

Behind the plate: Meet John Castellucci, culinary director of The Iberian Pig

Nancy Vienneau Special to Nashville Tennessean

Published 5:01 a.m. CT Feb. 14, 2024 | Updated 5:01 a.m. CT Feb. 14, 2024



 8 Photos

[VIEW FULL GALLERY](#) 

Spanish tapas restaurant makes splash in The Gulch

John Castellucci draws influences from all regions of Spain

When it comes to the life of restaurants and hospitality, John Castellucci and his siblings, Fred and Stephanie, come by it honestly.

Their family shares a legacy started by grandfather, Arcito, in 1940s-era Rhode Island. Parents, Federico II and Nancy, moved the family to Atlanta in 1996 to continue that pursuit, opening (and later selling) six locations of Roasted Garlic restaurant before opening Sugo in 2003.

These days, the family-owned Castellucci Hospitality Group operates a constellation of restaurants in the greater Atlanta area, including highly-acclaimed The Iberian Pig, launched in 2014. This fall, the family made its first foray outside Atlanta, introducing its second location of the modern Spanish tapas restaurant and bar to Music City in The Gulch.

John leads the team as CHG's culinary director.

How did you find your path as a chef, and culinary director?

Growing up the youngest of three in a boisterous Italian household, I found my zone behind the scenes, in the kitchen. I was very comfortable working with food. At the family restaurant, I started as dishwasher, then trained on the different stations and came to love the teamwork, the camaraderie.



John Castellucci is culinary director of The Iberian Pig.
Andrew Thomas Lee

I love sports, and I see the kitchen as an extension of that—how we all work together, under pressure, from prep to sauté, to grill to plating, making delicious food that people love. It's exhilarating! It was sometime in high school that I began to consider it as a career path.

My parents never pushed it on me; they knew firsthand the long hours, the stress and hard work. My mind was blown when I went to (the Culinary Institute of America at) Hyde Park. I found like-minded people who felt the way I did. The passion! After graduating, I moved around to many cities—New York, San Francisco, San Sebastián (in) Spain—to expose myself to, and work under other chefs.

Tell us about your creative process in designing the menu.

We have broad lee-way with creativity at The Iberian Pig, as we draw inspiration from all the regions of Spain as well as the influences from neighboring France and North Africa. We don't claim to be authentic; rather, we are inspired by Spanish techniques, ingredients and flavors.

My goal is to structure a menu that does not intimidate someone new to the cuisine, and at the same time, strike a balance, offer dishes for more adventurous palates. The crispy bechamel-filled croquetas, and the Bikini—petite grilled cheese sandwiches with Jamón and black truffle—are approachable comforts that appeal to just about everyone.

What ingredient would you feel lost without?

In cooking, it would be garlic. It is so versatile. I can create a base for a sauce; I can make garlic confit for background note; I can caramelize it for needed savory-sweetness in a dish, and grate it raw to add a strong top note. Otherwise, my choice would be sherry vinegar. It's such a flavorful acid, to balance a fat.

What is your favorite kitchen tool?

A cake tester. We use it to test the heat and texture of meats and vegetables. Insert it, and a hit on the wrist will tell you better than a thermometer about the desired internal temperature—the warmth level. With practice, you will also know the feel, the resistance of whatever it is you are cooking. The cake tester, in your pocket, is part of your uniform.



The Iberian Pig serves charcuterie boards with meats and cheeses and the sauces, jams, and garnishes. *Andrew Thomas Lee*

Say it's my first time to dine at The Iberian Pig. How would you guide me?

Start with a charcuterie board. We take pride in its composition—not only the meats and cheeses but all the sauces, jams, and garnishes. I recommend the Paleta Iberico, cured pork shoulder, which is more flavorful than the Jamón (ham.) And, order the KM 39, a cheese not unlike Parmesan. It is more unique than the more commonly offered Manchego and Mahon. Then, I'd recommend sharing the Coca con Seta: roasted mushroom flatbread with shiitake crema and black truffle.

Our Salmon set, with saffron-cava cream, is super-delicious. The Costillas, our Saint Louis pork ribs in pimenton glaze, is our take, in a way, on barbecue. We really let the carrots shine in our Zanahorias dish, with the warming spices and coconut milk, it gives off a curry vibe. What else? Our risotto, characterized by its meld of braised pork cheeks and Idiazabal cheese. For dessert, it's got to be Xuixo.

Say it's my first time to dine at The Iberian Pig. How would you guide me?

Start with a charcuterie board. We take pride in its composition—not only the meats and cheeses but all the sauces, jams, and garnishes. I recommend the Paleta Iberico, cured pork shoulder, which is more flavorful than the Jamón (ham.) And, order the KM 39, a cheese not unlike Parmesan. It is more unique than the more commonly offered Manchego and Mahon. Then, I'd recommend sharing the Coca con Seta: roasted mushroom flatbread with shiitake crema and black truffle.

Our Salmon set, with saffron-cava cream, is super-delicious. The Costillas, our Saint Louis pork ribs in pimenton glaze, is our take, in a way, on barbecue. We really let the carrots shine in our Zanahorias dish, with the warming spices and coconut milk, it gives off a curry vibe. What else? Our risotto, characterized by its meld of braised pork cheeks and Idiazabal cheese. For dessert, it's got to be Xuixo, a warm pastry with sherry cream that I'd pair with Amontillado sherry gelato.

What are you working on now that you are excited for guests to try?

We are always looking ahead to introduce seasonal dishes to the menu. At the same time, there is the immediacy of creating specials for the here and now. I've been working on a porcelet (young milk-fed pig) shank dish that is slow-cooked to rich, creamy tenderness.

You work closely with your brother and sister. Can you speak to your relationships as siblings and restaurant partners?

I've been asked that often, as some people find it daunting to work with family. One important aspect is that we each have distinct areas of focus: Fred, our CEO and president, is the Big Picture guy; Stephanie oversees operations, keeps them running smoothly, makes sure our staffing is strong and our service on point. I work on the menu development for The Iberian Pig and our other concepts.

We share great trust, that we will do our best in our areas of expertise. At the heart, though, is our mutual respect and love. It is awesome to get that sense of growth and development, personally and in the business. And we believe that it's not about us. You have to remove the ego to be successful. It is all about our guests and their experience.

The Iberian Pig

iberianpig.com/nashville

607 Overton St. in Nashville. 615-844-4242

Hours: 4-10 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 4-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday, 4-9 p.m. Sunday

Jamón happy hour: 4-6 p.m. daily