



Culinary Corner

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REVIEW



Bobby Cochran/CW photos

Tria Terra offers paella prepared two ways: *paella a la Basque*, made with seafood and meat, and a seafood-only selection known as *paella marinero*.

Terrific tastes at Tria Terra

Little-known spot offers big burst of flavor

by Heidi Billotto
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There's no need to plan a trip to Italy, Spain or France this summer; full-throttle flavor from all three countries has traveled to south Charlotte and taken up residence at Tria Terra. Tucked into Carmel Commons Shopping Center, this hidden jewel of a restaurant is a wonderful find.

The space, once home to Moe's Southwestern Grill, has been beautifully upfitted to offer a warm, rich and enveloping atmosphere. Soft classical guitar and flamenco music plays in the dining room and quickly transports diners from the bustle of Highway 51 to the calm, sophisticated aura of Europe and the Mediterranean. But it's more than just the ambiance that reflects an Old World influence; the talented team at Tria Terra infuses exciting flavors that evoke a European flair.

All in the family

The restaurant is owned by business partners Ivan Campoverde and Esteban Vintinmilla. After more than a decade of restaurant experience in New York City, the two Ecuadorian natives settled in Charlotte to raise their families. Chef Campoverde's creative culinary skills get credit for food and flavor, while Vintinmilla keeps the service, quality and atmosphere impeccable. Campoverde and Vintinmilla team with one of the most professional waitstaffs in south

Charlotte to offer a dining experience patrons will not soon forget.

This story sounds familiar. In fact, it almost mirrors the tale of Fiamma, the Dilworth dining spot that took the city by storm several years ago. Fiamma is owned by Fernando Campoverde, Ivan's older brother, and Kerwin Astidillo. The Campoverdes have a younger brother still in New York, the owner and chef at La Paella, a fabulous little Spanish restaurant located in the city at Ninth Street between Third and Fourth avenues.

Before bringing his family south, Ivan worked alongside his brother at La Paella. The ties remain tight; almost all the traditional ingredients in Tria Terra's kitchen are imported from Spain through La Paella. The two restaurants place orders together and then product is shipped overnight from New York as often as several times a week.

"It may not be the cheapest way to get ingredients here," said Campoverde, "but I know the quality is high. We're more interested in an excellent product than a cheap price." The quality is evident; Tria Terra's Serrano ham, chorizo sausage, tender white anchovies, piquillo peppers and assorted Spanish cheeses are unlike any that restaurant-goers will experience elsewhere in Charlotte.

A taste of tapas

While the entrées are grand, the tapas blow us away each time we dine here. Ordered as an appetizer or teamed together for a meal, these little plates truly set Tria Terra apart. They are the real thing, prepared

TRIA TERRA

★★★★★ out of 5

Location: 7707 Pineville-Mathews Road, in Carmel Commons Shopping Center.

Phone: 704-541-2924; Fax: 704-541-2925.

Price range: Tapas, \$4-\$13; dinner entrées, \$12.50-\$22.50.

Hours: Brunch served Sunday, 11 a.m.-2:30 p.m.;

lunch served Monday-Saturday, 11:30 a.m.-

3 p.m.; dinner served Monday-Thursday, 5-9:30

p.m., and Friday and Saturday, 5-10:30 p.m.

Details: Smoke-free dining room, bar and patio; takeout; on- and off-premises catering; special customer requests accommodated when possible; weekend specials; homemade sangria.

in Campoverde's own authentic way, and the combination of ingredients provides a burst of unexpected flavor.

Must-tries include *pimientos rellenos con queso de cabra*, three or four small, rich, red Spanish piquillo peppers stuffed with warm goat cheese; *batutas de espárgos y salmon ahumado*, an innovative recipe in which asparagus is wrapped in smoked salmon, then breaded and fried; *calamares a la plancha*, calamari or squid that is grilled and lightly seasoned; *croquetas de bacalao*, mild cod and potato croquettes; *plato de chorizo*, a small plate of fresh homemade Spanish chorizo, sautéed, sliced and seasoned with garlic and a rich Spanish olive oil; *parillada de cordero*, a thinly sliced then grilled fillet of lamb; and *jamón Serrano*, a cheese



Tapas at Tria Terra is extraordinary. These little plates of Spain are the perfect start or easily combine to make a meal.

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Enjoy the sophisticated cuisine of Europe and the Mediterranean with Tria Terra chefs and owners Esteban Vintinilla, left, and Ivan Campoverde.

plate like no other. The imported Serrano ham, which has been aged at least 18 months, is served thinly sliced with a trio of Spanish cheeses and several slices of soft, sautéed pears, drizzled with a bit of balsamic glaze. The ham practically melts in the mouth, a terrific complement to the zesty cheese, sweet pears and rich balsamic glaze.

