

## Flamenco Steps Out

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THE FIFTH ANNUAL Flamenco Festival winds up Saturday at Lisner Auditorium with "Crossroads," a program that traces the evolution of flamenco from its origins in Andalusia to more modern, avant-garde styles. Festival organizer Miguel Marin brings many of the world's best dancers to Washington every year, and if stars like Carmen Cortes and Sara Baras have piqued your interest in flamenco -- or if you weren't able to attend any of the concerts -- there are plenty of opportunities to enjoy Spanish music and dancing locally.

Tiny **Cafe Citron** (1343 Connecticut Ave. NW; 202-530-8844) seems worlds away from Lisner Auditorium, but on Mondays, the Dupont Circle club is a hotbed of flamenco. With flickering candles lighting much of the room, vocalist Gerard Moreno and guitarist Michael "Miguelito" Perez take seats on a low stage set along the back wall. Moreno sings upbeat rumbas and plaintive ballads while Perez's nimble picking alternates between propulsive rhythms and delicate melodies.

But all eyes are on dancer Sara Jerez. She flashes across the spotlight stage, her thick black hair flowing behind her, heels tapping out percussive cadences. Jerez's arms sweep through the air as she turns sharply, gesturing passionately with a red fan that matches her dress. She pauses, clapping sharply to accompany Perez, before beginning a new sequence of steps.

"I've never been to Spain," Perez says later, "but my friends tell me [Citron] is more like the real flamenco" in Spain, when people get together and dance in restaurants and nightclubs.

Perez fell in love with flamenco 14 years ago while studying classical guitar at California State University at Fullerton. The Los Angeles native spent summers in Washington with his mother after his parents divorced, and on one visit home from college, he decided he wanted to learn more about the local flamenco scene. "I called up the Spanish Embassy and asked them where to go," he says. "Who would you call if you wanted to know about Spanish music?" He was directed to the Spanish Dance Society and began to accompany dance classes at George Washington University -- recitals, student shows and eventually professional gigs.

Cafe Citron's flamenco night started in September 2001 and has been a fairly regular event ever since, but even Perez admits the setup is far from perfect. Unless you're somewhat close -- dining at a table or sitting in one of the prized seats at the end of the bar -- it's hard to see dancers on the low stage, and the intricate footwork, the swishing skirts and graceful arm gestures are blocked by heads and bodies. Regulars know to make reservations for tables near the stage or arrive early and stake out a spot near the end of the bar before the two performances, which begin around 8 and 9. (Don't worry: sangria and caipirinha specials help time go faster.) Flamenco dancing is about the nuances in every movement. Unlike most dance forms, flamenco fits the music around the dancer's steps.

"You watch what they do with their choreography, you create music on the spot," Perez says. "Then they hear what you do, and they respond to it."

The vocalist, too, is improvising, playing with melodies that come from a long oral tradition; flamenco dancing was only codified in the 18th century.

This unspoken conversation between the dancers and musicians, Perez says, "is what makes flamenco so alive: It's based on the energy of the moment."

Throughout the night, the musicians switch between various styles of flamenco, from quick-stepping numbers to a

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slow, dramatic style called *solea*.

For an unobscured view of dancers, **Las Tapas** (710 King St., Alexandria; 703-836-4000) may be the best place in the area. General Manager Douglas Bolanos says the Old Town restaurant has been hosting live music for more than six years, and the dining room has a large, high stage for performers. (While you can watch from the bar, it's separated from the dining room by brick arches, which may block the view.) On Tuesday and Thursday nights, a guitarist (either Perez or Richard Marlow) accompanies two dancers, who take turns wowing the crowd. Shows begin around 7:45 and 9; reservations are recommended for the earlier show.

The restaurant offers more than 60 varieties of tapas and some decent Spanish wines, and while the dancers and musicians are excellent, bright lighting and chatter from other patrons dull the mood. On Friday and Saturday nights, local group Duende Cameron provides an excellent evening of rumba and flamenco music in a style influenced by the Gipsy Kings.

