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Editor's Pick

Eclectic Avenue

East Boulevard spawns a Catalan food outlet

By [Tricia Childress](#)

Published 10.04.06

When was the last time you came home and turned to your friend/spouse and said, "You know, I'm in the mood for some Catalan food. How about you?"

Not recently? Although Spanish cuisine is one of nation's most popular, the tiny and new nation of Catalonia has yet to come to the front burner.

Catalonia, whose capital city is Barcelona, is located in the upper right hand corner of the Iberian peninsula, bordered by the Pyrenées and the Mediterranean. On Aug. 9, 2006, Catalonia gained further autonomy from Spain by being recognized as having nation status.

Catalan cuisine, however, has had its own distinctiveness for centuries. Since this nation has been one of those "also-conquered-by" Mediterranean states, the food has adapted elements from the cuisines of its invaders: Greek, Carthaginian (of Phoenician/Lebanese descent), Roman, Moor/Arab, Spanish and French.

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Catalina Kulczar

SPANISH FLY: A spread of Catalan edibles at Catalunya Café

INFO

Catalunya Café

1408 East Blvd. 704-335-3700. Hours: Monday through Saturday 9am until 10pm. Tapas served until midnight Wednesday

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Catalan cuisine uses the classic Mediterranean twosome: garlic and extra virgin olive oil. Although tomatoes are used, Catalan is not a tomato-based cuisine. Seafood, sausages, broad beans, chick peas, eggplants, haricots vert, red peppers, and ground almonds play a dominant role as do saffron and cinnamon. Aioli (here allioli) is the sauce of choice, which isn't surprising since its northern neighbor gave birth to mayonnaise.

In 2005, Charlottean Doug Marranci visited Catalan and "fell in love" with the country and its cuisine. Evidently there is much about Catalan cuisine to love: Chef Ferràn Adrià's three-Michelin-star El Bulli in Catalonia has been named the top restaurant in the world by the British magazine Restaurant. El Bulli, the European equivalent of Thomas Keller's French Laundry in Napa, has a year's wait on its reservation book.

When Marranci visited Catalonia, he had been selling restaurants in Charlotte. One space in the Dilworth Garden Shopping stuck with him. He had shown the space to several people, but they didn't quite "get the concept" of Dilworth. Eventually Marranci listened to his own spiel, bit the bullet, and leased the space himself. For Marranci, though, this is not his first foray in restaurants. He was co-owner of Café Dada (now occupied by Dish in Plaza-Midwood) back in the 1990s, and before that, owned Seven Seeds on Morehead at the end of the 1980s.

In July 2006, he opened the informal 44-seat Catalunya Café. Marranci noted that restaurants in Catalan have two stories: fine dining is upstairs while the more casual dining is on the ground floor. Catalunya Café is Marranci's take on casual Catalan.

The interior is a modest reverie of flamboyant colors dotted with the paintings of Puerto Rican-born local artist Oscar Ortiz. Because tables are alternatively clustered for groups of various sizes, the room does not afford anything close to a private dining experience. Currently Catalunya, without a super hot dishwasher, relies on plastic utensils, plates, and containers lined with black-and-white paper.

But this food would do justice to porcelain. Like any self-respecting Catalan maven, Marranci offers a selection of tapas and appetizers that will fill you if you let them. I was seduced by the pa amb tomàquet: a toasted baguette that the diner rubs with a clove of garlic and halves of Roma tomatoes. The baguette is made especially for Catalunya by Rudy Montero, who used to own the legendary Spanish restaurant Tio Montero (a stone's thrown from Catalunya in the spot now occupied by Brixx).

Less pleasing is the hummus, which needs an extra spin in the processor and a heavier hand with the olive oil. But more hits than misses delightfully highlight Catalunya's menu.

The hot from the fryer sweet potato chips, dunked in a heady aioli, satisfy not only foodies, but

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those who love fried anything. The app of rustic marinated, char-grilled artichokes mingled with thin slices of Serrano ham is as easy to enjoy.

