

SIT, SIP WINE AND LINGER AWHILE IN MÁLAGA

Moira Muldoon

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My cousin has entrusted me with his daughter's soul. In other words, I am now officially a godmother. ("Now you have to stay Catholic forever," my brother hooted. "Naw," I responded. "I just have to make sure she does.") So, one gray January weekend, I was in Dallas, dressed in my finest, to promise young Stella that I'll help her reject Satan and all his works, should her parents fail to do so.

I also, on my own, promised to read her poetry early and often (I'm thinking of William Blake's "Songs of Innocence" or William Wordsworth's "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" as good starting places). I promise to go shoe shopping with her (and her mother). And someday, when she's of age, I just might take her for an afternoon of wine tasting and talk and tapas.

Perhaps to someplace like Málaga.

Smack-dab in the middle of the Warehouse District, Málaga is a wine and tapas bar. Not that it stints on a full bar — you can find all the basic liquors, from Grey Goose to sundry scotches. But with 50 wines by the glass (many priced at \$5 and \$6) and 300 wines by the bottle, the issue of the grape tends to be the more interesting choice. During happy hour, select wines can be paired with select tapas for \$6 (happy hour runs from 5 to 7 p.m., Mondays-Saturdays).

Málaga stretches long and deep, rather than wide, and resides above one part of Cedar Street Courtyard. The bar area offers stool and eating space, and tables abound for regular dinner settings. Chef Alejandro Duran leads wine and cooking classes at 6:30 p.m. on select Tuesdays (\$40 per person, which includes two wines and two prepared dishes), so folks who want to learn how to make paella (March 21), for example, can then create it at home.

Tapas — small, tasting-size dishes — involve fabulous words such as "manchego," "Romanesco sauce" and "tortilla" (meaning the Spanish potato version, not the flat round Mexican flour/corn/wheat version). They're largely good. They also invite a kind of lingering over conversation, a verbal dipping into this and that as you taste one, then another, item.

Málaga can be noisy and full of commotion or sleepy on a weekday evening. Sometimes the bartenders might not respond as fast as you might like (though perhaps that's because you are deep in conversation and don't look like you need attention), but it's a good place for long wine- and talk-fueled nights. The back area can be closed off for private parties: I saw one at Christmastime and it looked like revelry kind of fun. (Contact Celeste Shepherd at 299-9550 ext. 14 to arrange events.)

It's Lent now, a time for all good Irish Catholic girls to reflect on and prepare for spring

and renewal. It's traditionally also thought of as a time of fasting and of giving up (I briefly contemplated giving up alcohol, then found myself drinking a beer at Billy's on Burnet the very first day — oh well).

So this afternoon, as I finished my column and sipped a beer, I turned instead back to Blake (who, for the record, did some amazing illustrations of the Bible) and thought about what I'd read to small Stella. The "Laughing Song, " of course.

"When the painted birds laugh in the shade, / Where our table with cherries and nuts is spread, / Come live & be merry, and join with me, / To sing the sweet chorus of 'Ha, Ha, He!' "

Málaga. 208 W. Fourth St. 236-8020; Monday-Wednesday, 5 p.m.-midnight, Thursday-Saturday 5 p.m.-2 a.m.