



## TAPAS: SPANISH STYLE EATING

Visitors to Spain didn't use to rank food, especially tapas, ahead of, say, Gaudí in the greater scheme of their travel ambitions, but all this has changed in recent years. Travelers are finding that the food is as good a reason for exploring Spain as any other. This is especially true when it comes to that most Spanish of all creations, the most paradigmatic celebration of the make-it-up-as-you-go-along quality of life south of the Pyrenees—the *tapa* (small morsel or hors d'oeuvre; derived from the verb *tapar*, meaning "to cover"). An evening perambulating from one tapas bar to another can make a delightful dining adventure in Barcelona, and needn't preclude a late dinner.

As with much of Spain's agricultural and culinary heritage, the history of tapas owes much to the 781-year (711—1492) Moorish presence on the Iberian Peninsula. The Moors brought with them exotic ingredients such as saffron, almonds, and peppers; introduced sweets and pastries; and created refreshing dishes such as cold almond- and vegetable-based soups still popular today. The Moorish taste for small and varied delicacies has become Spain's best-known culinary innovation. The term *tapa* itself is said to have come from pieces of ham or cheese laid across glasses of wine, both to keep flies out and to keep stagecoach drivers sober.

It is said that as far back as the 13th century, ailing Spanish king Alfonso X El Sabio ("The Learned") took small morsels with wine on his doctor's advice and so enjoyed the cure that he made it a regular practice in his court. Even Cervantes refers to tapas as *llamativos* (attention getters), for their stimulating properties, in *Don Quixote*. Often miniature versions of classic Spanish dishes, tapas allow you to sample different kinds of food and wine with minimal alcohol intake, especially on a *tapeo*—the Spanish version of a pub crawl: you walk off your wine and tapas as you move around.

A few standard tapas to watch for: *calamares fritos* (fried squid or cuttlefish), *pulpo a feira* (octopus on slices of potato), *chopitos* (baby octopuses), *chistorra* (fried spicy sausage), *chorizo* (hard pork sausage), *champiñones* (mushrooms), *setas* (wild mushrooms), *gambas al ajillo* (shrimp cooked in parsley, oil, and garlic), *langostinos* (jumbo shrimp or prawns), *patatas bravas* (potatoes in spicy sauce), *pimientos de Padrón* (peppers, some very hot, from the Galician town of Padrón), *sardinas* (fresh sardines cooked in garlic and parsley), *chanquetes* (whitebait cooked in oil and parsley), and *salmonetes* (small red mullet).

The generic term *tapas* covers various forms of small-scale dining generally enjoyed at a

# Epicurean Ways



FOOD & WINE ROUTES OF SPAIN

counter and often on foot. *Tentempiés* are small snacks designed to "keep you on your feet." *Pinchos* are bite-size offerings impaled on toothpicks; *banderillas* are similar, so called because the toothpick is wrapped in colorful paper resembling the batons used in bullfights. *Montaditos* are canapés, innovative combinations of delicacies "mounted" on toast; *raciones* (rations, or servings) are hot tapas served in small earthenware casseroles.

The preference for small quantities of different dishes also shows up in sit-down restaurants, where you can often order a variety of small delicacies *para picar* (to pick at), often called *entretenimientos*. Postmodern Spanish cooking, the foams and deconstructions of Ferran Adrià and his disciples are, when all is said and done, little more than a few dozen miniature servings of experimental tastes and textures.

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