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QUICK BITES

COCONUT GROVE

Spanish flavors, ambience mingle at Ideas

■ Off the beaten track of Coconut Grove's restaurant row, Ideas Restaurant attracts the Spanish community and anyone else who loves great food from Spain.

BY TSITSI D. WAKHISI
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Standing next to a counter in his spotless stainless-steel kitchen, James Figueroa-Perez considers a number of silverware patterns on display for his approval at Ideas Restaurant in Coconut Grove.

The chef is careful to choose from among 18 sets of knives, forks and spoons.

One sleek and curvy flatware pattern is too modern, he decides. "Look at the soup spoon," he said. "It looks nice but the design is not functional. The soup would fall out of it."

Figueroa-Perez also ruled out another set. "This one would be good for your house or my house," he said. "Yes, I would have it in my house, but not in my restaurant."

The elegant Ideas Restaurant caters to a chic clientele, about a third of whom comes from Spain or Europe, said Jeanette Perez, whose varied responsibilities with the restaurant's parent company, American Business Center, include handling publicity.

Since opening in October 2006 in a former two-story residence-turned restaurant, Ideas has featured the cuisine and products of Castilla y León, the largest of Spain's 17 autonomous regions.

The restaurant is one of the ventures of American Business Center, a conglomerate of businesses owned by Spaniard José Luis Esteve. American Business highlights the food, fashion and culture of Castilla y León. Cor-

If you go

- What: Ideas Restaurant
- Where: 2833 Bird Ave., Coconut Grove
- Hours: Lunch: noon-3:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; dinner 7-10:30 or 11 p.m. Monday-Saturday; closed on Sundays
- Reservations: Recommended but not required.
- Credit cards: All majors accepted.
- For information: 305-567-9074 or www.ideasrestaurant.com/default.aspx. Metered parking and limited parking in the back.

porate offices and the restaurant share the same building, 2833 Bird Ave., which housed several Italian eateries before Ideas moved in.

At Ideas, the accents — from the fish flown in twice a week to the 151-label wine list — are distinctively Spanish, even the chefs.

Until three months ago with Figueroa-Perez's arrival, all of the chefs have not only been Spanish, but from Castilla y León.

Although he is Spanish by birth, Figueroa-Perez does not come from Castilla y León but from the Andalusia province. He has lived in Turkey, Morocco and Brazil. He completed high school and college in Puerto Rico.

A fifth-generation chef, he began cooking in his grandmother's kitchen at age 15 and completed his formal training in 2006 at Cordon Bleu in Miami. He most recently was the executive sous chef at Eggwhites Catering based in North Miami.

"I am so honored that they

would consider me for this position," said Figueroa-Perez, 31, who replaces Felipe Perez who returned to Spain after working at Ideas for about a year.

Figueroa-Perez is not only redoing the table settings (he decided on a modern flatware design neither too classical nor whimsical), but he is tinkering with the current summer menu and planning for the fall menu, which, with the new place settings, will debut in September.

Figueroa-Perez said he is broadening the menu to incorporate more of Spain and the Mediterranean. For example, the Moroccan-spiced lamb chop seasoned with cinnamon, honey and walnuts (\$35) served with raisin couscous is popular.

"It's one of our big hits," he said. "I'm using my creativity but giving it a Spanish flair."

Other additions include a paella (\$25) from Valencia and is made with chicken, chorizo and rabbit. The cod fish (\$29) is Biscayne-style from the Basque region.

The menu also includes an executive lunch offerings for under \$20, which includes an appetizer, entree, beverage and dessert. That menu changes daily, and customers can request to have it e-mailed to them.

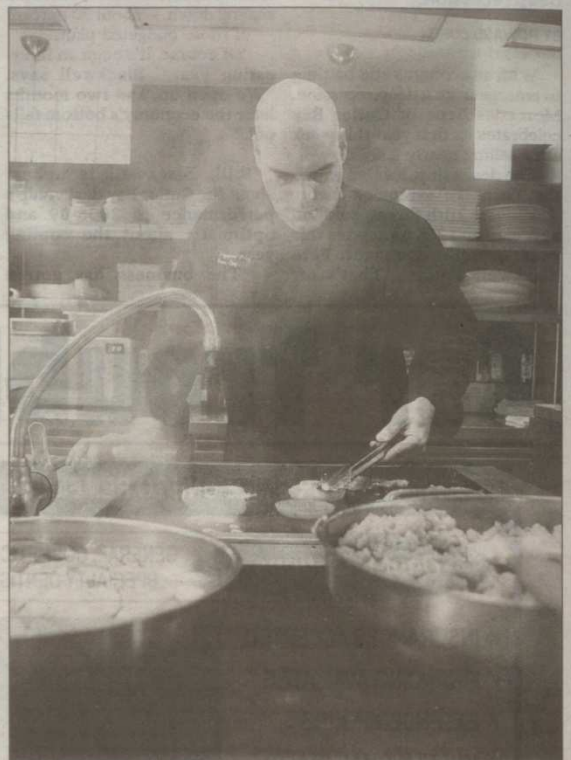
While many customers hail from Spain, some just have traveled to Spain or love Spanish and continental cuisine, Perez said. Other customers live nearby.

Longtime customer Hal Lobree of Pinecrest fits two of the categories.

"It's an undiscovered gem of a restaurant," Lobree said.

A travel hobbyist, Lobree said he used to lead tour groups of VIPs, including U.S. hotel owners, to Spain where they would dine in some of the country's best restaurants.

Now Lobree enjoys taking



ALLISON DIAZ/FOR THE MIAMI HERALD

A FEAST FOR THE PALATE: Executive chef James Figueroa-Perez prepares a few of the menu items at Ideas Restaurant. It has been pleasing customers since 2006 with authentic Spanish cuisine and Castillon wines.

friends to Ideas.

"The ambience is beautiful; the service is perfect, and the food is the best in the county," he said.

Guests enter the restaurant, which occupies the ground floor of the building, to a small bar area that leads into an intimate dining room of 13 tables. A large

glass window and sliding door separate the kitchen from the dining room, but patrons can see into the kitchen where the chef is creating his magic.

The aromas of Spain, as well as its music, fill the restaurant, providing an enjoyable experience — even for those who never have been to Spain.