



IN SPANISH TAPA MEANS LID OR COVER AND TAPAS were initially slices of bread or meat covering the glass between sips. The reason for this is unconfirmed, but suggestions include preventing flies getting into the glass, protecting the wine from sand or masking the smell of bad wine. Another legend attributes the tapas tradition to King Alfonso X, *El Sabio* or "The Wise One," who made sure that Castilian taverns served wine accompanied by something to eat, so that the alcohol would not go straight to the customers' heads.

Just as the origin is obscure, so is the purpose, with tapas dealt with by culinary professionals in different ways. "Tapas are a teaser to introduce our menu," says Beatrice LeMercier, manager and partner at Alibi.

Fernando Olivares, restaurateur and chef at Le Sud Gaudir agrees, citing his roast suckling pig dish. "This can be served tapas-style, but it's so popular we moved it into the main menu."

Jim Cawood, from *Vino*, offers a different meaning. "Tapas are about having something to keep you drinking," he says. "It is simple food in bars and most flavours can be paired with a range of beverages."

However, diners see it more as a social event. "I love the idea of tapas," says Tracey Mitchell while dining at Pacharan. "I like the social aspect of sharing food, chatting at the same time as trying a lot of different dishes."

Whatever the purpose, tapas bars are now in vogue, with New York, London and Sydney following the trend. However, Vietnamese have been enjoying tapas in *bia hoi* around the country way before the modern day craze for Iberian cuisine.

We covered eight restaurants in three days, munching our way through 44 plates of tapas. Here's the lowdown.

### ◦The Spanish Touch

The traditional Spanish tapas around town is made using Spanish flavours and principle ingredients including cured ham, spicy chorizo sausage, garlic and splashes of white wine. While the central components are the same, the way the dishes are combined makes for completely different

# small bites

From hard-boiled quail eggs to haute tapas of soy-lime scallops on beignets, Giselle Whiteaker sets off on a quest to source the city's top places for tapas.

Photos by Galen Stolee



Top: Alibi's mixed tapas; Below: ZanZbar's Shrimp and Jelly belly (inset)