

# Tapping into Tapas

How are chefs translating these tiny gems from Spain?

By Katie Ayoub

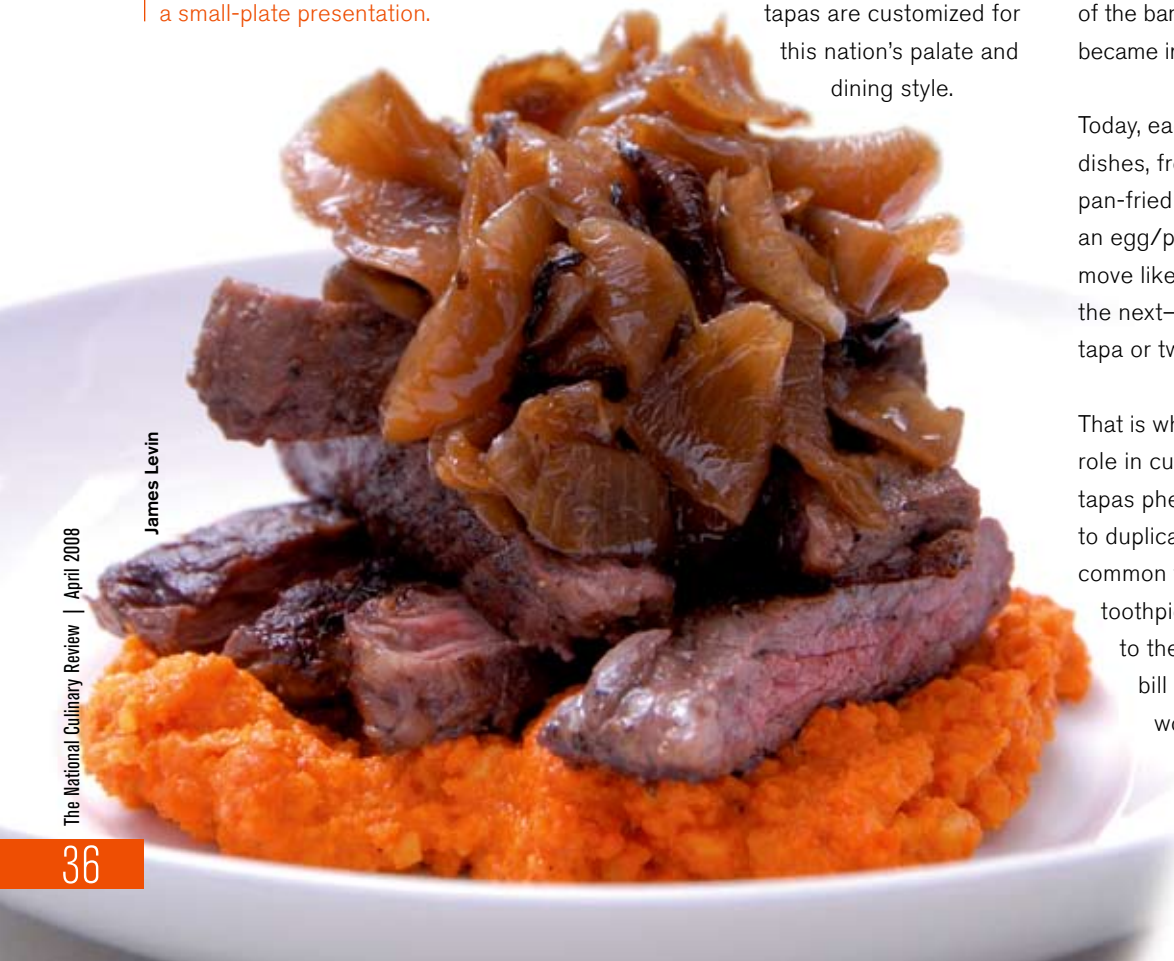
Matthew Lake's skirt steak with romesco sauce brings a classic Spanish dish into a small-plate presentation.

Although tapas certainly aren't a new phenomenon on the American dining scene, they continue to make their mark. We thought it was time to check in with this Spanish import, and see how it has taken root in American soil. Certainly, Spanish techniques and ingredients have become even more authentic as the global market becomes more familiar to chef and diner alike. But Americanized tapas are customized for this nation's palate and dining style.

Tapas are the patriarch of small plates. But beyond portion size—tapas fall somewhere between an amuse bouche and an appetizer—is a sensibility. Tapas are as much a part of Spain's social scene as a martini is in the United States. The origins of tapas link them inexorably with bar life: Slices of bread, cheese or ham were draped over a wine glass as a "tapa," or lid, to keep the flies away. They were often extensions of the barkeep's hospitality, and soon tapas became imbedded in Spanish culture.

Today, each bar is known for different dishes, from almonds tossed in salt and pan-fried in olive oil, to *tortilla de patata*, an egg/potato/onion pie. Spaniards move like waves from one tapas bar to the next—enjoying a glass of wine and a tapa or two, then rolling into the next bar.

That is where culture plays such a defining role in cuisine, and why, perhaps, the tapas phenomenon is almost impossible to duplicate here. For instance, the common tradition of presenting used toothpicks from *pintxos* (Basque tapas) to the bartender, who then tallies the bill by counting the toothpicks, just wouldn't work here.



