

## LATIN FLAVOUR

## MUY DELICIOSO!\*

\*Very delicious!

For a slice of Spanish and Latin American goodness, El Toro is the place to go

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YEARS ago, I took Spanish language classes in school. When they ended, so did my ability to speak Spanish. Which explains why "hola, me llamo Shermaine", (hello, I'm Shermaine) is about the only Spanish I can muster now.

What I do remember from those classes is how I became — and still am — attracted to the Spanish and Latin American cultures through learning the language. It could be the seductive Latin beats, the genuine warmth of the people or, most importantly, the hearty, home-style food the cultures offer.

Unfortunately, few restaurants serve Spanish or Latin American food here — rarer are the ones that dish out authentic fare. So, when El Toro Restro Bar charged onto our shores last September claiming to be the real deal, I was a tad sceptical.

Helmed by a four-man outfit, El Toro is headed by executive chef Sady Cerna, a Honduran native. It serves mainly food from Mexico and Brazil, but chef Sady revealed that the menu will soon expand to include dishes from more exotic locales like Cuba and the Caribbean.

Seemingly able to read my mind, chef Sady dished out a welcome starter of nachos and salsa — made in-house, he declared proudly. The chef also insisted that I try the homemade sour cream — which contains a touch of coconut — as well as the guacamole (\$3). The latter is not always available because "the avocados we get have to be good, or we don't serve guacamole".

Grilled calamari (\$13.80)



(From left) Grilled fresh calamari, prawn burrito and churros (sometimes known as Spanish doughnuts).



PHOTOS JASON HO

was next and I was delighted to see fat, char-grilled rolls of squid drizzled with a sweet-tangy balsamic reduction. The squid was juicy and tender, its intense flavour the result of it being marinated overnight with Cajun seasoning and spices such as cumin.

The starters got me looking forward to the mains, and I was excited to hear the sizzling of the beef fajita (\$28.80) as it was brought to us on a hot stone.

Slices of US prime were drizzled with beer before they were served, and what lay beneath them were sweet, lightly-charred

vegetables such as zucchini, cabbage and onion.

Burrito lovers should not miss the prawn version (\$20.80) here. The rice, a vivid shade of sunshine thanks to the addition of saffron, was cooked with chopped prawns and wrapped in a tortilla. Topped with onions, tomatoes, jalapenos, bean sauce and cheddar, and then baked, this combination was spicy, cheesy and bursting with the fragrant aroma of spices.

One of Spain's iconic dishes, the rice-based paella, is also good. For \$35.50, you get a generous portion of rice and ingredients such as fresh prawns, mussels, clams, chopped scallops and chorizo (spicy Spanish sausage) that's good for two. The rice was choke-full of thick, briny flavours, but pity the mussels were a tad overcooked.

Dessert was a unique chilli chocolate cake (\$12) and churros (\$10). The former was not that spicy, but the Mexican dried ancho chili in it did enhance the flavour of the moist chocolate cake.

Churros, sometimes known as Spanish donuts, are a must-order. The fried pastry sticks were dusted with cinnamon, slightly crisp on the outside and dense on the inside. It was lovelier when paired with the chocolate dip, made from a blend of six chocolate varieties.

By the end of my meal, my scepticism about El Toro serving up authentic Latin American fare had all but melted away, just like the runny cheddar that came with the burritos.

I said my goodbyes as I left, but I know it won't be long till I say "hola" to El Toro again.

#### EL TORO RESTRO BAR

**WHERE** Winsland Conservation House, 165 Penang Road, Level 2

**TELEPHONE** 6887 4787

**OPENING HOURS**

11.30am till late daily (last order for food at 9.30pm)

## FOODNOTES

### THOUGHTFUL TRUFFLES



If only because your dad could not get enough of it when you bought it for your mum on Mother's Day, surprise him with another limited-edition truffle cake from

Häagen-Dazs. And, with Father's Day just round the corner (June 21), you might want to place your order soon.

Available till June 30, this unique offering features a lavish ensemble of ice cream truffles atop a Häagen-Dazs ice cream cake, which is available in cookies and cream, or strawberry flavours. Priced at \$68, it serves four to six persons.

As an added boon, every purchase of this cake comes with a "Parents Dine For Free" voucher (for use at your next visit), which grants the holder a one-for-one deal on all its dine-in creations.

### BIG ON SMALL

Here's news that's useful for the whole family: Din Tai Fung's mini steamed pork dumplings are now available in Singapore,

and its Paragon outlet is the first restaurant outside of Taiwan to serve these popular bite-sized adaptation of the classic xiao long bao.

These portions are 50 per cent smaller than the usual, and are renowned for their concentrated burst of flavours and the skill needed to produce them.

Priced at \$10.80 per serving (10 dumplings and a bowl of chicken broth), the mini xiao long bao are available at the Paragon outlet from 3pm to 5pm on weekdays, and from 10am to noon on weekends. Call 6836 8336 to make a reservation. **DON MENDOZA**



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