



Tapas

A Guide to Spain's Most Iconic Food Culture

Welcome! This guide will help you navigate the tapas landscape and hopefully take your enjoyment of these delectable bundles of Spanish cuisine to the next level.

What Are Tapas?



If the world knows one thing about eating in Spain, it's tapas and that one thing is always true, Spain wouldn't be Spain without tapas.

But what are tapas, anyway?

Ask 10 Spaniards that question and you'll get 10 different answers. Some are elaborate plates full of food; others are bite-sized dishes, creative delicacies, home-made from seasonal local ingredients elaborated by families over generations, or sometimes simply olives or potato crisps. Some are hot; some are cold. In some places, they're free (although very rarely these days), so as the trend has developed, you have to pay.

In reality, tapas are small, savoury Spanish dishes that are typically served as appetizers or snacks. They are an integral part of Spanish cuisine and are mainly enjoyed with drinks in bars and restaurants. The traditional way of experiencing them is common to go on a "tapas crawl" (tapear) moving from one bar to another, trying different tapas and drinks at each stop.

Overall, tapas offer a unique dining experience that combines small, flavourful dishes with a social and relaxed atmosphere, the origin of a 'tasting menu'.

They allow people to sample a wide range of flavours and create a great communal dining experience.

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History Of Tapas



Tapas have now become ingrained in Spanish culture for centuries (the oldest tapas bar in Seville has been open for nearly 400 years in the same location !!) and, they are a part of everyday life for most Spaniards.

The word "tapa" (or lid) simply refers to the act of covering a drink with a cover, normally a slice of ham or cheese and this had two effects; firstly the customers thought they were getting free food and kept coming back for more, and secondly the bar owners realised by giving them salty snacks they would drink more; win-win.

Over time, the practice evolved into serving small portions of food on the side and the offerings became more adventurous, utilising the best local products and the whole culture just grew from there. Tapas are no longer just a Spanish thing, worldwide many countries have put their own interpretation on them to become universally popular.

There are a few legendary stories about how tapas began, and while it's hard to know which is fully true, they all add flavour to the story, so here's the folklore:

The tapas tradition may have begun when king Alfonso X of Castile in the 13th recovered from an illness by drinking wine with small dishes between meals. After regaining his health, the king ordered that taverns would not be allowed to serve wine to customers unless it was accompanied by a small snack or "tapa".

Another popular and more modern explanation says that King Alfonso XIII ordered food to be served to stop drunkenness.

However, the more plausible explanation is the first, that simply bartenders in Seville covered the glasses to keep out dust and fruit flies and eventually these lids of ham and cheese became elevated to more elaborate creations.

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Tapas Etiquette and How To Order



The first thing to remember is tapas are a fundamental part of social culture. Don't expect perfect service or even a table, the whole ethos is about standing around a bar, socialising, enjoying a couple of drinks and a few delectable morsels of food.

Order as you go, or a few at a time, and if there's no menu, just ask the house to bring their recommendations.

Mix, share, compare experiences, don't be afraid to eat with your fingers, this is inclusive sociable eating often with no cutlery, no crockery and just a few wastebins on the floor to throw in your leftover paper. Embrace it, it's the culture.

There is no standing on ceremony with tapas culture, no rules, no formality, just a way of engaging with friends, family (and new friends!) over a mutual passion for food.

After all, there is only one thing that completely unites the world and that is food, and the Spanish know how to do it better than anybody.

And, with most tapas bars, there may be a counter display, but no menu. If not, everything is made to order. And if the menu is totally in Spanish, never be afraid to ask, the Spanish are very accommodating and in the traditional tapas bars you will experience the true essence of Spanish food culture.

Even if you don't see a menu or a tapas counter, just go in and experiment, throw caution to the wind and let the passionate locals take you on a culinary expedition. After all, you're in one of the countries in the world that embraces food culture with all its heart.

So, don't get stressed if you have to wait a while, relax, enjoy the ambience, be experimental in the often-crazy atmosphere and meet new friends along the way!

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The Most Popular Tapas



Patatas Bravas (Fried Potatoes) - Fried in olive oil and traditionally served with a spicy, paprika infused tomato sauce and often accompanied garlic alioli.

Albondigas (Meatballs) - Now generally a mix of pork and beef and as with Patatas Bravas generally served with tomato sauce, but creamy almond sauce is also a popular classic.

