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A rare four-star restaurant review: The Bazaar by José Andrés

Spanish chef José Andrés works four-star magic at the SLS Hotel, with tapas bars Blanca and Rojo transforming small plates into delicious theater.

By S. Irene Virbila restaurant critic
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Olives that flood your mouth with flavor. A foie gras lollipop wrapped in cotton candy. The definitive shrimp with garlic. Innocent-looking bites that shoot smoke out of your nostrils.

How to describe the experience at [the Bazaar by José Andrés](#) in the new SLS Hotel at Beverly Hills? Fellini-esque, a gastronomical circus, a flirtation with the flavors and soul of Spain?



The Bazaar is actually several venues in one. (The entire ground floor of the former Nikko hotel has been gutted to accommodate it.)

There are the tapas bars -- Blanca (contemporary) and Rojo (traditional). Then there's Bar Centro with its sexy sofas in the dark, tall communal tables with vintage movies projected onto plate-sized screens, covet-able cocktails and raw bar and caviar offerings. Next to it, the Patisserie, with its exquisite bonbons under glass cloches, looks like just the place for the Mad Hatter's tea party (and it does serve a remarkable high tea every afternoon), but you can also repair to one of the nooks or communal tables for dessert. Or just stop in for a post-event sweet or two.

In a city that's full of Philippe Starck restaurants, this is his best design.

The Bazaar also (bizarrely) features vitrines curated by Murray Moss of Manhattan's (and West Hollywood's) hyper-design shop Moss, and if you see something you've just got to have -- a fabulously

expensive Nymphenburg porcelain tchotchke, a gilded piglet piggy bank, a vintage model powerboat, a fetching pair of gentleman's shoes or, my favorite, a set of finger puppets depicting five or six notables (including Maharishi Mahesh Yogi) -- why, by all means break out that platinum credit card. The rest of us will just goggle.

It's all very fun, but would only be a light *divertissement* if everything on the plate weren't so captivating. The ebullient Andrés is a culinary powerhouse -- restaurateur, cookbook author and star of the public television series "Made in Spain." Born in Asturias in north-central Spain, the 39-year-old chef grew up in Barcelona, and trained and worked with some of the region's best chefs, including Ferran Adrià of El Bulli in Roses, one of the best restaurants in the world and one of the most influential.

The Bazaar has some of the same theatricality, but it's more accessible. And more fun. I don't think I've ever been to a serious restaurant (serious in the sense that each dish is a revelation) that was as engaging and playful. Yet each dish has a kind of laser precision, especially the more contemporary ones from the Blanca side of the menu.

But don't worry, you don't have to choose between traditional or contemporary. Wherever you sit, on the Rojo side with its scrawl of blackboards and giant black and white portraits of matadors, or the Blanca side with its little sofas and armchairs slipcovered in white, you can order from either side of the menu, or mix it up, which is, I think, the best of both worlds. Or you can just have the kitchen send out a selection to the tune of \$45, \$65 or \$95 per person and be surprised. And you will be, guaranteed.



One night, blinged-out hip-hoppers sit stony-faced at a table in one corner of Rojo. They don't seem to know what to make of the place. Small plates? Spanish? Across the room, a woman tosses her hair and waits for an artist to finish drawing her caricature. Secluded behind a billowy curtain, a tarot devotee in a throne-like chair reads cards for any comers. Both are complimentary on the weekends.

Sleight of hand

The hip-hoppers begin to thaw when "magic" mojitos arrive and the waiter pours the cocktail over a ball of cotton candy, dissolving it in the glass (festive, but too sweet, I found when I tried one.) Meanwhile, a cart pulls up to our table to offer nitro caipirinha cocktails made with cachaça and lime. The server pours liquid nitrogen from a Thermos into a bowl filled with the cocktail ingredients and whisks like crazy as a fog rolls over the cart like something in a horror movie. After awhile, he hands us each a small glass filled with chilly, utterly refreshing caipirinha sorbet to bring our palates to attention.



Now I see Andrés leaning over the hip-hoppers' table, telling them that when they eat this next dish -- "dragon's breath" -- they must look at each other. Really!, he says as he presents what looks like a piece of mochi on a skewer. It's very cold. Very delicious. But that's not the point. As soon as they pop a piece in their mouths, extravagant plumes of smoke shoot out their nostrils. And they crack up.

I know exactly what they're experiencing because we just had the same thing minutes ago. Weirdly festive, just one slight trick in Andrés' formidable bag of fireworks. They're loosening up and starting to have fun now. "Crazy," I can lip-read one big guy say to his friend, laughing.

