



he Beginners Guide to *Authentic Tapas*

The smell of roasting sardines perfumes the air, peppered with the clattering of plates, the carefree slosh of wine into glasses and the buzz of happy conversation.

Piles of fried fish, thick fingers of tortilla and skewers of prawns, cheese and ham are scattered haphazardly on the table, with chunks of crusty bread, olive oil and white wine vinegar in endless supply.



This is the art of tapas; a bounty of delectable morsels, each washed down with a cold beer or crisp glass of rosé, with a convivial group of family or friends. It's a scene you'll find up and down Spain and a tradition that dates back hundreds of years.

Beginners might say that an appetizer is a poor excuse for a proper meal but do it right, master the art of tapas, and you'll find yourself seduced by these small plates, unsure of just how many more pinchos you can squeeze in.

Spanish food in general is enjoying something of a renaissance and tapas are right there as part of the new foodie avant garde. Cool chains are popping up with experimental menus, big name chefs such as Omar Allibhoy, founder of Tapas Revolution, are elevating classic dishes while unusual ingredients are also getting the tapas treatment.

Authentic tapas are still easy to come by in Gibraltar and Southern Spain with plenty of options for meat eaters, pescatarians, vegetarians and everyone in between. A communal dining experience, the beauty of tapas lies in ordering a smorgasbord of different options and then diving in to sample a little of everything.

THE HISTORY

There's still some debate about the true origin of tapas, with legend having it that King Alfonso 10th, ruler of Spain in the 13th Century, fell so ill he could only consume small dishes. In the 19th Century, Alfonso XIII was said to have ordered wine in a Cadiz tavern and the barkeep, fearful of the legendary winds depositing sand in the King's glass, covered it with a slice of ham. Tapa translated to lid and it's thought that this is when the tapas we know today were born. Back then, barkeeps and innkeepers would provide a piece of salted bread or meat –

usually chorizo or ham – to cover tankards of sherry. This lid kept flies away from the sweet, enticing sherry while the saltiness of the snack ensured patrons kept drinking.

Over time, the owners of guesthouses introduced more options in order to increase the sale of alcohol and, thus, worked out that nothing goes better with a drink than a snack. Eventually, the food on offer became just as important as the sherry, and tapas was confirmed as a part of Mediterranean food culture.

AUTHENTIC TAPAS 101

One of the first things to know about tapas is that almost anything can be made into a small hot or cold snack.

Authentic tapas reflect the diverse produce of Spain, with typical ingredients such as ham, cheese, fish and vegetables prepared in a way that's traditional to the region.

This diversity means that any tapas meal takes your taste buds on a culinary tour of Spain, from the seafood of Galicia to the pork of Andalucía.

COLD TAPAS

Tapas can be served hot or cold, with cold tapas contrasting with warmer dishes. If you're new to tapas, try some of the more popular authentic cold tapas dishes for starters; aceitunas (olives), jamón (dry-cured ham) and queso (cured cheese) make for a gentle introduction. These are small finger foods that everyone can enjoy and are a great way to ease into your first tapas experience.

If, however, you want something a little more filling, you've got options here too. Ensalada Rusa (potato salad with peas, carrots and tuna or shrimp in the south) and Tortilla Española (a thick omelette with potatoes and onions) are filling, especially when accompanied by crunchy breadsticks, a mixed salad or chunks of baguette.

If you fancy something a little bit different, try gazpacho or salmorejo – both are cold soups, with salmorejo being the thicker option of the two. Cold soup is something to avoid rather than embrace in many European countries but slurp down a refreshing spoonful of sweet, spicy gazpacho on a blistering hot day and you'll wonder why you'd always insisted your tomato soup reached boiled point before savouring.

WARM TAPAS

Glance down the warm tapas menu, or observe dishes as they whizz past en-route to other tables, and you may well find that you've heard of a few of the staples even if you haven't set out to try tapas before.

If you're seeking an authentic tapas experience, you can't go wrong with albondigas. Warm, soft, smoky meatballs often served in a rich, garlicky tomato sauce with crusty bread for dipping are the foodie equivalent of holiday sunshine. Equally as delicious is chorizo a la sidra (chorizo with cider) or crispy, moreish croquetas de jamón (ham croquets).

To accompany all of this, a dish heaped with patatas bravas (fried potatoes with a tomatoey, spicy sauce and garlic mayo) is a must.

SEAFOOD TAPAS

In terms of influence and history, seafood tapas draw inspiration mainly from the northern and southern coastal regions of Spain. Northern recipes, where the climate is colder, tend to be hearty and rich, whereas tapas dishes from the southern coast, where the Mediterranean waters are warmer, are usually fried. This diversity gives a range of seafood options, from calamari, octopus and prawn to sardines, tuna, crab and salted cod.

A good starting point for the tapas newcomer is a plate of pescaíto frito (small fried fish). This simple dish is delicious served simply with a squeeze of lemon and a side of patatas bravas.

Gambas pil pil (prawns served in a garlic infused oil) are an icon of Spanish tapas – just make sure you order more than one lot along with extra bread for soaking up the oil, as these are sure to disappear from your table quickly.

Coquinas (small clams) and berberechos (cockles) are also sublime authentic tapas dishes and offer real insight into the maritime nature of Spanish cuisine.

If you're feeling a little more daring, order the Galician speciality pulpo a la gallega (marinated octopus) or the tart, but delicious boquerones (anchovies in vinegar).

DRINKS

Once you've settled on your tapas, it's time to think about the drinks, as this is as much a part of the ritual as the piles of small dishes and skewers you'll quickly accumulate.

In Spain, it's traditional to drink dry sherry with tapas and – as we saw above – this is because it provides a nice, sweet contrast against salty and robust flavours. But don't worry, you're not bound to this choice, and other drinks go just as well with tapas. Wine and beer are excellent choices.

You might also consider trying a clara, which is the Spanish equivalent of a good old shandy. Alternatively, ask for a tinto de verano – cold red wine mixed with lemonade or Fanta Limon. Both are delightfully refreshing and go very well with a range of tapas options. If you don't drink, an alcohol-free beer or grape juice will go just as well with any traditional tapa

