

Frita Milho
from España



A TASTE OF SPAIN

Tapas restaurant takes root in Fernandina Beach

BY ALISON TRINIDAD • PHOTOS BY BRADLEY STOOKEY

a lot has changed in downtown Fernandina Beach in the last six years; a lot has stayed the same. The food at **España**, however, remains consistently fresh and flavorful. With owner and chef Roberto Pestana heading the kitchen, the dinner-only restaurant serves a mix of the Spanish and Portuguese dishes he grew up eating. The menu offers hot and cold tapas (small dishes meant for sharing), salads, full entrées and a selection of paellas. And the wine list features a variety of Mediterranean, South American and domestic varietals.

Since opening España in 2004, Pestana and his wife Marina have added outdoor seating and even planted a vegetable garden in the back. The main dining room, which faces Fourth Street, is painted a warm yellow with a potpourri of artwork adorning the walls (among them a framed photo of Black Eyed Peas singer Fergie and hubby Josh Duhamel taken with restaurant staff in 2005).

The smell of garlic and other spices is strong upon entering. Wait to be seated by the hostess (reservations are recommended, especially on weekends) or cozy up to the bar. Tables are covered in white linen, but dress is resort casual.

On a recent Saturday evening, both dining rooms were busy, with only a few empty tables. With a 7 PM reservation, my friend and I were

promptly seated in the sunroom. We ordered a half-pitcher of red sangria and a few tapas to start. The entremes (Spanish antipasto) comes with Serrano ham, Manchego cheese, salami and marinated mixed olives. The ham and cheese are not as sharp or salty as I've had in Spain, which is not a bad thing. We also had the tortilla española (crustless potato quiche) and caracoles (Andalusian escargot). España's version of the tortilla española includes layers of thinly sliced potatoes, vegetables and cheese. Of the three appetizers we ordered, the escargot was the best—the snails plump and tender, flambéed with brandy in a creamy marinara sauce. For our entrée, we decided to split a single order of the seafood paella, which comes with clams, shrimp, scallops, mussels, calamari and lobster (on the evening we dined, the lobster was substituted with prawns and fish). The flavors were bold and the presentation authentic (be prepared if you don't like to see heads on shrimp). Paella is a signature Spanish rice dish and made with various combinations of vegetables, meat, chicken or seafood. The dish is a chef specialty (he uses a recipe that's taken 20 years to perfect) and we had no complaints.

Though it's been centuries since the Spanish flag has flown over Amelia Island, a taste of the country can easily be had at España. *

España

22 S. Fourth St., Fernandina Beach; (904) 261-7700, espanadowntown.com

Why go: To enjoy owner Roberto Pestana's paellas, or perhaps converse with him in Brazilian Portuguese.

Easy Does It: There are a handful of free parking spots right out front, the menu is straightforward Spanish cuisine and you can pop in wearing a sweatshirt, no questions asked.

Who you'll see: Island locals and tourists staying in the nearby bed and breakfasts. It's family-friendly but the bulk of the crowd will be of legal drinking age.

Drink Up: White or red sangria by the glass (\$7), half-pitcher (\$15) or full (\$25)—it's all good. Or pair a bottle of vino (\$24-\$125) with a few tapas for a night out with friends.

Privacy Please: The enclosed sunroom can be reserved for private parties. The Pestanas also cater off-site. Ask about their "Paella Party," which includes a cooking demonstration.

Hours: Mon.-Sun. 5-10 PM

Prices: Tapas \$3.50-\$12, entrées \$19-\$29, paellas \$20-\$40

▼ Gambas al Ajillo

