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At last -- earthy food to remember; MIAMI-DADE REVIEW

By ENRIQUE FERNANDEZ
efernandez@MiamiHerald.com

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It takes chutzpah for a restaurant to call itself **Por Fin** (At Long Last), as if we were all waiting for it.

Well, we were.

Por Fin, in the crowded Coral Gables restaurant scene, is already earning raves on foodie websites. It draws a full crowd to its airy downstairs room, with tall ceilings, white walls and dark furniture, and its friendly bar and sweet veranda upstairs. The secret? Really good food. While most serious restaurants offer interesting, innovative yet totally forgettable dishes, **Por Fin** makes you want to go back again and again for . . . fried eggs on fried potatoes.

That standard Spanish comfort dish -- what Spanish moms make for kids -- gets a little tweaking with a side of potato foam and a touch of truffle oil. It's topped by a slice of fried serrano, which is common for a dish that is basically breakfast to be eaten at any hour of the day.

Potato foam with fried spuds? Yes, and miraculously it works. You can have it with one or two eggs, as a first course or as a lunch special. It's wonderful.

Other appetizers are equally pleasing. A tuna tartare is combined with mango, avocado, caviar and yogurt and spiked with a soy sesame vinaigrette: a refreshing mix. Patatas bravas are the classic Spanish tapa done to perfection -- potato cubes fried in olive oil and drizzled with aioli and a mildly hot sauce. One whiff and I was transported to Madrid.

Another standard, buñuelos de bacalao (codfish fritters), is miraculously light and accompanied by a romesco sauce. This spicy Catalan sauce is also one of three dips offered with the crusty bread at each table, the others being olive oil and shaved ripe tomato.

The foamed potatoes show up again as a side to short ribs braised until the meat is falling off the bone and redolent of spice and caramelized aromas. Chef Marc Vidal knows his technique, having worked at three-star restaurants in Paris and done a stint at El Bulli -- incubator of modern Spanish cuisine in Girona, Spain -- but this common-sense use of foam as the world's airiest mashed potatoes shows his restraint.

Por Fin has come into being during the full bloom of the earthy food boom -- short ribs are on every hip menu. Its paella is not only not "deconstructed" but is purely a seafood paella -- nothing but shrimp, clams and squid. It's the best in town, possibly because it's made with real Spanish Calasparra rice, properly al dente, and seasoned with onions caramelized for 12 hours.

A roast chicken is boneless, juicy and delicious, topped with asparagus and garnished with a side of morels and button mushrooms in a cream sauce. The roast lamb is a rack with a sweet crust, a tender core, and a side of chanterelles mixed with pistachios. And an organic Irish salmon filet came exactly medium rare, as ordered.

Trying not to fall off the diet wagon, I sampled only one dessert: White chocolate mousse with pistachio crust and raspberry sorbet. It made me wish I'd sinned more often.

The menu is still a work in progress. Some comfort dishes, like barbecued baby-backs and garganelli Bolognese, were there because they were favorites of owner Carlos Centurión, but they're coming off, replaced by arroz negro tinted with squid ink and fideuá, the Catalan paella made with angel-hair soup noodles instead of rice. And a sommelier is being hired to revise the wine list.

Food is awesome, service is friendly but tentative and overeager, as if the help hasn't gotten its sea legs yet. An order of cava before dinner got lost in the shuffle, and we had to ask for it more than once. An artichoke risotto arrived as porcini risotto, but it was so good there was no sense in sending it back. In all fairness, the help was conscious of gaffes and deeply apologetic. One only hopes they can just get it right and relax -- too many visits from concerned waiters and maitre d's can be intrusive.

But with this awesome food, all is forgiven.

Place: **Por Fin** Restaurant & Lounge.

Address: 2500 Ponce de Leon, Coral Gables.

Contact: 305-441-0107, porfinrestaurant.com.

Rating: ½ (Excellent)

Hours: 11:30 a.m.-10 p.m. Sunday-Wednesday, until 11 p.m. Thursday, until midnight Friday and Saturday.

Prices: Appetizers: \$8-\$16, entrees \$16-\$32, desserts \$7-\$8

FYI: Reservations recommended. Valet parking on weekends. Full bar; corkage \$20. MC, VS, AX, DS.

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