

tastes. Possibly the city's first western tapas restaurant, the *montadites de jamon Serrano* (VND75,000) at **Pacharan** (97D Hai Ba Trung, Q1) are a twist on Italian bruchetta. The fresh tomato paste that binds the smoky Serrano ham to crusty bread is divine while *gambas al pil pil* (VND95,000) contains wine soaked prawns with garlic and tomato, livened with a hint of chilli.

Another tapas dish starring prawns was found in the Spanish seafood salad (VND130,000) at **Le Sud Gaudir** (4 Thao Dien, Q2) — delicate mouthfuls on a tomato, garlic and onion salsa, sautéed in white wine. For the vegetarians, their asparagus with warm camembert (VND170,000) is elegantly presented, with strands of crisp asparagus settled next to triangles of fried camembert, while the restaurant logo is cleverly drizzled on top in tomato and spring onion puree. Simple flavours well matched.

Although Cuban-themed, **La Habana's** (6 Cao Ba Quat, Q1) eggplant stuffed with mince meat and chorizo (VND70,000) is a three-way combo with the warmth of the chorizo mingling with the meat's juices, perfectly complementing the smoky eggplant flavour. The second bite was even better and the third leaves you wanting more.

For a lesson in slow eating sample their speciality meatballs (VND70,000). The first bite, eaten warm, is a little disappointing, but after the meatballs cool, the second will have you raving about the light salsa zing topping the lightly crusted meatballs. Their mixed seafood in saffron sauce (VND90,000) has a definite Spanish influence that brings you a taste of Spain.

◦ Asian Fusion

ZanZBar (41 Dong Du, Q1) shows a strong local influence with its tapas. The restaurant's executive chef, Ana Esteves, is creative with her flavours and spices.

"It's about taking the beautiful fresh ingredients here in Vietnam and combining them into small bites that keep people wanting more," she says.

Their soy-lime scallops on *beignets* (VND103,000) — small savoury pancakes, topped with delicately fried leek strands — looked and tasted like a work of art. The tartness of the lime battled pleasantly with the lightly salted soy on the tongue with the scallops mediating the flavour. The tuna rolls (VND124,000), based loosely on sushi, melted delightfully in the mouth, although the serving size was that little bit awkward, slightly bigger than a mouthful. An interesting twist was the deconstructed Peking duck pancake (VND130,000), which combined unmistakable duck and hoisin flavours, all with a Vietnamese spring roll-style presentation. The crowning jewel is the jelly belly (VND95,000) — pork belly cubes topped with quail eggs, with a caramelised exterior. The consistency of the pork was a little sticky, making it difficult to cut through, but it melted in the mouth, leaving a sweet aftertaste perfectly offset by the quail egg.

Diner Julian Gruening summed it up perfectly: "That is one of the best things I have



Clockwise from top: Pacharan's *montadites de jamon Serrano*; Quan Oc Huong's snails; Tib's spring rolls; Vino's lamb shoulder with *harissa*

ever eaten."

For 100 percent Vietnamese tapas head to **Quan Oc Huong** (16/43/37A Ky Dong, Q3). The stand out dishes were squid and prawns in a deliciously spicy tamarind sauce (VND60,000), and oysters with tangy ricotta cheese and chilli. (VND60,000) A few quail eggs (VND15,000) on the side from a street vendor provided the flavour some balance. While visually unappealing, the eel cake with bean paste (*cha luon*, VND80,000) turned into a tasty treat with a texture like fake meat — the boiled bean paste hides thin eel slices, gently seasoned with mild green peppercorns. The downside? It was served with a mince ball that tasted like bad hamburger.

Hue cuisine is known for the sum of its numerous flour-based appetisers such as *banh khoai*, *banh la cha*, among other dishes. The well-known, high-end Hue restaurant **Tib** (187 Hai Ba Trung, Q3) offers barbecued pork wrapped in fresh rice paper (VND90,000) that gave a subtle smoky aftertaste, directly contrasting with the Hue Spring Rolls (VND85,000), where pungent fish paste fights for dominance with strong chilli dipping sauce. The latter is not for the faint-hearted. Snails with pork and lemongrass (VND125,000) are a Vietnamese favourite. The snail meat is steamed with minced pork around a lemongrass shoot. Stuffed into the shell, the lemongrass is positioned to hook

the meat out of the shell in a simple swipe. The zing of the lemongrass adds pizzazz to the subtle taste of the meat.

◦ Globally Designed

The crumbed lamb shoulder with *harissa* (Tunisian hot chilli sauce), a dab of homemade *labneh* (cheese yogurt) and an olive salad (VND100,000) is a piquant invention at **Vino's** (74/17 Hai Ba Trung, Q1) hinting at a southern Moroccan palate. Perfect eaten with wine. The *boquerones* (VND130,000) is a simple dish of white anchovies and red pepper drizzled with parsley oil that didn't excite until it was popped onto slices of crusty bread. The ensuing taste explosion was divine. Add to it some rosé or fruity white wine and you have a lovely contrast of flavours.

Alibi's (5A Nguyen Sieu, Q1) bruchetta (VND95,000) offered an Italian style salsa, a delectable lemon ricotta combination, and a roast pepper pesto dip. The mixed tapas on spoons (VND95,000) hosted garlic sausage, spiced shrimp on risotto cake, and pork trotters and beans. All pack a flavourful punch, with the garlic tang on the shrimps edging them to the forefront.

So it's tapas time, and to help you on your way, here's a handy Vietnamese phrase taught to us by Mr Hieu, a frequent diner at Quan Oc Huong: "*Cho toi moi thu mot chut!*" (Give me a little of everything!). **W**