



Qú by Mario Sandoval JW Marriott

MADRID

For his first hotel-based venture, two-Michelin-starred chef Mario Sandoval creates the dining offer for JW Marriott's Spanish debut.

Words: Agnish Ray • Photography: Courtesy of Marriott International

If the greatest hotel chains are landing in Madrid, it's not by coincidence," says chef Mario Sandoval, speaking of his home city. Spaniards know him best as the chef behind Coque, an iconic fine-dining temple in Madrid with two Michelin stars, but hotels are next on his agenda. The intrepid restaurateur has created the dining offer for JW Marriott's first venture in Spain, a 139-key property that opened in the capital city last spring.

Famed for its inventive presentation, never-ending tasting menus and sequential movement around its various spaces, Coque blazes a trail in contemporary Spanish innovation – but its origins date back generations. Sandoval's grandfather, whose name was Coque, first opened his eponymous tavern in a small town south of Madrid in 1947; he later handed it down to his daughter, who took on the family business and raised her sons among the lively hubbub of the restaurant.

"It was a sincere, natural cuisine," recalls Sandoval, whose love of simple, local produce stems from these childhood memories in the family business, which included a pig farm and vegetable garden. "People would come from the surrounding villages to eat the cochinitillo and other dishes my parents would make."

His new restaurant, called Qú, looks further afield, with an offer focused on attracting the interest and approval of holidaymakers visiting Spain from across the world. Around

80% of the hotel's clientele is American, and Sandoval describes the restaurant as "the entry point to Spanish haute cuisine", with a menu curated specially for a foreign diner.

Designed by Rockwell Group, the seven-storey building was once home to the Álvarez Gómez perfumery, one of Madrid's oldest. Emerging from the dimly lit, moody tones of the hotel hallways, Qú is characterised by original wrought iron columns, sapphire walls and marble floors, while vast windows, custom long-stemmed chandeliers and handblown glass wall sconces provide additional layers of light.

Today, Sandoval's own suckling pig is one of his most famous dishes at Coque – and it features on Qú's menu too. Handed down through generations, the roast is a staple in much of Castilian cuisine, particularly in regions like Segovia, where it is ubiquitous in tavern lunches. A discerning foreign diner might be puzzled by its simplicity amidst an otherwise elaborate context, but Sandoval holds the seemingly humble dish with great esteem within his vision of high cuisine.

He admits, however, that there are certain secrets to making the dish truly special. Most importantly, the breed; his parents taught him that the John Dallas pig – a mix between Piétrain and Duroc, which has 30% less fat than Segovia's Iberian pig – produces exquisite results. "Mixed-breed pigs with less fat are better for roasting," he explains. "For jamón ibérico, it's the opposite; the Iberian pig needs to be pure-



The menu showcases meaty Spanish delicacies, from suckling pig and veal shank to sirloin steak wellington



bred and eat lots of acorns, which makes better ham.” The trick is in the preparation, too. “We roast it in an oak wood oven,” the chef reveals, “placing it on a rack above a roasting tin, so that the cochinillo can cook not in its own juices, but through the vapour, without touching the liquid itself.” At Qú, such Spanish staples sit alongside other meaty delicacies like a veal shank, which is slow-cooked at a low temperature, or a sirloin steak wellington, whose rich meat is enveloped in comforting pastry.

Several adventurous touches infuse the menu: the starters include two varieties of salmorejo (a thick, cold soup) – tomato and mango – and partridge pickled in Amontillado sherry. Iranian Beluga caviar is served on brioche doused in clarified butter, while chanterelle mushrooms are bathed in a foie gras reduction, and jalapeños and ginger give the prawn carpaccio a spicy kick.

Much of the produce on the menu comes from the Sandovals’ own farm, El Jaral de la Mira, a 45-minute drive from the centre of Madrid. Here, they produce onions, courgettes, tomatoes, green pedrosillano chickpeas, lettuce, broccoli and more. Sandoval says that although visitors may think Madrid starts and ends with its urban centre, he wants them to have a first-hand taste of its strong agricultural offer.



Whether at Coque or their new ventures, the Sandoval operation remains a family business, with Mario's two elder brothers heading up their own strands of work. While Mario is in charge of gastronomy, Diego acts as maître d' in charge of all front-of-house operations.

For the drinks offer, sommelier Rafael has curated a selection of over 200 wines for Qú, from a minerally Meseta Sur from Castilla-La Mancha fermented in a clay pot, with just 500 bottles produced per year, to a rioja from López de Heredia and a Château Violet-Lamothe.

Sandoval may be a dab hand at dinners, but the hotel venture has given him the opportunity to tackle an all-day dining offer as well as other mealtimes, including room service. But Qú's breakfast is what has him most excited: "Breakfast isn't very well cared for in Spain's big hotels," he says, insisting that too many rely on mass suppliers to provide their breakfast goods, rather than producing on-site. Qú has its own specialist team of bakers and pâtisseries who make the breads, croissants and pastries

served every morning, ranging from tomato bread and wine bread to brioche infused with rum, lemon and honey. "We believe that the most important meal of the day is breakfast," states the chef, who wants JW Marriott's Madrid outpost to be a reference for the group in how to breakfast like a king. "We've put 60% of our energy in the project into making the best breakfast in Madrid."

Now 46, Sandoval and his brothers took over from their parents in 1999. "When I started out, being a chef from Madrid didn't mean much," he says. "It was all about the Basques and the Catalans. But now Spanish cuisine has been democratised – you can eat just as well in Cádiz and Cordoba as in the north."

With Four Seasons across the road, JW Marriott joins a cluster of international brands that have taken on the Spanish capital, including Rosewood, Mandarin Oriental and Edition, each battling it out for the most appealing food offer. "There's a revolution in Madrid," says Sandoval. "And I feel like a part of it."



IN A BITE

Operator: Marriott International
 Interior Design: Rockwell Group
 Executive Chef: Mario Sandoval
 Glassware: Chef & Sommelier
www.marriott.com