

Picador

Creative Spanish cuisine is served up at Picador, a restaurant as cozy as the food is bold in flavor

By Mary Kate Hogan



Pan-roasted pork chop
PHOTOGRAPHS: JANE BEILES

At this Spanish-style restaurant in New Canaan, the thirty-four-seat dining room may be petite in scale but it's brimming with comfort and warmth. Creative Mediterranean cuisine, bold in flavor, is showcased through a range of tapas and larger plates. In Spanish, picador refers to a type of bullfighter, yet it's also related to the word pique, which seems fitting since so many dishes here pique your interest—from seared scallops over cauliflower purée with truffle oil to a smoked, bone-in pork chop with Spanish paprika and Valdeon cheese.

In recent months, a new menu was launched by Picador's new co-owners Leo Gaspar and Ray Rivera, and executive chef, Corey Falcone. The team brings fresh additions to the lineup of tapas, ensaladas, entrées and carnes, plus stellar desserts from their personal recipes. This trio of restaurant pros are well known in our area. Gaspar and Rivera both live in New Canaan with their families and Falcone is the former chef-owner of Bella Luna, a popular Springdale Italian. Gaspar and his wife, Jennifer—also owners of Club Sandwich—liked this local eatery so much they decided to buy it and partner with Ray Rivera, who came out of retirement after many years at the Greenwich Hyatt.

When you're seated at one of the copper-top tables, nestled into the leather banquette that hugs half the perimeter of the room, you feel as if you're in the home of a personal friend. Rivera glides from table to table, chatting with guests and suggesting wines. We were pleased with the Capitoso Rioja he recommended, a new house red. Walls are covered with copper- and wood-framed mirrors, and casual décor includes throw pillows—there was one placed between my seat and the window to block any draft. We started with tapas, of course, substantial enough that you could make a meal just by ordering a selection for the table. Wedges of Manchego are artfully arranged on a wood cutting board, each slice topped with Marcona almonds and drizzled with truffle honey for a lush, earthy combination. Tiger shrimp flambé with ajillo peppers and cubes of Serrano ham tastes even more intriguing in a sauce enlivened with orange oil and turmeric. We also liked the rich and hearty beef tips with hot cherry peppers, arugula and melted Mahon cheese.

Chef Falcone, working with sous-chef Frank Barrese, sends out dishes on a whim; we were treated to a plate of ravioli in a demi-glaze with truffle oil. For our mains, the branzino lived up to its reputation: Shaved fennel blankets the plate, topping the tender fish served in a lemony sauce with grape tomatoes, and spinach. Those who love a good steak will appreciate the filet mignon, a perfect cut of meat covered in peppercorn sauce.

Dessert? The flan is Ray's mother's recipe; it's light, silky and not overly sweet. A decadent Bananas Foster lets caramelized bananas and vanilla ice cream swim in a sea of cinnamon, while Pan Perdido blends bread pudding with apples and peaches. Our recommendation: Say Si to these splurge-worthy offerings.

