



La Boca Barrio: The Mediterranean menu brims with talent and tapas at this Cleveland restaurant

Published: Friday, September 02, 2011, 2:00 PM Updated: Wednesday, September 07, 2011, 10:14 AM

Special to The Plain Dealer

By

Food surveys now call us a nation of snackers -- not a bad thing, depending on what we're nibbling. In Spain, snacking is a fine art, with tapas or "small plates" that fit deliciously into the slower-paced culture.

So we downshifted and pulled up some chairs on the patio at La Boca Barrio, a new (and old) tapas place a few doors down from Minh Anh and Latitude 41 North on Cleveland's West Side.

La Boca was previously short-lived as Roseangel, a fancy taco joint (and before that, an Argentine-styled La Boca, and before that, Snickers, and before that, Krazy Mac's, and before that . . .).

Then Roseangel co-owner (and founder of the original La Boca) Rosita Kutkut went solo again and back to her more traditional Hispanic roots.

I'd like to say summer weather borrowed from the Iberian Peninsula played no part of this review, but it sure does make things easy. We arrived at the patio on a warm, dry early evening and seated ourselves in the slanting rays of the sun under handsome, billowing greenery. It was a night-shifting companion's rare weeknight off, and a chance to go to town.

"How are my beautiful ladies doing?" said our server. Without her warmth and Spanish accent, it might have



Thomas Ondrey, The Plain Dealer

Check out the rich flavors at La Boca's Margarita pizza. Get it for much less at happy hour.

WE WANT YOUR REVIEW

Have you been to La Boca Barrio in Cleveland? Email us your review of the food, service and atmosphere. Include your full name and where you live. We'll publish a sampling on **Cleveland.com** and in The Plain Dealer. Email **food@plaind.com** to sound off.

sounded hokey and overworked. But her voice had an intuitive ring to it, like when hospitality is really kindness in a professional disguise. It was a shock to hear it, frankly, with the businesslike manner of most dining these days.

We settled in to the menu and found intuitive talent there as well. Spain's traditional hallmarks are the comforts of the Mediterranean palate and the richness of essential flavors, rather than sparkly add-ons. Garlic is there, but more often as a layered cloud than a strike of lightning.

The list of tapas was staggering, even the somewhat abbreviated list offered during the smartly priced happy hour. The high points started with "Little Oranges," freshly fried rice balls with peas served on roasted eggplant sauce (\$5.50). They were as golden outside and as they were luxuriously creamy inside. Bet you can't eat just two.

A Margarita flatbread (\$15) outdid most things called pizza. I looked at the thin little thing and worried. But one bite and the tomato-based combo showed a piquant lift from cheese, capers and whatever magic dust the kitchen scatters. It's not about the dough, but it's one of the best.

Garlic shrimp with sweet pepper relish (\$7.50) slapped tired shrimp cocktail out of the box. The kitchen knows how to maintain a fresh texture in shrimp, and with a steeping in garlic and a flashy sweet-hot-sour relish, it was almost candy.

Bacalao (salt cod) croquettes with garlic aioli (\$6.50) were, like the Little Oranges, expertly fried. But I would have liked more rustic textures in the filling, and more fish flavor. Pepper-and-basil-dressed pan-seared artichokes (\$5) could have used a sign of caramelization. Similarly, the flavor of the Manchego cheese with sherry and fresh thyme (\$4.75) had a paleness to it.

Along with the trio of tapenades (\$6.50), which were refreshing and varied -- pickled vegetable, olive, white bean with thyme -- but individually short on complex flavor.

Sandwiches and salads are also on the menu. While our well-endowed mixed greens (\$4.50) had housemade dressing, deep green lettuce and garden-fresh tomatoes, it was served in a little bowl that made it hard to maneuver anything.

A Saturday visit turned up a couple of surprises. Salsa dancing takes place later in the evening, and a full entree is sometimes offered. We snatched up the chance to try the paella (\$17), a saffron-seasoned rice dish bejeweled with seafood, sausage and chicken. All pieces and parts checked in, but we had a hard time detecting the warm, glowing look and flavor of the golden saffron. As a savory, dense, earthy looking pilaf, though, it had everything else going for it, including a layer of shrimp and fresh mussels.

The house makes a special effort to search out good wines from Portugal, Spain and Argentina, and dessert

is no small dish. A silky ginger creme brulee (\$8) topped the choices.

La Boca Barrio is named after a city in Brazil known for its nightlife. We didn't stay for the salsa but were glad that people do. This is a place that reaches for a vibrancy that it sometimes grabs and sometimes does not. But the comfort level of everything on our visits was gracious, warm and dependable.

TASTE BITES

La Boca Barrio

Where: 5800 Detroit Ave., Cleveland.

Contact: 216-961-5800; website under construction.

Hours: 5-11 p.m., Tuesday through Saturday. Bar open until 1 p.m. through Friday, and until 2:30 a.m. Saturday for salsa dancing.

Prices: Tapas, \$4.75-\$9.50; flat breads, \$14-\$15; sandwiches, \$10-\$13; desserts, \$8.

Reservations: Taken.

Credit cards: Most major cards accepted.

Cuisine: Spanish tapas.

Kid-friendliness: No kids menu but flatbread pizzas and sandwiches. High chairs and booster seats.

Bar service: Full.

Accessibility: Through back patio or, with an advance call, on ramp at front door. Restroom wheelchair accessible.

Grade: * *

Ratings: One star means fair; 2 stars, good; 3 stars, very good; 4 stars, exceptional. Zero stars: not recommended.) Plain Dealer reviewers make at least two anonymous visits to each restaurant and do not accept complimentary meals. Read past reviews at cleveland.com/dining.

© 2011 cleveland.com. All rights reserved.