Another cart parks next to our table, this one plying any takers with caviar, pretty little cones, either salmon roe with crème fraîche or paddlefish with cauliflower cream. They're offered in such a delightful way, like somebody just picked a wildflower for you.



The server also makes up foie gras lollipops. Bring it on, I say, and when she does, it's a fluffy wad of vanilla-scented cotton candy on a stick. Eat it all in one bite, she tells me. What? But I somehow manage to fit it all in my mouth: The cotton candy melts into a veil of sugar, sensational with the slightly chilled cube of foie gras at the heart of the "lollipop."

Traditional olives stuffed with anchovy (*great* anchovy) and a sliver of roasted piquillo pepper come

threaded on a bamboo pick. They're briny, salty, sweet all at once. And then a server is scooping plain green olives from a canning jar, placing each on a porcelain Chinese soup spoon. I know what it is, so I watch my friend's reaction. Her eyebrows shoot up, her eyes widen. What? What? She bursts out, laughing wildly. What is that? That is Ferran Adrià's famous spherical olive, which tastes like some kind of magic trick that concentrates the essence of olive and olive oil enclosed in the thinnest gelatinous shell. Magic. What did I tell you?

He does the same thing with mozzarella balls and serves them with roasted peeled cherry tomatoes to make a delightful winter *caprese*.

Interest on high

In four meals here, I've never gotten a bad dish, or really even a boring one -- whether Andrés was in town or his chef de cuisine Michael Voltaggio was in charge. Even the most traditional of traditional, the plates of *jamón* or chorizo served on alabaster oval plates are top notch; the cheeses too.

But if you're going to get just one, go with the *jamón* plate: You'll get *jamón serrano*, *jamón ibérico* and the ham that's the most prized in the world, *jamón ibérico de bellota*-- the black-footed *jamón* that is every bit as marbled as Kobe beef and twice as delicious.

In fact, one of the most magical things about the restaurant is the way he does traditional foods just as well as modern. *Pa amb tomaquet*, the traditional Catalan bread with tomatoes, is the best version I've ever had: the bread perfectly toasted, fruity Spanish olive oil with a slurry of ripe tomato on top. The *gambas al ajillo*, frequently nothing more than overcooked shrimp with burnt garlic, are barely cooked so they're still delicate and bright in flavor, the garlic still sweet and soft.

One must: Andrés' "Philly cheesesteak," a torpedo-shaped roll that's really just a thin shell of crust (which is why he calls it "air bread") topped with thin slices of seared Kobe beef and inside a wisp of cheese. An amusing sleight of hand. For the Oscars, he's doing something similar filled with a vanilla potato foam, the top surface of the bread covered in gold dust.



Bites of fresh king crab might arrive in an empty sardine tin strewn with raspberries and dressed with a perfumed raspberry vinegar. The surprise is that the crab is sweeter than the raspberries, a brilliant pairing.

For me, one of the most satisfying dishes is tiny wrinkled potatoes cooked in seawater or salt in the style of the Canary Islands so that the potatoes are creamy inside and suffused with salt. Dip them in the emerald *mojo verde* of parsley, cilantro, garlic and olive oil (which has no salt) and the effect is electric.

I love the *cigalas* (Norwegian lobster), a few bites, laid on a bed of seaweed salad and topped with a brûléed sugar "lid," and accompanied by a small cup of intense shellfish essence. Andrés works his magic in the balance of salt to sweet.



Chunks of watermelon topped with the seeds and insides of tomato and a dash of Pedro Ximénez reduction are wonderful too.

Service is seamless under director Felix Meana who, along with wine director Lucas Paya, is an El Bulli alum. I kept wondering, where did he find these people? They're knowledgeable, relaxed, cordial, there when you need them and never intrusive. I suspect it's training, training, training. The wine list has some terrific Spanish wines by the glass and by the bottle. Note that you have to ask for the full wine list.

Come dessert, you can stay at your table, in which case you should order the flan, which is absolutely dreamy, better than any I've ever had in Spain. Or you can move over to the Patisserie for bonbons and little things from pastry chef Michel Gillet, maybe a nitro coconut floating island that shatters with a touch of the spoon. It's all very light.

In the midst of this gloomy restaurant climate, the Bazaar arrives like fireworks bursting in the night. Bite by bite, the restaurant delivers an intoxicating magic.

rene.virbila@latimes.com

The Bazaar by José Andrés ****

Rating is based on food, service and ambience, with price taken into account in relation to quality. ****: Outstanding on every level. ***: Excellent. **: Very good. *: Good. No star: Poor to satisfactory.