

<p>CASA DE PLAYA 39 MAIN ST, MORNINGTON PH: 5976 1276</p>	
<p>FOOD Spanish influenced</p>	<p>TIME BETWEEN ORDERING AND EATING 18 mins</p>
<p>HOURS Daily from 10am (closed Tues)</p>	<p>PERFECT FOR A long, lazy lunch</p>
<p>CHEFS Fred Keene and Steph Price</p>	<p>DESTINATION DISH The rib eye</p>
<p>BOOKINGS Yes</p>	<p>NOISE FACTOR Music can drown conversation</p>
<p>TABLE FOR TWO @12.30PM? Yes</p>	
<p>ONLINE casadeplaya.com.au</p>	



Casa de Playa in Mornington has both substance and style

Herald Sun

July 22, 2016

MORNINGTON'S Main St provides a perfect snapshot of our current cultural obsessions.

Along its length you'll find craft beers (Mr Paul's), artisan burgers (Thanks Albert), cool and funky Asian-style snacks (Merchant Lane), wood-fired pizza (DOC) and locally roasted beans at one of the dozen cafes that line the strip.

None of which, of course, would look out of place in the inner city. Likewise, the tattooist, skate shop, or the retro-cool barber ready to tend to all those bushy beards. So it was only a matter of time before the Jospo oven — the hottest piece of kitchen kit chefs across town covet — found its way down here.

This all-in-one charcoal-fired grill that's imported from Spain and revered for the smokiness it imparts takes pride of place in the open kitchen at Casa de Playa. This stylish newcomer, which opened in February, bears little in common with the La Porchetta that it replaced; its gleaming whitewashed facade, funky fitout and glistening brewery-fresh Carlton Draught tanks would be equally at home much closer to town.

This city sensibility makes sense given Francisco Valles is the head of this casa. Having introduced Melbourne's CBD to the concept of the day-through-night-through-early morning cafe-restaurant-bar with much-loved Hairy Canary two decades ago, Valles is well versed in hospitality, having opened north of a dozen over his career.

He retired to the peninsula a couple of years back but, as they say, if hospitality is in your blood, it's hard to quit.



The enthusiastic young team makes for a properly good time at Casa de Playa. Picture: Jason Sammon

FOOD

That Jospers, of course, is put to good use. There's great chorizo, dense with pork and with a good hit of smoky paprika heat (\$12), and excellent roasted chook, where crisp-tanned skin hides wonderfully flavoursome, juicy meat (\$18). But the oven's true prowess comes to the fore on the hefty 450g rib eye.

The Flinders-reared steak is so tender there's no need for anything heftier than a butter knife, the meat with a lovely smoky sweetness highlighted with perfect medium-rare cooking. It's excellent unadorned, which is lucky, as the chimichurri (an Argentinian green sauce) needed more everything — more oregano and parsley and much more garlic — to do justice to such excellent meat (\$38).

But no faulting spot-on croquettes — three fat fingers with a brilliant crack to the crust enclose a baccala-and-caramelised-onion mix that gets the sweet and salt balance right (\$12.50).

Good aioli to swipe them through also turns up next to a pot of smoked tomato salsa to dunk nicely spiced crisp patatas bravas into (\$9).

"I don't like molten cheese to scoop from the pot," said no one ever, and the heady mix of manchego, buffalo mozzarella, haloumi and pecorino, teamed with slices of smoked jalapeño for heat and melted in the oven is a flag-bearer for everything good about hot cheese and charred bread (\$13).

A small line in tacos gives good snack — crunchy-battered fish nuggets served with a corn and red onion relish on soft tortilla are a satisfying few bites (\$16.50 for 3). And there are big pans of paella — traditional and vegetarian — for the heartier appetite (\$22/\$46).

To finish, every second table is rightfully digging into a board laden with cinnamon sugar-dusted churros, with a Turkish copper coffee pot full of excellent Valrhona chocolate to dunk them into, bettered by the scoop of silken salted caramel ice cream from Vespa's gelateria a few doors down (\$14).

DRINKS

Wines on the short list keep things cleverly on theme, with Mornington Peninsula drops bolstered by a few bottles imported from Spain.

A few of each colour are offered by the glass (most sub \$10), with a couple of premium locals, such as Paringa Estate, minimally marked up.

Little Rebel, a small roaster in Dromana, supplies the coffee and it's treated with due respect here — a textbook long macchiato is a perfect finale to this lunch. But it's just as easy to kick on with a few Mornington Brewery pale ale schooners if that unpasteurised Carlton hasn't wet your whistle first.



The rib eye shows the Jospers's true prowess. Picture: Jason Sammon

SERVICE

Along with a switched-on bartender — who also ran drinks to tables on this busy Saturday lunch — the young team, guided by a couple of older experienced hands who are excellent, is enthusiastic and keen, all of which makes for a properly enjoyable time.

X-FACTOR

This really is the most stylish spot on the strip. Beautiful woven wool lampshades and patterned noise panels on the roof add interesting flair, while the upstairs light-filled atrium — used mainly for functions but also weekends when a DJ spins some smooth tunes until late — has an open fire and lounge for a cheeky red on a winter's arvo.

It's attracting a mixed crowd of gal pals catching up, dating duos doing coffee over papers and older couples coming by for late afternoon drinks, along with extended families with a few prams and children during the day. After dark, dinner transforms into late-night drinkers.

BANG FOR YOUR BUCK

Like all tapas menus, the small dishes can add up by the time all's done, but the menu across the board is fairly priced for quality produce cooked well.

VERDICT

This is one classy casa that has substance to back up its style. The peninsula has a new Playa that might become a new obsession.



Salted cod Croquettes. Picture: Jason Sammon