

# Turned on to tapas with Tierra Brindisa

Tierra Brindisa

Marina O'Loughlin - Tuesday, September 30, 2008



I didn't mean to go to Tierra Brindisa at all. What I wanted to tell you about was a little place called Kokeb in an unlovely street behind Pentonville prison where owner and chef Gete doles out some genuinely splendid Ethiopian food – all those thrillingly zingy, berbere-laced wots and firfirs and tibs (my favourite dish name: derek tibs, which sounds like the boy at school with his glasses Sellotaped together). And, of course, the acres of flannelly, slightly sour injera bread ('If you don't take a doggy bag,' says Gete, 'I charge you double').

Her food is properly home-made: lovingly prepared and served with genuine warmth, grace and hospitality. But due to absolutely rubbish research on my part, I find out belatedly that Gete has been doing her thing for appreciative locals – no, not the jailbirds – for more than nine years and therefore, by nobody's standards, qualifies as news.

So can I get a table at any of the myriad hot new openings in town? Can I heckaslike. (At this point feel free to insert your own credit-crunch-my-arse type expostulation.) Andaman: 'Sorry, madam'; Giaconda Dining Room: 'Er, sorry, fully booked – and for the whole of next week.' Vanilla Black, a newish vegetarian restaurant – no problem getting a table there, surely? Um, no chance. The people at Murano (or should that be the Gordon Ramsay Empire Call Centre?) virtually snigger in my ear. Hence my hurtling into Tierra rather earlier than I would have liked.

But fear not: Tierra Brindisa is not an operation ever likely to be caught on the hop. Within a couple of weeks of opening, it's already running like clockwork, bursting at the seams with Soho's early adopters – diners rhubarbing away about green-lighting and optioning and other self-important whatnot.

We order some marjoram-scented, orange-stuffed, fat Gordal olives with our glasses of rare palo cortado sherry – like a luscious cross between the lightness of the finest aged amontillado and the sultry depths of an oloroso. These are without doubt, the best olives I've tasted. Seriously. We briefly contemplate just scarfing a tonne of them, washed down by vats of the sherry and leaving it at that.

But we plough on and everything we eat is glorious. I wasn't entirely blissed out by the small chain's original branch in Borough but that wasn't about food quality, more the fact that it's unbookable; jostling at the bar for a small sherry and an almond is not my idea of fun. Here food is, if anything, even better – and you get to eat it in the comfort of your own table.

Allow me another small gush about the croquetas. Four stout, crisp-crumbed torpedoes of silky gorgeousness studded with nutty Iberico ham on a nest of deep-fried curly parsley – oh my. Or teeny lamb cutlets, perfectly rosy, with romesco sauce fragrant with sweet pepper and crunchy with chunks of hazelnut. Or freshly hand-cut, precious acorn-fed Joselito jamón. Or pearly hake in a light batter with pungent, velvety aioli. There's a great, gutsy assembly of halibut, toasty little chunks of squid and chorizo with a spiky garnish of tomato and coriander.

The place itself is spartanly pretty, if that's not an oxymoron, almost Scandinavian in its use of blond wood and sage-y green. The only nod to any kind of Spanish theming is a vast tin of La Chinata smoked paprika lurking in a corner and, here and there, the odd terracotta pot.

If I have to criticise – and believe me, I'm struggling – it's that we're killed a little by kindness, an insistence by the lovely staff on waiting till one small dish is finished before the arrival of the next when what we're really hoping for is a big old onslaught: there's nothing I love more than a table groaning with excellent Iberian scoff. A herb salad, aromatic with mint and parsley and sweet with a moscatel wine dressing, is violently over-salted.

That ravishing Joselito ham is served in a fairly bijou portion for an enthusiastic £20 (like all the new-wave tapas places, prices can spiral if you're as greedy as I am). Oh, and the phone, positioned right at the doorway, has the loudest, most jarring ringtone. But that's it. Everything else is a blast.

Some of my favourite London restaurants are Spanish, but each has its downside: El Faro is miles away from anything (unless you're in Docklands); Barrafina is always queued out; Dehesa's tables are wildly uncomfortable unless it's sunny enough to sit outside. Tierra Brindisa suffers from none of these shortcomings and for that I love it. Apparently there's yet another shoot of the burgeoning empire about to blossom this November in South Ken – Casa Brindisa – with a delicatessen in the basement and a jamóneria on the ground floor. I'll be there.