Gambas al Ajillo (Garlic Shrimp) - A Spanish institution of juicy shrimps, heated in lots of olive oil, with plenty of garlic and normally some dried chilli. Can be very hot!

Croquetas (Breaded and Fried Croquettes) - These enduring bites are traditionally made with jamon or fish but increasingly with more adventurous things, see more below.

Tortilla Española (Spanish Omelette) - Ubiquitous throughout Spain it's a dish of eggs and finely sliced potatoes, and sometimes onion, although the purists would dispute that. Simple but delicious.

Jamón Ibérico (Iberico Ham) - The most revered product in all of Spain, thinly sliced cured ham which comes in many different quality and taste variations. The best is simply melt-in-the-mouth.

Pimientos de Padrón (Padron peppers) - Small mild green peppers blistered in olive oil and sprinkled with sea salt, but be careful, roughly 1 in 6 is hot. Perfect finger food.

Calamares a la Romana (Deep-Fried Squid Rings) - Something to be seen in virtually every tapas bar and chiringuito in Spain, simply served with garlic alioli and a lemon wedge.

Espinacas Con Garbanzos (Chickpeas with Spinach) - Basic ingredients flavoured with garlic, white pepper, cumin, coriander and paprika combine to give amazing flavours.

Queso Manchego (Manchego cheese) - Often served on its own simply with bread or quince paste called membrillo, this is one of Spain's great foodie triumphs.

Most of these can be found in the majority of tapas bars in Spain and they are well worth trying; order a few all together and share and enjoy!

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A Few Choices For Adventurous Foodies



Navajas (Razor Clams) - Simply quickly grilled on the plancha with olive oil, lemon, parsley and garlic, these are a delight for any seafood lover.



Carrilleras de Ternera (Slow Braised Beef Cheeks) - Very slowly-braised beef cheeks in a rich, glossy red wine sauce. Served in mini portions as tapas.



Percebes (Gooseneck Barnacles) - Harvested with great risk on the north-western cliffs in Galicia, these are a rare and expensive treat: a bit fiddly but delicious.

Pulpo Carpaccio (Octopus Carpaccio) - Thinly sliced cooked octopus served cold with olive oil, lemon zest, and smoked paprika. Elegant, light, and flavourful.

Croquetas Calamari Negro (Black Squid Ink Croquettes) - With a creamy filling of squid and black squid ink. Super umami and black inside; a real surprise as they're delicious.

Sardinas Ahumadas (Smoked Sardine with Orange Zest & Olive Tapenade) - A flavour bomb of smoky, citrusy, salty goodness on a little toast. Great if you like bold flavours.

Berenjenos con Miel (Aubergines with Cane Honey) - May sound strange to deep-fry vegetables and serve with cane honey, but these are irresistible and a perfect end to any tapas night.

Caracoles (Snails) – As the largest producer in Europe, these are incredibly popular in Spain. Done in our own style with garlic, wine, tomato and lots of paprika and served by the bowlful.

Cochinillo Cochifrito (Deep-Fried Suckling Pig) - Bites of this succulent animal fried in olive oil and garlic to give the crunchiest skin whilst still retaining the tender meat.

Pate Higado de Pollo con PX (Chicken Liver Paté with Sweet Wine) - A rich silky paté with a sweet reduction made from Spanish dessert wine that compliments the earthiness perfectly.

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Matching Wines



There is no greater pleasure in the culinary world than enjoying food and wines that match perfectly together.

Spain has over 4000 wineries and about 600 grape varieties and huge variations in wine styles from north to south. Combine these with the huge diversity of tapas and Spain is blessed with amazing opportunities for gastronomic adventure.

But where do you start with this?

Here's a little guide through the maze of Spanish wines to help you along:

Seafood and plain white fish – nothing better than a crisp Albarino from Galicia.

Richer seafood such as lobster or fish with a creamy sauce – think Godello.

And if in doubt – Verdejo, Spain's undisputed leader of white wines is a failsafe.

Hams and cheeses – A light red such as a young (joven) Tempranillo from Rioja or Ribero is perfect.

Meats – Generally require something a bit heavier, so consider an aged Rioja or Ribero (crianza or reserva) or the unsung hero, Mencia

And if in doubt – A good Garnacha will tick most of the boxes.

But, if you're enjoying a wide range of tapas covering every spectrum of taste then cava will virtually go with anything and it's rare you ever find a bad cava in Spain.

***So, in conclusion, enjoy, experiment, feel the passion,
embrace the Spanish food culture and take your
culinary experiences to the next level***

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