James Levin



National Honey Board

Adam Navidi's "Spanish Cocktail" is a simple but elegant presentation of Spanish ingredients.

That casual, loose attitude is a crucial ingredient in Spain's tapas tradition—raucous, lively, laid-back, hip without pretension. America is the mother of interpretation, though, and chefs across the country are taking the essence of tapas and molding it to their menus. Indeed, they're interpreting the culinary essence of the tapas with true homage.

Tapas are to Spain as pizza is to the United States. Each region has its own specialty, and each claims authenticity. But one thing that quilts tapas into one big, colorful tapestry is a reliance on local ingredients. So, although chefs here often showcase Spanish and Mediterranean ingredients in their tapas recipes, they also source local product—following the rich tradition of the Spanish tapa.

### The pioneer and the (almost) native

Café Ba Ba Reeba! was one of Chicago's first tapas restaurants, opening in the late 1980s. Owned by Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises, it still boasts tremendous popularity, offering tapas, paellas, other Spanish dishes and an energetic ambiance.

But it has evolved over the years, reflecting a growing familiarity with authentic product and an astute business sense to reinvent itself. Gabino Sotelino is chef/owner of Ba Ba Reeba! and hails from Spain. His executive chef, Timothy Cottini, is charged with bringing Sotelino's Spanish traditions into focus.

"We look at the traditions present in Spain and ask ourselves how we can update it," says Cottini. "We may change the technique a little bit or elevate the presentation, but we stay true to its roots."

One of the dishes that adds wow factor to presentation is the *toro brochetas*. Introduced two years ago, these skewers of grilled beef, pork, chicken or shrimp hang down from a hook and are served with complementing sauces. "They're definitely a presentation piece," Cottini says. "But they're still grounded in authentic Spanish tradition."

A few of the favorites that have been on the menu since the concept's inception include skewered chicken and chorizo with a romesco sauce, and a beef skewer with caramelized onions and horseradish cream. A recent addition is a cold tapa of white anchovies, avocado and red onion. "The anchovies aren't hugely popular, but people who know them love them," says Cottini. "They also add to the range of our menu."

At Iluna Basque in San Francisco, chef/owner Mattin Noblia tries to stay true to authentic Basque cuisine. Hailing from Biarritz, in France's Basque country, he fell

in love with the traditions of southwestern France and northwestern Spain, which share more than a geographical border.

Ingredients from coastal waters as well as the fertile valley of Ebro define Basque cooking. "We have such strong traditions here," says Noblia. "Sheep's cheese, beans, lots of seafood. It's easy to translate those traditions in San Francisco."

One such traditional tapa on his menu is piquillo peppers stuffed with Spanish salt-cod bacalao. Another is his stuffed roasted red peppers with portobello mushrooms and Manchego cheese. He roasts red peppers in-house, then fills them with a mixture of sautéed onion, garlic, portobello and tomato. They're sprinkled with Manchego, baked, and garnished with fresh chives.

"You have to take into account the mixology of chefs," says Noblia. "Tapas will always vary depending on who's making them, but you can follow the traditions set out in Spain, then interpret them for your market."

### The social scene of tapas

"A lot of restaurants have a misconception of tapas," says Adam Schop, executive chef at De La Costa in Chicago, Douglas Rodriguez's concept that embraces the coastal cuisines of Latin America, Spain and the Caribbean. "It's a dining style, not just a small plate of food."

De La Costa offers a tapas menu in its swanky lounge in the summertime. "We just

weren't getting the traffic during the colder months. We'd prepare all these tapas for it, and they'd go to waste," Schop says.

But the tapas menu fits the lounge sensibility. "It's got to be lively and fun to work, but you also need to tweak it to how Americans like to eat dinner," says Schop.

In that vein, De La Costa offers what Schop calls "a tapas-inspired menu." Its duck-confit flatbread is a good example. "This is an authentic tapa from Spain, but we've turned it into an appetizer," he says.

He bakes thin rectangles of raw dough, tops it with duck confit cooked with caramelized onion, then tops it with Mahon, a Spanish cow's-milk cheese. He then bakes it again until the cheese melts, and tops it with watercress dressed in a sherry vinaigrette. It's served with a slice of fig cake.

"What we do here is fundamentally Spanish, but we apply it to the American sensibility," Schop says. "Spanish cuisine is certainly in the spotlight, but will it become more popular than Mexican or Italian? Probably not. It can never be as pedestrian as those cuisines. Spanish food is completely ingredient driven."

The culture behind tapas is explored at blue on blue at the Avalon Hotel in Beverly Hills, Calif. Here, executive chef Scott Garrett has introduced tapas as part of the restaurant's poolside happy hour. "I'm going for the fun and high energy associated with tapas," says Garrett. "My menu in the restaurant is a showcase, but

my tapas menu is where I can try things out and have fun."

Two of the most popular tapas are the turkey *albondigas* and the *paella con gambas*. For the meatballs, he combines ground turkey with rendered bacon fat or chorizo, shallot, garlic and black pepper. He browns them, and on the pickup, sautés the 1½-ounce meatballs in chicken stock, and garnishes with roasted jalapeño and avocado. "They're pretty much the most popular tapa on our menu," says Garrett. "They're spectacular."

