

Restaurant review: Kate Spicer at Tierra Brindisa



Kate Spicer

Tierra Brindisa, Broadwick Street, W1; 020 7534 1690. Mon-Sat, 11am-11pm

5 stars Reign in Spain, 4 stars Viva España, 3 stars Spanish Main, 2 stars Spanish Inquisition, 1 star Spain in the neck



I always wonder how, when the time to pay comes, restaurant staff decide who to hand the bill to. I've had a few low-level angst moments as I have swooped in and snatched the silver tray as it makes its way, automatically, to the gent. Frequently staff ask, and this can also cause a bit of an awkward fluster, as there's still a part of me that wants the chap to insist on paying — not because I'm one of those women who bemoans their lot in an equal-opportunities world, more that when a guy insists on paying, it often means he really likes you. Much as I'd love it if blokes paid for absolutely everything and my higher education had consisted of flower arranging and cordon bleu cookery, and I got picked up for dates by Terry-Thomas in a sports car, life ain't like that any more. Nowadays, women are as often "in charge" of the table, picking the venue, the wine, the food and generally being the boss.

Still, every now and again a sommelier will find himself in a royal state of distress at having to communicate with a woman. This happened to me in a restaurant in Manchester a few years ago. When I asked for the wine list, so patronising was his tone I wondered if I had the outward appearance of being profoundly mentally disabled. Some staff still, at the grotty end of the Noughties, don't like taking orders from a female. After the Police played in Hyde Park this summer, I took some young men and a visiting overseas friend of high rock'n'roll calibre to Maroush III, in Seymour Street, where I felt ignored and bullied by the maitre d' as he pushed me into making certain decisions that left me with a bill beyond what was reasonable and a lot of sad leftover food nobody had wanted to order or eat. I won't bang on, I've vented now, but it was humiliating and, safe to say, my two-decade love affair with the Maroush chain is well and truly over.

Mezze isn't quite tapas, it being a meal in itself, while tapas is a bar food that should, eventually, lead to a meal of some kind; but it was in the spirit of mezze-style eating that my future brother-in-law, Richard, and my family member Louis managed to make a late-afternoon snack at Tierra Brindisa in Soho last for five and a half hours. Brindisa's reputation is high. It started life as a supplier of Spanish ingredients, then opened its lauded, chaotic and authentic tapas bar in Borough Market, where its fame for excellence took root. This is its first foray into the restaurant world, and it has chosen to do it in Soho, an area already brimming with very good tapas bars.

I arrived alone, and the restaurant was empty, so I wanted to sit at the back, where an open table in front of the kitchen would have made me feel a little less solo. It was warm and a bit scruffy and unfinished back there, reminding me of Cal Pep, the Barcelona tapas bar and restaurant that everyone blatantly imitates when opening a decent tapas place outside Spain. But there was a bit of confusion over staff dinner and whether I could sit there or not. A mild hullabaloo ensued and I got in an embarrassed, blushing-to-the-roots-of-my-hair sort of state. I clattered back through to the cold main dining room. But with the help of a supporting cast of passing family and friends on their way home from work, we ate our way through nearly half the menu, and only once or twice did my trousers feel tight and only once or twice did the dishes not hit the spot. My longest lunch ever was at Cecconi's behind Savile Row. It lasted nine hours, was extremely alcoholic and I felt sorry for those present who had real jobs to go to the next morning. But it was bliss, melting into the company, the steady flow of quips, teary laughter and all-over-the-shop conversation. This stuff doesn't happen easily in adult life, the way it did during teenager sleepovers. Happy restaurants are the salons of my generation. I love them.

Our Brindisa epic did not see us stop eating for longer than 45 minutes. From 5pm until 10.30pm we took sips of wine and sherry, but in nearly six hours drank only one bottle of wine, a few glasses of house (both red and white were good, a mark of respect for the customer, I always think) and a few glasses of sherry, which probably still puts us in rehab turf, but counts as a sober occasion for me. Richard, who is professionally expert in food and wine, and a spangophile, or whatever it is you call a Spanish-loving person, thought the sherries and wines were kept perfectly. We had a nerdy conversation about whether it is correct to serve sherry in a champagne flute, and on the merits of stemless wine glasses. Other than that, the liquid aspect of our visit was just perfect. A £35 bottle of mencia had character, structure and — that word so loved by Victoria Beckham when describing her recent collection of dresses — class. My faith in sherry was reborn. Just the tiniest sips fill your mouth with flavour, but it really does suck without food. I particularly loved the salty manzanilla and the dark and sticky palo cortado that smelt of orange and toffee.

Highlights from the menu included some fat gordal olives stuffed with juicy orange and sprinkled with marjoram, a plate of sweet Joselito pata negra ham, and some mojama with pear. Mojama is a sort of tuna jerky, with an intense smoky flavour a bit like botargo; the slice of pear would have been a perfect pairing, if it hadn't been so hard and tasteless. Catalan spinach with pine nuts and raisins was barely cooked, but warmed through enough to make the leaves tender. I managed to eat it twice in this long, greedy shift. Similarly, a herb salad was genuinely herby, crunchy and full of green flavours. We were divided over the tortilla and ham croquettes. The tortilla was too much floury potato and not enough egg, and underseasoned; the croquettes were a bit gluey, but my sisters, who dropped in for a mere hour or two, said both were perfect examples of Spanish comfort food.

The more substantial dishes were patchier in quality. Quail escabeche, a poached and mildly pickled, pallid-looking little bird that came with softened dried fruits, had a sweet-and-sour broth that we all fought over. But good bits of hake came in a soggy and sweaty batter, which I am sure wasn't intended. A lentil stew with curd cheese was intensely savoury and satisfying. The cazuela, a fish stew with rice, was rubbish, all the shellfish entirely lacking any sparkling quality, tasting at times distinctly, and clearly wrongly, earthy. The cheese selection ranged across the savoury spectrum, and all came with perfect personal companions, like a quince, some bold little black grapes or a fig cheese. This and a glass of wine would usually have done me for supper, but on we went, into pudding. Between us we struggled with Rovira chocolate on toast, speckled with salt and drizzled with olive oil, but its temperature, nigh on frozen, stopped the flavour flooding out.

The waiting staff, aside from the managers, seemed ignorant about elements of the menu. One said: "Manzanilla, like vanilla." I don't usually mind about this, but Brindisa should have known better. For a name that suggests utter correctness in all things Spanish, they should have tutored their staff on the menu and wine list. But then you look at the prices, and, while the wine list isn't a bargain, it's reasonable, and the dishes all hover around the five-quid mark. They need to improve, though, with the stiff competition in the area. Louis, who lived in Spain for some time, said Brindisa would not tempt him away from his devotion to the two Fernandez & Wells cafes over the road. I'd go back: it's early days, and it will improve, undoubtedly, and it holds some good memories for me. And good memories are all a restaurant needs to leave you with for you to want to return.