

By YVONNE MILOSEVIC
SPECIAL TO THE DJ WEEKEND
PHOTOS COURTESY OF ZUCCO

These days, staying home for a lackluster supper of ham-'n'-cheese sandwiches seems preferable to braving the snarled traffic and demonstration-clogged streets of Altamira, Los Palos Grandes, or Las Mercedes, where my favorite dining haunts lay. In large part, that's why Zucco International Seafood is such a gem – the journey to La Lagunita alone helps urbanites disconnect from the hassles and stress permanently girdling Caracas of late.

This tranquil hillside restaurant with sweeping city and Avila views offers an astounding array of Spanish-style seafood specialties, *tapas*, *tortillas*, *paellas*, meats, and more. Owner Rodolfo Sberna says the menu contains the inspiration for more than 400 different dishes, which makes decision-making a deliciously difficult task.

At Zucco, you could easily while away a pleasant weekend afternoon nibbling through plate after plate of *tapas*, appetizers, and *tortillas* and never make it to the main courses. Mollusk lovers must order a dozen oysters on the half-shell that come direct from the owner's farm in Mochima, northeast of Caracas. Artfully presented with lime wheels on a bed of chipped ice, these fresh oysters taste just as they should: Soft, watery, plump, and slightly briny. Contrary to popular belief, oysters are much like fine wine and should not be slurped down like some tawdry Jell-O shot in a sports bar.

Razor clams (*navajas* in Spanish), another house specialty, come well seasoned with plenty of garlic, parsley, sweet piquillo peppers, and a splash of white wine. These elongated clams have a strong distinctive flavor occasionally marred by the errant grain of sand, but otherwise extremely tasty. Zucco imports its *navajas* direct from Galicia, and Sberna says just three restaurants in Caracas serve this typical Spanish bivalve.

Other interesting options from the *tapas* menu include *fabada asturiana* (Asturian bean stew), *chorizo ibérico* (Spanish pork sausage), *cochinillo Segoviana* (roasted suckling pig), and the mother of all Spanish delicacies, *angulas de aguinao*, or baby-freshwater eels. These creatures, crudely compared to short spaghetti strands with eyes, are a Basque Country specialty commanding nearly Bs.70,000 a serving.

When it comes to entrees, Zucco has all, and I do mean *all*, the bases covered with *pastas*, *paellas*, steak, duck, rabbit, and chicken dishes in addition to the slew of seafood plates. Light eaters, or those who've ordered one *tapas* too many, will find that any of the six salads or seven soups hit the spot. For comfort food, try the *cazuela de mero*, a satisfying mixture of grouper and giant scallops served in a light broth infused with garlic, red pepper, paprika, and tomato. Or consider ordering the leg of lamb seasoned with tarragon, oregano, onion,

leeks, and garlic, which is marinated for 24 hours and then slow-cooked in a wood burning oven. Served with a giant roasted pepper and lovely scalloped potatoes, the end result is so tender, the meat literally falls off the bone.

Lobster fever has taken over many local eateries, and Zucco is no exception. The restaurant currently features no fewer than 24 different combinations

Capital Dining

Zucco International Seafood



Here's looking at you: All eyes will be on you if you can finish this spread of seafood.

exalting this coveted crustacean. You can order your lobster steamed, grilled, sautéed, or cooked in the wood-burning oven; with asparagus, artichoke hearts, mushrooms, or a la Florentine; accompanied with oysters, mussels, shrimp, scallops, crab or escargot; bathed in sauces concocted with whiskey cream, sherry, brandy, or Pernod wine. The possibilities seem endless.

You should definitely save room for the Nutella crepe, even if it means discreetly undoing your belt a notch. This simple dessert graces menus all over town, but the chefs at Zucco have tweaked things up a bit by grilling it to a nice crisp, then flambéing the crepe tableside with a generous splash of Cointreau. I wouldn't be surprised to learn they use half a pot of Nutella in every crepe, so be forewarned that all pretenses of dieting fly out the window once you place your order.

To my mind, the only incongruous element at Zucco is the diminutive sushi bar tucked in one corner of the terrace. Sushi may be all the rage in Caracas, but these typical Japanese morsels do little to enhance Zucco's overwhelming-ly Spanish-driven menu. The restaurant would do better to focus its culinary energies on what it does best – first-rate Iberian seafood.

Zucco International Seafood

Centro Comercial Terrazas de La Lagunita, Nivel Terraza, in La Lagunita. (212) 961-6045/4370.

Atmosphere: Upscale international and Spanish-style seafood served on a breezy terrace with views of Caracas and the Avila. Live music nightly.

Hours: Monday through Wednesday, 4 p.m. to midnight; Thursday through Sunday, noon to 2 a.m. (kitchen closes at midnight).

Price Range: Assorted *tapas* and appetizers, Bs.4,500 to Bs.19,800; entrees, Bs.7,600 to Bs.22,500.

Parking: Yes

Forms of Payment: Visa, MasterCard, debit cards, personal checks, and cash.



Succulent, plump oysters plucked from the shores of Mochima.



The breezy patio at Zucco, with views out over the city and Avila.