



Pasha

RATING: ★★

802 W. Randolph St.,
312.243.4442. Hours: Mon.-
Wed. 5PM-10PM; Thurs. 5PM-
midnight; Fri. 5PM-2AM; Sat.
5PM-3AM; closed Sun.

What the stars mean:

★ = fair, some noteworthy qualities;

★★ = good, above average;

★★★ = very good, well above norm;

★★★★ = excellent, among the area's best;

★★★★★ = world-class, extraordinary
in every detail. Reviews are based on multiple
visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall
reaction to food, ambience and service.

WHAT TO WEAR: *Salsa-friendly skirts
and Cuban heels. Men: Glossy
shirts, jeans and Gucci loafers.*

WHAT TO ORDER: *Chicken-chorizo
croquetas, paella, bellini with
fresh strawberries for dessert.*

WHEN TO GO: *As of a recent schedule
change, Fridays and Saturdays are
when the Bandoleros play.*

WHAT TO KNOW: *Score sangria pitchers
for half-price on Thursday nights.*

WHO GOES: *Women looking to dance
and swinging young men who
know how to salsa.*

WHAT IT COSTS: *Appetizers \$7-\$10;
entrées \$22-\$26; desserts \$7.*

Spanish Ammunition

With smokin' paella and sexy sounds, West Loop's Pasha is fully loaded and ready to (light your) fire | *By Michael Nagrant | Photography by Dave Slivinski* |

It's a Thursday night and I'm slurping an Ay! Ven Chiquita, a potent mix of Spanish brandy, orange liqueur and fresh sour, as I watch a motorcycle burst into flames. I guess sports disaster television, blaring on the shiny flat-screen above the bar at Pasha, is opening tonight for Latin band the Bandoleros. That and a very energetic DJ who is working the room with juiced-up techno remixes of Bob Marley, New Order and The Smiths. Ashur Isho of the Bandoleros, who co-owns this new West Loop restaurant and music venue (restaurant first, the management stresses, though the first thing facing me when I walk in is the dance floor) with manager Ron Levine, is set to go on with the rest of the band at 10PM.

I better slow down on the Ay! Ven. I could probably get drunk on the heady citrus perfume from the glass alone. I've also done a pretty good job on

half of the Guacamole cocktail, a flashy Margarita featuring smoky Patron tequila and garnished with an avocado wedge. It's a little too tart, but doesn't take away from the pleasure of a cocktail list that's well-balanced and pleasantly focused on fresh fruit.

There's also the intoxicating (-ed?) ladies, a few in patent leather thigh-high boots and others in shimmering silver micro-minis (who may need a reminder that it's 2010 and this is not an Austin Powers movie), shaking their booties five feet from my face. Some of the restaurant's tables are perilously close to the sprawling dance floor, which takes over the middle of the restaurant.

Behind the dancers is the crowded bar; on the west wall, a cushy, red banquette runs the length of

MAD ABOUT SAFFRON

From top left: The dining room at Pasha; paella with langostino, shrimp, clams, chorizo and saffron-flavored rice.

the place. It's packed with diners waiting for the band. Though there are icicles hanging from the restaurant's Randolph Street awning, to quote Matchbox 20 sage Rob Thomas, I feel like I'm about seven inches from the midday sun in this joint.

The smart thing would be to eat light, but Pasha's Spanish-influenced menu is an exercise in rich temptation. I doubt even the slender women here getting ready to shake their stuff on the dance floor could restrain themselves from the deep-fried chicken chorizo croquetas (slathered in spicy, garlicky aioli), or the tiny, flaky empanadas oozing with red wine-kissed shreds of tender lamb, both of which I'm

devouring like this is my last supper.

Suddenly, the Bandoleros start popping off mambo rhythms and the dance floor swells. Pushing through to the next dishes—a house-made butifarrita sausage and a whole fried branzino, a silver-skinned fish sometimes called European sea bass—I promise myself I'll dance off the calories.

As a card-carrying member of the “white men can't dance” club, that's a brazen lie, but it serves me well as I dip plump hunks of the butifarrita into a rich pool of cider broth. The sweet acid cuts through the fat on the sausage and melds nicely with the sweetness of the garlic. Finished by a scoop of peppery lettuce garnish (providing a satisfying crunch to balance the soft butifarrita), this dish has all the right moves to be one of the best in the house.

I slink further into my banquette. I'm sated already, and not even a funky hunk of the deep-fried branzino, clearly past its prime, can shake me. I move on to the paella, the dish I'm probably most excited to try.

“The stage lights pulsate, and the Bandoleros guitarist works hard at a Flamenco number, threatening to rip the nylon strings out of his guitar with each violent pluck.”



Briny, plump seafood swimming in creamy, saffron-perfumed rice is always tempting, and I rarely turn down an opportunity to eat the stuff. However, I've never really had a great local version. The rice is usually overcooked and gummy, or the seafood is rubbery and off, like tonight's branzino. Even if those two points are executed well, paella is supposed to feature a textural contrast of crunchy rice scalded at the bottom of the traditional serving pan. Many places just use the pan for show and cook the rice ahead of time. Once bitten and twice shy, I had balked when ordering, but my server implored me, promising that Pasha's paella is the best he's ever had.

Turns out he's right. The rice has a creamy risotto consistency, but boasts plenty of charred goodies from the cast iron pan below. The tail of the huge lobster guarding the plate is luscious, and the salty, spicy pieces of chorizo mingle with fat shrimp and delicate clams. Props to chef Daniel Marquis, a relative unknown (formerly of Bin 36).

Although, maybe I got lucky, as my server's affable guidance turns out to be less about shepherding me through to a good meal and more about bumping up his check average. Teetering on the edge of exploding like that motorcycle on TV, we think about begging off dessert, but he insists we try the chocolate cake with smoked banana and the bread pudding with sherry-poached figs. Both, almost entirely devoid of sugar, are some of the most terrible desserts I've eaten. The figs are dessicated, and the chocolate cake is sandy, crumbly and bitter. I can't believe these treats came from the same kitchen as that paella. I mention this to the server, and he says, “Yeah, I know. I keep telling the cooks our savory food is great and our desserts are pretty bad.” Thanks, buddy.

But, as the stage lights pulsate, and the Bandoleros guitarist works hard at a Flamenco number, threatening to rip the nylon strings out of his guitar with each violent pluck, I pretty much forget that I've been duped over the final course, and lose myself in the intensity of his playing. I'm already planning my white cotton leisure suit and porkpie hat laden return. ■



From left: Grilled baby octopus with smoked paprika vinaigrette; the bar; chicken-chorizo croquetas with roasted red pepper aioli.