The true star at Catalunya is the chorizo which makes its appearance in a number of dishes. This artisan-style sausage is made locally by d'Rouco Chorizo based in Matthews. (That's right: Matthews.) Owner Andy d'Rouco uses Niman Ranch hormone-free pork and a smoked paprika in his Spanish grandmother's recipe. Catalunya, which has a glass deli case in front of the kitchen, also sells D'Rouco chorizo by the pound.

The grand plates at Catalunya include a number of hearty dishes of paella and pastas. Also on the roster are a series of Panini sandwiches and salads. The quality of ingredients makes the difference here. Even a deceptively simple Philly cheese steak was made even better on the rustic baguette.

Desserts range from the crêpes filled with ice cream and drizzled with a chocolate sauce to a flan that's more substantial than most. In the future, Marranci hopes to add the quintessential Catalan dessert: Crema Catalana, a Catalan version of crème brûlée.

Catalunya's beverage list includes a few bottles of wine, a German draft, Catalan sparkling water, espresso drinks, milkshakes and house-made sangria. The serving crew couldn't be more helpful or welcoming. This is a team that wants folks to enjoy their meal, as well as Catalan food, and is willing to go the extra step to get there.

Catalunya's prices, which range from \$10 to \$14 for entrees and \$5.50 to \$8 for sandwiches, send a message of affordable welcome to the neighborhood.

Lucky Dilworth.

To contact Tricia regarding tips, compliments or complaints or to send notice of a food or wine event (at least 12 days in advance, please), opening, closing or menu change, fax Eaters' Digest at 704-944-3605, leave voice mail at 704-522-8334, ext. 136, or e-mail tricia.childress@creativeloafing.com.

COMMENTS



RE: Eclectic Avenue

Posted by Brian on 01.22.07 @ 06:32 PM

Most recent sanitation score was 86, worse than their borderline 90.5 initial inspection.



RE: Eclectic Avenue

Posted by [groove1](#) on 10.28.06 @ 12:50 PM

This is a nice little cafe. I really like the artwork and the slide show of Catalunya playing on the monitor at the bar. However, I agree with Tricia on the hummus. It is a very small portion, especially for the price of \$6.50. The best hummus in Charlotte is hands-down at Presto Bar and Grill, a large portion with plenty of bread, plus olives and tzatziki (sp?). I had the vegetable paella and it was the most bland paella I have ever had. They could add a little more flavor and serve it in a skillet and it would be much better. My girlfriend had the vegetable lasagna and it was slightly better than the paella. Overall, dissapointed with the food especially after reading such good reviews. I would not make it a must visit or a fist choice for dining out. Also, their initial sanitation score as on the Meckleburg Digitla Health department of 90.5 included many potentially hazardous foods being held at inappropriate temperatures.



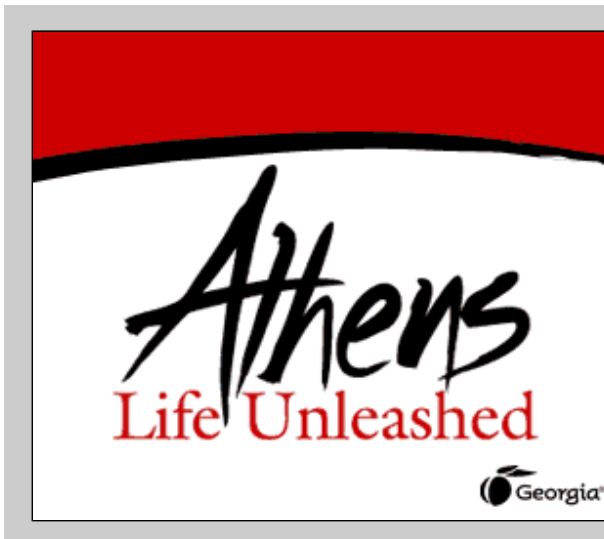
RE: Eclectic Avenue

Posted by [Maggie](#) on 10.09.06 @ 02:29 PM

Catalunya's not a "new" nation... Good review, though, can't wait to try it!

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