With so many can't-miss tapas, customers might have difficulty selecting. The educated waitstaff knows the menu

well and is always ready to suggest favorites. Tria Terra's *plato misto*, a chef's choice combo plate of tapas for two, is another good way to sample.

Innovative salads, much like those at Fiamma, round out a meal of tapas. An artful selection of greens tastes as good as it looks: There's the French-style arugula salad with toasted sunflower seeds, blood orange vinaigrette and herbed Bucheron goat cheese; the arugula salad with gor-

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Whats cookin

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Congratulations to Charlotte teacher Chris Ayers, the state winner of the Blue Bell Ice Cream 100th anniversary "Taste of the Country" contest. Each contestant proposed a flavor name to represent his or her state and its dessert traditions. For her entry, "Tar Heel Tracks," Ayers received a gift pack including a year's supply of Blue Bell Ice Cream and an ice cream party in her honor. Ayers shared her party with about 65 of her English as a Second Language students at East Mecklenburg High School on July 13.

Ayers, who taught Charlotte kindergartners for 34 years, now teaches ESL to elementary schoolchildren during the school year and to high school students during the summer. She chose to invite her high school students, many from war-torn lands where their education had been interrupted, to the party.

Blue Bell Ice Cream, the third best-selling ice cream in the country, entered

the Charlotte market just three years ago.



To mark National Mustard Day – yes, there is such a day, observed this year on Saturday, Aug. 4 – mustard aficionados can enter the Food Loves French's Love Story Contest. French's invites contestants to share stories of America's love for the spicy yellow condiment. To enter, submit an essay of 200 words or less by Aug. 24; the 10 semifinalist essays will be posted at www.foodlovesfrenchs.tv by Sept. 13 so visitors can cast votes online for the People's Choice winner. A panel of judges also will select one grand-prize winner from the semifinalists. Both winners will receive a \$2,000 American Express Gift Cheque, and the grand-prize winner's essay will become an animated Webcast. The other eight semifinalists will receive a \$500 American Express Gift Cheque.

To submit your essay, visit www.foodlovesfrenchs.tv and click on "Chance to Win Fame and Fortune," or mail your entry to Food Loves French's Love Story Contest, Attn: BHGPR, 546 Valley Road, Upper Montclair, NJ, 07043. For complete rules, visit www.frenchsfoods.com. □

Tria Terra

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gonzola cheese, bosc pears and caramelized walnuts; the red and gold salad with thick-sliced red and yellow beets, haricot verts, asparagus tips and warm goat cheese; and the tricolor salad with endive, arugula, radicchio, shaved parmesan and a balsamic vinaigrette.

Order up

I am hard-pressed to find much wrong at Tria Terra. Some menu items I like better than others, but everything is done well and the attention to detail from kitchen to table is without fault.

My favorites from the list of main courses include both varieties of paella: one with meat and seafood, the other with just seafood. The paellas are priced as an order for two but can be prepared and served for one upon request.

Other favorites include the *linguini neri*, a black pasta made from squid's ink and topped with grilled shrimp; the *rigatoni freshi*, made with roasted eggplant, tomato sauce, basil and fresh ricotta cheese; the grilled rack of lamb with wild mushrooms and roasted potatoes; and the black olive-crust cod served with broccoli rabe and roasted tomatoes in a parsley sauce. The menu, recently revamped for summer, also includes several items from the grill.

Fine details

Everything at Tria Terra is made fresh and to the customer's order. Each dinner starts with a pesto sauce served with a

bottomless basket of fresh-baked bread, focaccia and bread sticks. Different from the kind served with pasta, this pesto is a unique mix of basil, Parmigiano-Reggiano, orange juice, pine nuts and olive oil – nothing short of addictive.

At Sunday brunch, the menu takes a more traditional turn with granola and fresh fruit, pancakes with bananas and walnuts and cinnamon-raisin French toast. Omelets are given an innovative spin – one is filled with oven-roasted tomatoes and herbed goat cheese, another with prosciutto, fontina cheese and wild mushrooms. Eggs Benedict, eggs Florentine and an artichoke-and-shrimp frittata round out the breakfast items, while grilled shrimp salad, penne with tomato ragout and a grilled chicken breast salad are offered for patrons who prefer the lunch side of brunch.

Easy entertaining

Aside from Sunday brunch and dinner service six evenings a week, the restaurant also caters. The owners take the flavors of Tria Terra on location or offer patrons the rental of the restaurant for private affairs on Sunday evenings. For a do-it-yourself party, Vintinmilla suggests takeout tapas for entertainment ease.

"Customers may select any of the tapas from the menu and our chef will prepare them to go," said Vintinmilla. "This food holds well, may be presented cold or hot, is simple to serve and not complicated to eat. What could be easier?" □