dining out

lunch counter Enjoy a bodacious bite of Barcelona at Raval



Wild Wing Cafe

ADDRESS: 36 North Market St. PHONE: 722-9464 HOURS: Full menu 11 a.m.-midnight. Wings are served until 1 a.m.

Though it is a franchise, Wild Wing Cafe is restricted to a small number of stores in the Southeast. The Charleston area has three Wild Wing locations. All of them are owned by husband-and-wife team Cecil and Diane Crowley. Their primary residence is in Hilton Head, where the chain was started.

I ventured into the downtown location for a first-time visit to a "Wing" restaurant. A friend has been telling me for some time that Wild Wing makes the best wings in town. After sampling them, I have to say that I do not agree, but I do agree they are good. The strong suit of the 30-plus wing flavors offered is that the wings are particularly meaty and tender, and can be ordered in a wide range of heat degrees from "virgin" mild to "braveheart" hot.

The buffalo wings (medium) and island Jamaican (jerk) wings I sampled on a 16-piece wing platter (\$11.49) were enjoyable. Both were a little flat in the seasoning department, particularly the jerk wings, but these flapped a little harder when dipped in the sweet and spicy sauces provided.

A surprise winner was the chicken soup (\$2.99, cup), which really did come close to what Mom makes, as the menu states. Big, broad noodles and chunky bites of carrot, celery and chicken were delicious in a homemade-tasting broth.

Service is fast and pleasant, but be prepared for a little noise from the boisterous lunchtime crowd. It was composed of an eclectic blend of businessmen, students and tourists on my visit.

- Holly Herrick

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BY HOLLY HERRICK

A away from Barcelona. I always regretted never visiting the city, as it's reputed to offer many venues for entertainment and education.

Now, I can put the past behind me and revel in Raval's fabulously Catalan experience on Upper King Street, just minutes from my current home.

Named after a neighborhood in the Spanish city, the bar (which happens to serve great food) is a fabulously fashioned amalgam of several similar haunts that owners Tim Mink, Karalee Nielsen and their silent business partner have visited in New York. The luxurious community tables were fashioned by local furniture maker Kirk Heiddnreich. These are absolutely stunning, as is all the decor, including that of the newly opened back room, which features luxuri-

ous Moroccan touches in colorful pillows

and gargantuan lamps that hang dramatically from the ceiling. Candles seem to flicker everywhere, including in a large, overhead chandelier in the front room. This sheds light on the restaurant's Moorish and moody ambience that just oozes sophisticated urban energy.

There is a window into the soul of the cupboard-size kitchen. The opening is framed with colorful canned goods and other edible tidbits. Due to its size, the small-plates menu is relatively restricted but does include several hot dishes. All that we sampled were excellent, just prancing with the refreshing flavors of Spain, such as garlic, orange and figs. I spied an artistic arrangement of the tempting fruit on a cutting board next to a lovely tray of imported cheeses as I was leaving, almost cruelly reminding me of the fleshy, blue cheesestuffed baked figs (\$8) I had savored just moments before.

Mink described Raval as a bar that happens to serve food (only 20 percent of sales at the sixmonth-old restaurant are from food sales), not a full-on restaurant. In other words, it's not really a full-service set-up where guests can expect someone to fill their wine glass every five



BRAD NETTLES/STAFF

minutes and wipe crumbs off the table. Instead, the limited service staff takes wine and food orders and brings the food as it comes out. It's also entirely nonsmoking (except for a few strategic outdoor locations).

I found the missing cloud of smoke to be refreshing. Despite a full house, there was only one person who ran the bar and acted as the only server in the place. Regardless, our service was excellent and our food arrived in a timely manner.

In addition, the tables and the entire place was spotlessly clean. My fingers seemed to glide over the table. It was so free of the frequent beer-induced stickiness I've encountered at many bars and even some upscale eating establishments.

Raval has a fine Spanish wine list selected by manager Josh Mueller. I really enjoyed the Casamaro Spanish white wine (\$7, glass) that was recommended. Raval also serves several specialty drinks and beer, but the food is not to be missed. Come with a group of friends and just keep ordering the tasty small plates until you've had your fill.

Begin with a bowl of succulent orange-infused olives mixed merrily together with cornichons, marinated pearl onions and garlic (\$4). The pan con tomate (\$6, with condiments) was a luscious ride of rustic texture. The thick, country-style bread was bathed in a splash of fresh tomato and fresh garlic. It was delicious with the chunky texture of the tapenade, which had a refreshing, clean aroma and flavor of freshly grated orange

zest. Fried, fat rectangular puffs of potatoes (patatas bravas, \$6) were exquisite and served with a bowl of a silky aioli with delicate garlic flavor and the slight sting of peppery heat. I'd go back again and again for the potatoes and the figs alone.

A beautifully arranged plate of sliced beets and sliced hardboiled eggs (\$7) was served cold and was simultaneously hearty and light. The eggs tasted fresh off the farm, and the sweet earthiness of the roasted beets were a perfect complement.

A curious sauce tasted vaguely reminiscent of a chimichurri, but I couldn't quite nail it except to say that it erred slightly on the side of bitter and was parsleyrich.

A crunchy, grilled Spanish style ham and cheese sandwich (bocadillo, \$8) fed me, heart and soul, with its simplicity. The mellow, golden cheese oozed gleefully into the crispy bread and whisper-thin slices of salty ham.

The steak pincho (\$9) and the shrimp pincho (\$9) featured marinated ingredients that were grilled and served satay-style on skewers. Both were served with snappy classic sauces: a zesty chimichurri for the steak and a frothy blend of almond, tomatoes, cheese and bread crumbs in the romesco sauce served with the shrimp.

Sweet, cool balls of chili-kissed truffles couldn't have made for a nicer finish.

Raval is a proven pick for good times and excellent food in one of Charleston's most wonderfully unique dining and drinking environs.

Raval

Neighborhood Favorite/Night Out

453 KING ST., DOWNTOWN 853-VINO (8466)

FOOD: **** SERVICE: ***1/2 AMBIENCE: ****

AMBIENCE: Dramatic decor featuring hand-crafted mahogany tables and ironwork. Casual, sophisticated environment with community-style tables.

SERVICE: Friendly and efficient. Particularly knowledgeable of food and wine menus.

HOURS: Mon.-Sat., 5 p.m.-until, DECIBEL LEVEL: Moderate. PRICE RANGE: Small plates, \$3-\$11

OUR FAVORITES: Olive & pickle bowl, pan con tomate, patatas bravas, baked figs, roasted beet and egg salad, ham & cheese bocadillo, steak pincho, shrimp pincho, chocolate chili truffles.

VEGETARIAN ALTERNATIVES: Nearly 50 percent of the 20 or so items on the menu are vegetarian friendly.

WINE LIST: Spanish-intensive, with approximately 100 wines available by the bottle, \$22-\$150. Approximately, 40 varieties available by the glass, \$4.40-\$13.25. CREDIT CARDS: Visa/MC/AmEx. WHEELCHAIR ACCESS: Yes. SMOKING: Nonsmoking. RESERVATIONS: No.

RESTAURANT FACTS: Rating criteria include quality and presentation of food, service and ambience, while taking into consideration the type of restaurant — elegant, night out or neighborhood favorite.

WHAT THE STARS MEAN: ★Fair, ★★Average, ★★★Good, ★★★★ Excellent, ★★★★Extraordinary PRICE: S Least Expensive \$\$\$\$\$ Most Expensive