

Search for Tomorrow

Xavier Laurentino toured his native Spain looking for the future of Catalan cuisine.

PHOTO: JAMES GAFFNEY

Anyone who has visited Laurentino's in Metairie knows the owner, Xavier Laurentino. He is a gregarious Spaniard, a self-trained chef and the unofficial ambassador of paella, Manchego cheese and *patatas bravas* to the greater New Orleans area.

No one who saw the second season of Bravo's *Top Chef* can forget Marcel Vigneron. He was the smart aleck, spiky-haired young chef who became the emblem of avant-garde Innovations due to his fascination with foams. Laurentino met Vigneron in Barcelona at a course on the cutting-edge techniques of El Bulli, the trend setting restaurant and culinary laboratory (Chef Scott Boswell of Stella also attended the class.), and the unlikely pair somehow ended up as travel companions last December on a culinary tour through northern Spain. "You should have seen the face on this kid," Laurentino says. "He lives, breathes, sleeps food. Everything relates to food for this guy." The friendly Spaniard was able to charm their way into kitchens across the Basque region.

For Laurentino, the course and time with Vigneron was a period of transition. He has always cooked the traditional dishes he grew up eating in Barcelona, and last year he decided to explore the current state of cooking in the Catalan capital.

"I saw that everything was so different from what they used to do in the past," he says. "This is a revolution." Influenced by the mad-scientist techniques of El Bulli and taking a greater interest in how food looks, chefs in Barcelona are creating *nova cuina catalana*, or new Catalan cuisine. "It's not only the new restaurants and the big restaurants; it's every single corner bar."

"We're used to po-boys where everything is hanging out the side, overstuffed and full of gravy," he says. "Imagine all of a sudden these guys make a po-boy that you could put on an altar. That's what's happening in Barcelona."

Laurentino began his advanced education with an internship last August at Can Fabes, considered one of the best restaurants in the world. On his next trip he'll learn the secrets of Cal Pep, a popular seafood tapas bar.

You will not see these cutting edge tapas at Laurentino's. They will be on the menu at Barcelona Tapas, a new restaurant opening soon in the former Café Volage space off Carrollton. He hoped to have it open by now, but the renovations to the 1840s cottage took longer than expected after Laurentino discovered uneven floors, termite damage in the kitchen and three layers of plaster and sheetrock hiding the original, red pine beams.

Half the menu will be a seasonal selection of traditional tapas like the ones at Laurentino's. The rest will be innovative tapas in the new Barcelona style. He promises that all the small plates will have big flavors.

"I'm a flavor junkie," he says. "When you go to a restaurant, you want to sit down, you want to try something and you want to go 'wow.'"

NEVILLES ARE NICE, BUT SOME PREFER ICE

In September 2006, Angelo Brocato reopened and everything seemed back to normal. The brass espresso machine shined like a mirror. The cannoli shells were stacked and waiting to be filled. The cooler was stocked with ices and gelatos. Behind the building, though, the extra freezers and gelato production facility was still not repaired.

It has taken a year and half, but Angelo Brocato can once again churn out gelato like it did in the old days. With the help of some recently returned employees, the century-old gelateria is ready again for Jazz Fest.

"We were in the first Jazz Fest with spumoni," says Arthur Brocato, the third-generation proprietor. "We weren't there ourselves, but Quint Davis was real young then

and he brought someone to come and purchase our products." Since then, Brocato's has had a booth at the festival for nearly three decades.

In other ways, Angelo Brocato's business has changed. The regular customers from the Lindy Boggs Hospital down the street never returned. Restaurants and stores that bought Brocato's gelato never reopened.

"A lot of people have moved away to the Northshore," Brocato says, "but we have a lot of people that when they come in town, they stock up. It's a shift, but it's getting back to normal a little at a time."

OTHER NEWS

Cocktail writer Cheryl Charming of MissCharming.com leads an audience through an inebriated lesson on drinking in classic films at the Cocktail Film Fest. Watch *Casablanca*, *the Seven Year Itch* and *Guys and Dolls* with a champagne cocktail or Cuba libre instead of a bucket of soda. The festival, sponsored by Tales of the Cocktail, is at the W Hotel on Friday, March 21, at 8 p.m. and Saturday, March 22, at 5 p.m. and 8 p.m. Order tickets at TalesoftheCocktail.com. . . . Martin Wine Cellar hosts its 14th "Once Upon a Vine" tasting Sunday, March 30, from 4-7 p.m. For \$60, sample 175 wines at City Park's Pavilion of the Two Sisters. Tickets available at both Martin Wine Cellar locations. . . . Buy your tickets now at nowfe.com for the 17th annual New Orleans Food and Wine Experience. The five-day event starts May 21.

Angelo Brocato's: 214 N. Carrollton Ave., 486-1465

Laurentino's Restaurant: 4410 Transcontinental Dr., Metairie, 779-9393
Martin Wine Cellar: 3500 Magazine St., 899-7411; 714 Elmeer St., Metairie, 896-7300

Stella: 1032 Chartres St., 587-0091