain and Portugal. Located in historic downtown Fernandina Beach, the restaurant boasts a cozy atmosphere, a friendly and knowledgeable staff, and a lovely kitchen garden. Owners Roberto and Marina Pestana have over 20 years of restaurant experience in both the culinary arts and management. The couple takes great pride in their recipes, which are inspired by their experiences traveling across Spain Portugal and come to life at the España table. The restaurant's menu highlights include varied hot and cold tapas, evening specials, seafood, steaks, and homemade desserts.

Recently, I met my friend Bruce at España for dinner. He had never been there before, as he lives near Jacksonville, and he was eager to try some of España's specialties. Our server, Mandy, brought us some of Roberto's homemade bread, one of my favorite things at the restaurant. I had my heart set on the mussels riojana that evening, so that was the appetizer we decided to try. The mussels are incredibly tender and almost buttery in flavor, and the sauce features traditional Spanish ingredients, lots of garlic, tomatoes, white wine, parsley, and cilantro. This is a really nice appetizer to share as it is bountiful, but light, and I love to soak up all the juices with the homemade bread. We sipped a glass of Alberino, a Spanish white wine made from grapes grown in northwest Spain. The wine is light, with high acidity and flavors of peach and apricot, and it was just wonderful with the flavorful mussels.

Roberto suggested two specials for us, a seafood dish that featured grouper, shrimp, and scallops, and also baby lamb

chops. The seafood dish was spectacular—and how could it not be, with all my favorite fishes on one plate? A lovely tropical sauce made the dish creamy and succulent. The lamb chops were perfectly cooked and served with a savory mushroom sauce. I like my lamb on the rare side, and it was perfectly cooked. Both dishes were served with delicious garlicky mashed potatoes and also a fabulous vegetable side dish that was a combination of red cabbage, zucchini, onions, and garlic. What a nice surprise and change from the “usual” vegetable medleys that accompany entrees! We also tried a lovely red wine to go with the lamb: El Coto de Rioja, a smooth and medium-bodied red wine bursting with the flavor of berries. It was the perfectly paired with the lamb.

I always have room for dessert, and my favorite at España is their Tres Leches Cake. I thought it best to bust free of my routine, however, so Mandy brought us Tiramisu and Caramel Flan. How wonderful it was to have two desserts to try! I love that España makes their own desserts from scratch. That really makes all the difference, along with the fact that España's desserts are all traditional recipes, created the proper way. The flan was melt-in-your-mouth, and the tiramisu rich with flavors of coffee and cocoa. Served with a cup of espresso, España's tiramisu is a lighter dessert than you would think.

Some of España's other must-have offerings are their Sangria, their fabulous paella, and their wonderfully varied hot and cold tapas. Be sure to make a reservation, especially on weekends and holidays, as España is a very popular place to dine. To check out their menu, visit their web site at www.espanadowntown.com.