

LITTLE HOUSE, BIG FLAVORS

ZALAYA SERVES UP SPANISH-
STYLE SOPHISTICATION.

BY LANCE SPARKS

Editor's note: Formerly "Zelaya," this restaurant has changed the spelling of its name to "Zalaya."

You might have heard by now that Zalaya was savaged by the restaurant reviewer for *The Register-Gazette* ("needed salt," twice, "lack of salt," once — so sad, nasty sign). My response: Good.

Eugene is a boopy little burg, true dat, and we don't do nearly enough to support our best restaurants, especially the small, non-corporate, privately owned and operated places serving interesting food with exciting flavors — special, charming spots like Koho Bistro, Chef's Kitchen, Zenon, Soriah, and such. But when one gains popularity (think Beppe and Gianni's), it becomes nearly impossible to find a table on a weekend night.

Until recently, Zalaya's name was whispered among fanatic food-lovers, a message strictly between friends. The joint is teeny. It's the latest incarnation of the historic Pennington House, built in 1897 and moved in 1903 to its present location, at 839 Lincoln Street, about a half-block south of the WOW Hall. The house is architecturally dull, plain, with high-pitched gable roof, no Victorian foofraw at all, a working-class home that simply survived the crushers and modernists. But inside

Pamela Mathis, Sara Chinske, Chef Patrick McKee and his wife, Madeline ventured into remodeling the place and managed to shape interior space for about 25 seats at smallish tables and a miniscule bar, with a beautiful outdoor patio (stone flooring, a garden of herbs and flowers, shade trees and grape arbor) with room for

another 28 diners. "Cozy" and "intimate" would be the usual adjectives; "cuddly" might be a better term.

Even with white tablecloths and nappies, Zalaya's feels homey and relaxed. The natural wood floors exude the charm of age, and tasteful art on the walls draws the eyes from the chintz-trimmed windows and the street-scene view. Feels like we just dropped in at Mom's house at dinnertime. Most nights, diners recognize each other, the town's known foodies and flavor-fiends.

Having been deeply involved with the glory days of Red Agave, Patrick is committed to the flavors, textures, colors and spicing of Spanish cuisine, so the menu and wine list emerged as a melding of influences. In both, the range of diners' selections are modest in length but deep in quality.

Take beverages: In Spain, common dining practice would be to sip a sherry aperitif while scoping the bill of fare, so

Zalaya offers a nice, dry fino, a demi-sec Amontillado and a dry Amontillado (each \$4). How civilized. The rest of the list is dominated by Spain, for reds (12, priced from \$21 to \$73) and whites (7, \$17 to \$32), with a sprinkling of other sources, mostly Oregon, as it should be (our *vins de pays*). But each wine has been carefully vetted, chosen for matches with the food coming out of Patrick's kitchen.

On our most recent visit, we automatically opened with thin slices of bread and the house-marinated Spanish olives (\$2), lovely while nipping sherries. Could have gone big for any of the five appetizers, especially potato and manchego (cheese) with fresh herbs and saffron aioli (\$5), or the sopa del dia, a cold carrot puree (\$5), but we had to test Patrick's Caesar salad with baby romaine, croutons, special dressing — yummy, delicate, distinctive. We also opted for a half-order of the day's special pasta,

squares stuffed with potato, served in a butter sauce with sliced shiitakes and fresh shelled peas (\$9), simply delicious, cooked al dente, pasta firm but tender. Just curious, we searched the tables for salt shakers: uh-uh. But Angela, our affable and super-competent server, assured us, blushing, that salt cellars were available. We declined, but took Rumsfeldian comfort in the knowledge.

For entrees, we had to taste fresh halibut (\$18) and Moroccan mixed grill (\$24). Both, when they came so timely to table, proved outstanding. The fish was seared a light gold, finished in the oven, moist, tender, as close to perfect as we get on Earth, served prettily on a bed of roasted potatoes and fresh veggies, topped with a sauce of parsley, oregano, thyme, minced capers, a sassy melody of flavors and aromas. The mixed grill was comprised of marinated, locally grown rack of lamb, a thick-cut lamb chop, and a tangy merguez sausage bedded on almond-currant couscous and vegetable tagine with a side of harissa sauce for a zippy dash of pepper-fire. The lamb was delicious, but the couscous leaped to the top of the charts. Wow, indeed.

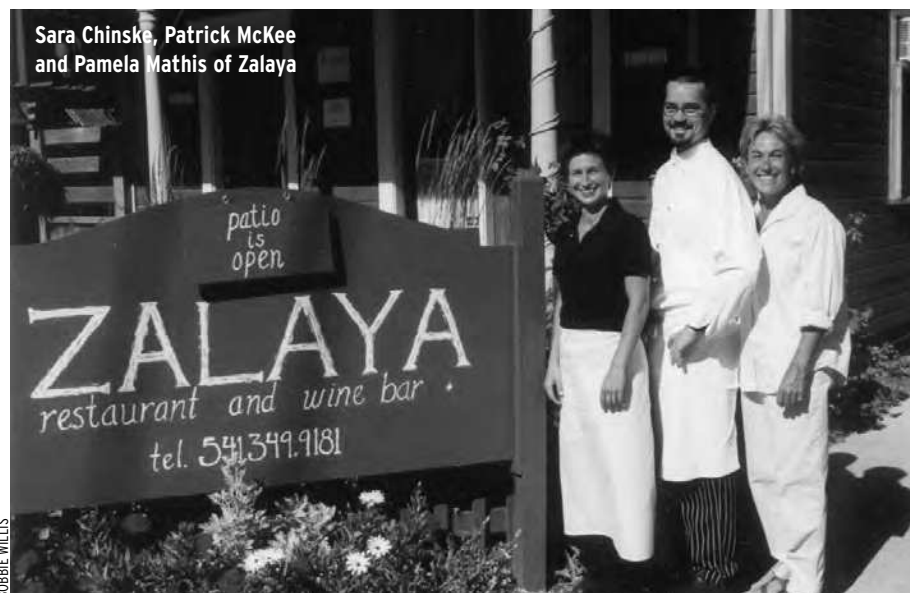
Desserts at Zalaya are tasty, but chocos deserve fair warning: That little chocolate pie kills — omigod. Add Full City coffee, call it supper.

Okay, that's how Zalaya really plays out. No tacos, no burritos or refrieds, no nachos, the essence of Spain, old and new, with new dimensions in flavor.

But don't believe me. Stay home. Plenty of seating at McGrath's. I could be lying. Certainly take all this with a large grain of salt.

EW

839 Lincoln St. 349-9181. 5:30 pm-10 pm T, W, Th, Su; 5:30 pm-11 pm F-Sa. Wheelchair accessible



Sara Chinske, Patrick McKee
and Pamela Mathis of Zalaya

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