**Jaleo** is best known for pioneering the local tapas craze, but the restaurant has also hosted live Spanish dancing longer than any Washington area restaurant. Each of Jaleo's three area branches features a night of dance performances: Sundays in Crystal City (2250-A Crystal Dr., Arlington; 703-413-8181); Mondays in Bethesda (7271 Woodmont Ave., Bethesda; 301-913-0003); and Wednesdays at the original restaurant in Penn Quarter (480 Seventh St. NW; 202-628-7949). Chef Jose Andres and his partners named their restaurant after John Singer Sargent's mammoth painting "El Jaleo," which depicts a flamenco dancer in full flight, and all three branches of Jaleo feature large murals inspired by Sargent's work.

"[Hosting dancers] didn't have so much to do with entertainment as bringing the cultural life of Spain into the restaurant," Andres explains. "Spain and flamenco are very much associated."

Sara Jerez, who dances at the Crystal City location, explains that the dancers are actually doing *sevillanas*, a traditional Andalusian folk dance, and while done to the same music, it's not strictly flamenco. As a social dance, sevillanas contain a strict series of steps and turns that must be followed in order, while flamenco thrives on improvisation.

Still, it's a crowd-pleasing event. As the prerecorded music begins and the dancers begin their rhythmic clapping, heads turn, and patrons stand up and twist their necks to get a view. There are no stages at the Jaleo restaurants, so the dancers perform much like strolling violinists, dancing between tables as they move around the room. (It's easiest to get a view in Crystal City, the largest and most striking of the three restaurants.) "There was no type of planning [for dancing] when we opened [in 1993]," Andres says. "But the dancing gives people a reason to come."

While the floor show is quite a spectacle, it's more of an embellishment to a meal than a must-do event. Last week, for example, the Crystal City restaurant featured performances at 7 and 8, but each lasted only about a dozen minutes, and from my table, the dancers were visible about half that time. Still, between the costumed dancers, small plates of roasted sweet onions and fish, and Jaleo's excellent sangria, I had no reason to complain.

## 'DESPERATE' MEASURES

It's been almost a year since "Sex and the City" went off the air, and with it one of the more unusual nightlife events around: the "Sex and the City" viewing parties at the Felix restaurant and martini lounge.

Every Sunday night, while other bars were filled with guys watching football, scores of women gathered at the Adams Morgan nightspot to watch Carrie and friends on flat-screen televisions, sip discounted Cosmopolitans and catch up on female bonding.

Now **La Tasca** (2900 Wilson Blvd., Arlington; 703-812-9120) is trying to fill the gap with a party centered on the acclaimed series "Desperate Housewives," offering drink specials and games every Sunday from 7 to 11.

It's an interesting idea. Despite the clever writing and largely female audience, the women of Wisteria Lane wouldn't appear to be natural successors to Carrie Bradshaw and her pals. "Sex" celebrated being young, urban and single --

words that describe many of those who came to the viewing parties -- while the "Desperate Housewives" neighbors struggle with issues of marriage and motherhood.

But there's a bigger difference: "Desperate Housewives" is on network television.

One of the draws at Felix was being able to follow "Sex and the City" without subscribing to HBO. La Tasca's challenge is to get "Housewives" fans to abandon the comfort of their couches for a Spanish tapas restaurant in Clarendon.

Here's the lure: Nine different varieties of house sangria are available for \$1 per glass. (Go for the cinnamon-spiced Sangria La Tasca over the bland traditional blend, or try the Agua de Valencia, a sweet mix of orange, brandy and sparkling wine.) Selected wines are \$3. And true "Housewives" fans can win gift certificates and other merchandise by answering trivia questions. What is Rex Van De Kamp seriously allergic to? What are the names of Lynette and Tom Scavo's three oldest kids? (Answers below.)

Despite the specials, La Tasca isn't the perfect place to watch television. It's a huge restaurant, with two stories separated by a twisting staircase and narrow mezzanine dining area. Flowers, old paintings and Spanish bric-a-brac cover the walls. The "Housewives" party is held on the first floor, and you can count the number of TVs on two fingers (though one is a large, well-positioned flat-screen). The crowd, though, which has consisted mostly of groups of women and couples, doesn't seem to mind.

La Tasca's "Desperate Housewives" party is held when a new episode airs, which means you can check it out on Sunday and Feb. 20 before the show takes a break for the Academy Awards and resumes in March.

(The answers to the trivia questions, which were worth \$25 in food and drink: onions, and Parker, Porter and Preston).

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