For his tapas-sized paella, he renders fat from chorizo and caramelizes Texas

white shrimp tossed in paprika and cayenne. He adds apple-cider vinegar, brown sugar, saffron, piquillo pepper, peas, chicken stock and Arborio rice. The paella is then baked in the oven and served in tapas-sized portions. "It's not authentic, but I don't think that's a bad thing," says Garrett. "I've added my own touches, but still pass along the sensibility of a tapa."

At Miami's The Bar at Level 25, located at the top of the Conrad Hotel, executive chef Michael Gilligan features a *pintxos* menu. Inspired by a visit to San Sebastián in the north of Spain, Gilligan brought back the concept, but tweaked it for the

## Skirt Steak with Romesco Sauce

Matthew Lake, Executive Chef  
HONU  
Huntington, N.Y.

Yield: 4 portions

4 (10 oz.) skirt steaks, trimmed  
Salt and pepper, to taste  
Olive oil, to taste  
2 red onions, sliced  
Romesco Sauce (recipe follows)

*Method:* Season steaks with salt and pepper. Rub with olive oil; set aside. Sauté red onion until soft and slightly caramelized; set aside. Grill steaks until desired degree of doneness. Rest 2 minutes; slice. Divide romesco sauce among four plates. Put sliced steak on romesco; top with red onions.

## Romesco Sauce

1 10 oz. jar piquillo peppers, drained  
½ cup blanched slivered almonds  
1 garlic clove  
1 T. sherry vinegar  
2 oz. extra-virgin olive oil  
Salt and pepper, to taste

*Method:* Blend peppers, almonds and garlic in robot coupe until coarse. Add vinegar and olive oil; mix. Season with salt and pepper.

*Note:* The sauce may be made up to two days in advance, stored in an airtight container and refrigerated.

American palate. "I've tried to bring back my experience, but unfortunately, we can't have foods sitting out at the bar, or toothpicks presented as a bill tally," he says. "I sometimes worry that as a culture, we sanitize experiences too much, but I'm happy with how we translated it for our bar customers."

Although not hugely popular, a fixture on the *pintxos* menu is a cod-fish *esqueixada*. Gilligan soaks dried cod for 24 hours in water, then poaches it in milk for 20 minutes. "The milk breaks down enzymes and removes some of the salt," he explains. He then adds the cod to tomato concassé, roasted red pepper, red onion and garlic oil. He chops it and smears it on a crostini for service.

"It's not that popular because it's salt cod, but I'm going to keep serving it," he says. "Why not? It gives the menu authenticity. I do change the menu quite often though—it keeps us creative and keeps me on my toes."

### Tapas, interpreted

There is another dimension to tapas beyond conviviality and charm. Twisting tapas into hors d'oeuvres or amuses bouche doesn't take a huge leap of faith. "You can capitalize on the popularity of Spanish ingredients, but make them work outside of a tapas theme," says Adam Navidi, fine-dining chef at the Hyatt Regency Huntington Beach, Calif., and owner of Chef Adam Navidi's Signature Cuisine, also in Huntington Beach.

He features what he calls his "Spanish Cocktail" as an amuse bouche at the Hyatt and as a passed hors d'oeuvre at catered events. On a cocktail fork, he skewers Manchego cheese and a melon-balled piece of casaba. He squeezes local orange-blossom honey over the skewer, then garnishes with ground cumin. "My inspiration was the classic combination of fruit and cheese," says Navidi. "And cumin and honey go so well together."

He features other Spanish ingredients on his menu at the hotel. Spanish white anchovies are tossed in with the Caesar salad, and crispy Serrano ham embellishes a side of grilled asparagus.

Perhaps the most predominant interpretation of tapas is found in small plates, a tradition pulled not only from Spain, but from all the countries that border the Mediterranean Sea.

"We serve American small plates," says Matthew Lake, executive chef of HONU, Huntington, N.Y. Although the focus is on local ingredients, there is a Spanish influence here. "Seasonality is important to us, but we use Spain and the Mediterranean as our guideposts," he says.

So, piquillo peppers—Spanish to the core—are given an American twist with a stuffing of braised short ribs. Carrot, onion and celery are browned, then garlic and tomato paste are added. Red wine deglazes the pan, and the liquid is then reduced. The braised short ribs are added back in, along with fresh thyme. The ingredients



This beef tenderloin *toro brocheta* is a presentation piece at Chicago's Cafe Ba Ba Reeba!

are covered with water and brought back to a simmer. The ribs braise in the oven at 300°F until the meat is tender. The meat is shredded, and the braising liquid strained and puréed. The pulled ribs are moistened with a bit of the sauce, then stuffed into whole piquillo peppers. The peppers are placed in a baking dish, draped with more sauce, covered, and baked at 300°F until warmed through.

"We're definitely seeing a change in how Americans want to eat," says Lake. "They may want more than tapas, but that small-plate sensibility is catching on. People want quality food without feeling like they're sitting in church."

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