

Table for One

A New York woman follows an impulse to dinner in Madrid

By DAWN DRZAL

“**T**HERE isn’t a woman I know who hasn’t wanted to put an ocean between herself and her husband at some point,” my friend remarked when I apologized for not returning her call sooner. At noon a week before, standing in painfully bright February sunshine, I’d realized that I couldn’t bear to be home when my husband returned from a business trip later that day. By 6:30 that evening, I was on a plane to Europe.

Nothing terribly dramatic had precipitated my trip. My husband and I had argued before he left, and suddenly the prospect of going through the motions of normalcy in front of our 5-year-old seemed to drain all the life out of me. In the middle of Astor Place, far from our apartment, I was struck with an epiphany:

No law said I had to be there when he got back. I could go off by myself someplace. Someplace far away. Right away.

My feet propelled me into the nearby Barnes & Noble, where five minutes of flipping through “A Journey of One’s Own: Uncommon Advice for the Independent Woman Traveler” and “A Woman Alone: Travel Tales From Around the Globe” convinced me that it might not be a great idea to wander alone through the medina in Marrakesh or explore the caves of Cappadocia in Turkey by myself. In the end, I settled on Spain.

I carried my shopping bag of guide books over to an Internet cafe on Cooper Square. In little more than an hour, fingers trembling, I had booked a round-trip ticket to Madrid and a vastly discounted reservation at the Hotel Adler, a luxury boutique hotel that would ordinarily have been out of my range.

I even had time to send my husband an e-mail message explaining where I was going and why. Then, it was just a matter of packing, telling my son and babysitter I had to visit a sick friend (and that Daddy would be home soon), and getting to the airport.

I had let the hotel know that I would be arriving at 10 a.m. In my experience, the only way to deal with jet lag is to sleep it off, and I intended to take a nice, civilized nap and wake up fresh for dinner. (I had too many memories of being marched, headachy and gravel-eyed, through a European city the day I arrived.) After an assortment of tiny pastries and some orange juice, I crawled gratefully between smooth, lavender-scent-

ed sheets and slept.

Dusk had fallen when I opened the shutters at 5:30, and the stores below my double-glazed windows were just reopening after a siesta almost as long as my own. If I had been in France, I would have faced a frustrating lull before dinner. But this was Spain, so I had time for a quick shower and some shopping.

On my way out through the flower-filled lobby, I asked the concierge to book me a 10 o’clock reservation at the celebrated Pedro Larumbe. I had heard enough tales of forlorn tourists sitting in empty restaurants at 8 or 9 o’clock.

Nothing about the shadowy, unmarked exterior of Pedro Larumbe could have prepared me for the dining room. At the head of two flights of worn marble stairs, a faded velvet curtain was swept aside to reveal a dazzle of Art Nouveau frescoes. Slender ivory-skinned women, their dresses intricately spangled in green and gold, comported themselves on every wall in stylized forests

filled with fantastic trees. I was ushered to a corner table for four.

As soon as I had made myself comfortable the dapper young captain-sommelier was at my side.

"Would you care for a cocktail, Señora?"

"I'd like to see the wine list, please."

"Here is a list of wines by the glass," he said, opening a menu and handing it to me.

"No, thank you. I'd like to see the wine list, please."

To my surprise, he stayed where he was. "I think you'll find, Señora, that we have a very nice selection."

I closed the offending document and put it on the table.

"I don't think you understand," I said, turning to look up at him and forcing myself to smile a little. "I love wine."

I tried to think of how to convey that I was serious without being obnoxious. Should I mention that I'd been a wine book editor? That I'd been certified by the Wine & Spirit Education Trust?

Inspiration arrived: "My husband and his family own a vineyard in Côte Rôtie."

His eyes lit up.

"And now that I am finally in your country," I drove my point home, "I would like to drink a good bottle, perhaps a Priorato or Pesquera de Duero."

"Ah, Señora," he straightened, then gave the tiniest of bows. "Welcome to Spain."

He whispered something to a passing waiter, who returned almost instantly with a leather-bound burgundy tome. The captain began leafing through it very fast, talking as much to himself as to me: "Yes, a fine wine, made from Spanish grapes." Finally, he thrust a page in front of me.

"This is a beautiful wine," he said, pointing. "The Malleolus 2000, from Emilio Moro." It was also not unreasonably priced.

"Wonderful," I said. "Now I have to decide what to eat with it."

To my relief, the menu he was in both English and Spanish. No need to spend half the evening frantically consulting my "World

Food Guide" under the tablecloth.

Obviously, I couldn't choose seafood with such a red wine, although that was the restaurant's specialty, so after much deliberation I chose the Iberian pork cheeks with oloroso sherry on a swirl of apple and pea purée. The wine was indeed beautiful, very young but bursting with fruit.

As I ate and drank, I observed my surroundings, not only the extraordinary room but also the other guests. It occurred to me that having been a New Yorker for 20 years, had given me a lot of practice in eating alone. All those unremarkable meals at sushi bars and coffee shops and ordinary restaurants had made me comfortable even in a setting like this. And one of the unexpected boons of turning 40 was losing the crippling self-consciousness that had caused me such agonies most of my traveling life.

When I had finished my meal, the captain reappeared, surprised and relieved. "This is a very Spanish dish, Señora," he said. "I was very worried that you would not like it. No foreigner has ever ordered this dish. But I thought, with the wine."

I turned down dessert, but requested some cheese. He nodded approvingly and went off to choose it. I drank only a sip as I waited, trying to prolong my state of perfect intoxication. In a few minutes, he reappeared with a plate of six perfect cheeses.

"Is that Idiazabal?" I said, pointing to a golden wedge, one of my favorites.

He raised his eyebrows, surprised perhaps that an American should know a Spanish cheese beyond manchego, then smiled. I motioned toward the decanter, still half full. "I hope you'll do me the honor of finishing this with your dinner."

He beamed. "It will be my pleasure."

With the check — which came to only about \$55 without the wine — he brought me a large booklet about Spanish cheeses (in Spanish), a brochure in English about tapas, and his card.

"Now Señora," he said with great seriousness, "you need to learn to speak Spanish."

As I drank my coffee, he bustled around the dining room. He stood at the back when the rest of the staff gathered on the landing to say goodnight, and I descended the uneven stairs carefully, a little tentative on my high heels after so much wine.

When the chilly air of the street hit my face, I looked at my watch. It was 1 a.m., 7 p.m. in New York. My husband must be walking in the door about now, I thought. As I hailed a cab, I felt a twinge of conscience at my slightly operatic escape and wondered, a bit guiltily, whether he would be able to get dinner on the table fast enough to keep our son from melting down.