



Tapas and Tipples

We've all had a menu moment, when every dish sounds so good you can't choose. That's why tapas is such a popular concept. Giselle Whiteaker dines on Spanish tapas in a London location.

According to legend, back in the 13th century, King Alfonso X of Castille found that while he was recuperating from an illness, he could only eat and drink in small amounts. He became so fond of the habit that he went on to issue a decree that all drinks should be served with a small snack. Hence tapas was born.

There are numerous alternative explanations, but whatever the origin, tapas has taken the world by storm. There's something satisfying about nibbling on a snack alongside a cold drink; all the better if that snack packs more flavour than a handful of salted peanuts. The small-plate phenomenon has become so popular that the concept has been appropriated for use with cuisines ranging from Greek to Gallic, but few, if any, do it better than the Spanish.

World Tapas Day passed me by unnoticed in mid-June, but unwilling to miss a Spanish feast, my friend Lily and I head to The Tapas Room for a belated celebration. The Tapas Room is the sister business to the acclaimed Pop Brixton restaurant Donostia Social Club and the associated DSC Imports, which specialises in the exclusive distribution of Basque and Spanish wines and beers to the London bar and restaurant industry.

Given its pedigree, and the success of the original Tapas Room in Tooting Broadway, which opened only a year or so ago, we're expecting good things of the latest opening in Deptford.

Like the majority of the patrons at The Tapas Room tonight, we choose to sit at an outdoor table in the

up-and-coming Deptford Market Yard. We slide onto high bar stools and Chef and Owner Paul Belcher swings by to talk us through the tapas menu, while his partner in life, Bel Shapiro, brings us Vermouth Spritzers, the dark spirit topped up with cava and garnished with a spring of rosemary. It's The Tapas Room's take on a classic Spanish wine cocktail and it's the perfect aperitif for a warm day. Given the wine-importing background of Paul and Adrian Copplestone in the DSC Imports venture, we'll be moving on to the 70-strong bottle list next.

It isn't long before our first plate lands on the table – boquerones (marinated white anchovies) with Piquillo peppers and lemon oil. This is one of those odd combinations of ingredients I often avoid come together to form a taste-bud smashing sensation. Each bite is deliciously tangy, an explosion of flavour.

We've also requested a small selection of meat and cheese – a requirement in any tapas session. "That is an award-winning cheese," says Bel, pointing to the Monternera de Cabra, which was declared the winner of the Deptford Cheese Cup. In our minds, everything on the slate platter is worthy of an award, including the Catalan Fuet, a thin, dry-cured pork sausage.

We're still munching our way through this offering when two enormous scallops arrive, sitting in their shells on a dollop of Pisto (Spanish ratatouille), drizzled with green chilli sauce. Almond slivers lend crunch to the plump, buttery morsels, seared to perfection, which are topped with mustard frills, the tiny, deep purple leaves adding to the visual beauty of the dish. These were firm favourites on the Donostia Social Club menu and we understand why.

Next to arrive is a tower of octopus, resting on a bed of Piquillo pepper sauce and topped with samphire. "The octopus is cooked on the boat as soon as it's caught and frozen immediately afterwards, then exported," explains

Paul. This keeps it tasting as if it has just come from the ocean, with smoky undertones from being chargrilled.

I'm drawn to duck, so when I saw it on the menu paired with Spanish hummus, quince and orange, I knew I had to give it a try. The perfectly pink slices of breast meat are melt-in-the-mouth tender, and the quince and orange add a sweet hit. It's simply delicious.

"I'm so glad we ordered this," says Lily after a mouthful of truffled wild mushrooms, topped with a quail egg



and PX sherry glaze. I agree. The rich, earthy flavours are delectable, leading us nicely back to the remnants of the meat and cheese platter, which we slowly devour as we polish off the last drops of wine in our glasses.

This is tapas at its finest – authentic Spanish ingredients, exquisite flavour combinations, and a chef who understands the provenance of the produce and knows exactly what to do with it. Add that to an ethos of community engagement and participation, and you have a place to come back to, time and time again.





The Tapas Room's Seared Scallops and Spanish Ratatouille (Pisto)

Serves 4

Ingredients

Seared Scallops:
1 large scallop per person
Toasted almonds
Rock salt

For the Pisto:

1 small onion (diced)
1 small courgette (diced)
1 red, 1 green, 1 yellow peppers (small, diced)
1 tsp smoked paprika
1 tsp sherry vinegar
150ml tomato frito/passata

For the Parsley Oil:

1 small bunch of flat leaf parsley
3 cloves of garlic (peeled)
4 tsp sherry vinegar
200ml extra virgin olive oil
A good pinch of salt (sea salt is better)

Method:

Pisto: Sweat the onion, courgette and peppers in olive oil on medium heat for 10 minutes. Add the paprika and sherry vinegar and stir for two minutes, then add the frito/passata, turn down the heat and cook for five minutes.

Parsley Oil:

Wash then roughly chop the parsley, discarding any thick stalks. Put the parsley in a food processor with all of the other ingredients and blend for about two minutes until mixed. Add more oil if it is too thick.

Seared Scallops:

Sear for approximately one minute on each side, depending on size.

To Serve:

Put the Pisto in the middle of the plate. Place the seared scallops on top of the Pisto. Drizzle with the parsley oil, sprinkle with rock salt and toasted almonds and enjoy.