

The Spanish invasion heads to the gritty south

03 May 2012 ANDREW NEATHER

Spanish food in London is enjoying a boom. The past year has seen the opening of former Brindisa chef José Pizarro's tapas bar, José, and its sister down Bermondsey Street, Pizarro. A buzzy new branch of Ibérica opened in Canary Wharf in November; there was Abel Lusa's new Capote y Toros on Old Brompton Road; and the engaging Copita, sister to Barrica, arrived in Soho. But none of these have escaped Zone 1.



Thus the arrival of Boquería on a particularly gritty stretch of Acre Lane, in the Brixton-Clapham badlands, has been greeted by locals with something approaching euphoria. It was full the evening I visited, despite little publicity and its unpromising location. So full, in fact, that it was distinctly noisy, the chatter bouncing off its plain walls and wooden floors.

The Boquería is Barcelona's central food market, and owner Jaime Armenter is from that city. So there is a Catalan theme here: in charcuterie such as fuet, a dried sausage found on both Catalan sides of the Pyrenees but rarely outside; in rape (monkfish) à la catalana; and in the standard Catalan tapas accompaniment of bread rubbed with tomato, oil and garlic (pan con tomate or rather, pa amb tomàquet.)

But there is also a sprinkling of dishes from elsewhere: albóndigas de rape (fried balls of monkfish) had a delicate flavour and texture better than any I ate this year in their native Andalucía. Nor do I think of arroz negro — essentially a paella flavoured with squid ink — as a particularly Catalan dish but Boquería's version was delicious, as good as any I've had in Jerez or Málaga.

Meanwhile there are plenty of favourites such as tortilla, patatas bravas and croquetas (the latter often a good measure of a tapas joint: Boquería's cheese ones weren't bad but the cheese and ham were above average). And there is, of course, very decent Guijuelo jamón iberico.

More experimental dishes worked less well. Medallones de solomillo de buey (beef medallions with cheese and honey) were tasty but not really a very Spanish combination of flavours. Pimientos asados y taquitos de bonito (roast peppers with tuna) had too much undercooked onion. And a portion of langostinas al pil-pil con espinacas (prawns with spicy sauce and spinach), a twist on a classic seaside dish, featured fresh, precisely cooked shrimp with a slightly underpowered sauce. For dessert, crema catalana was average; better was tarta de Santiago, a Galician cake based on ground almonds.

The wine list is acceptable if unadventurous, sticking to Rioja from biggish producers; it would be nice to see a few Catalan wines here. There are also four dry sherries by the glass and several Spanish beers.

Boquería isn't in the same league as José or Ibérica but it's good value and a welcome addition to the neighbourhood. It plans to open a café and churrería (serving the classic combination of churros — sweet fritters — and hot chocolate) next door very soon. I'll be there for breakfast