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Exciting Modern Latino Cuisine at NYC's Ortzi

By John Mariani

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Photos by Daniel Kreuger

The NYC food media are getting a little better at covering restaurants in hotels, as long as there's a name chef onboard. Ortzi, in the Luma Hotel near Bryant Park, should certainly get attention via José Garces (*below*), who has built a good-sized empire of restaurants out of his Philadelphia base, where he has the tapas place Amada, a modern Mexican eatery Distrito, even a Japanese *izakaya* place named Okatshe. At Ortzi he is playing his strong suit—contemporary Spanish cuisine with New World touches—and, if he isn't actually on premises very often, he's done a good job teaching chef de cuisine Michael Han (previously at Bouley and A Voce) to keep his boss's standards high.



There's not much to say about the look of the place: an entry bar section generally packed from 6 to 7:30 p.m. opens to a modest dining room with the kind of décor that is difficult to describe because there isn't much of it. It's comfortable enough—except for some armchairs that seem fit for an anorexic's butt—and there is a semi-open kitchen; the light is convivial and the noise level easy on the ears. The service staff, at least the night we were there, wavered between constant attention at the beginning of the evening to a neglectful lassitude after nine o'clock. The wine list is very, very good, especially for Spanish and South American bottlings at fair prices.



The *crudos* and *conservas* offer the most excitement on the menu, beginning with satiny hamachi with *piquillo* pepper in a bright saffron emulsion (\$19). Bluefin tuna belly, nice and fatty, is dressed with superb *arbecquina* olive oil and caviar that is not too fishy for the mildness of the dish. *Platja* (fluke) is dusted with chickpea flour and sided with sea beans \$\$15), while *lubina negra* (black bass) gets a nice bite from green chile escabeche and *mojama*, a salt-cured tuna (\$17). *Pulpo* (octopus) was cut too thin to have much flavor on its own (\$17), but bonito came with an assertive rémoulade and sour caperberries (\$16); *berberechos* (cockles) were made luxurious by a potato puree, pine nuts and hot *chorizo* (\$14).



There is a *jamon del dia* (ham of the day), but the one served the night I visited—at \$32—was not in a league with the better Spanish hams now coming to this country. The *cazuelas* main dishes include a very hearty *rabo* stew of braised ox tail with chickpeas, tomato and a fennel *sofrito* (\$19), and even better was a *conejo estofado* rabbit stew cooked in Albariño wine with artichokes and flavored with rosemary (\$23). *Bacalao* (cod) is too often a bore but here the bright snowy fish with its own buttery flavor was enhanced with cockles in a bright green parsley emulsion (\$23). Alongside was a stellar vegetable dish—a fava bean salad with feta cheese, Meyer lemon, olives and smoked egg yolk (\$11)—but the unusual wood-roasted cabbage with anchovy dressing, Manchego cheese and *guanciale* bacon (\$12) was little but a hard chunk of tasteless cabbage.



Three of the desserts (all \$12) we tried were very good and wholly in line with the style of the menu: *Copa caramel*, made of milk chocolate cream, caramel foam, Sherry, orange and sea salt; *pastel vasco*, a Basque custard tart, with apricot, olive oil, and pistachio cream; and a goat's cheese cream on almond cake with a red wine Caramel and roast of cherries called *cuajada*. The reason I'm never jaded about dining out in NYC is because of places like Ortzi, where an expected pleasant meal turns out to be innovative and deliciously different, with big splashes of color and spice.

ORTZI

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