

# It started with a Spanish food stall, then came the shop and the tapas bar. What could Brindisa possibly do next?

Tierra Brindisa, 46 Broadwick Street, London W1, tel: 020 7534 1690

By Terry Durack, restaurant critic of the year

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Lisa Barber

**Linton (left) says: 'This is a lovely opportunity to put our ingredients on the plate and show people what we can do.'**

How easy is it to put together a meal of tapas? Drape a few anchovies over jamon on a hunk of bread painted with tomato and garlic; scatter almonds over a bowl of fleshy green olives; or drizzle olive oil over spicy-sweet piquillo peppers, white beans or chickpeas. That's it. Any fool can throw together some good ingredients. I should know – I do it myself, every weekend.

But the reason my weekend tapas feasts are so good is because the anchovies are the fleshy Spanish ones from Ortiz, not salty little rat-tails. The jamon is the fragrant Joselito Iberian; the almonds are crisp, golden Marcona; and the olives are Gordal Reina. The olive oil is my very special Núñez de Prado, and the piquillo peppers, alubias beans and chickpeas are all from Navarrico. Yep, I'm a Brindisa boy.

This would be a sad island to live on if it were not for Brindisa's Monika Linton, who has been bringing the best Spanish ingredients to our tables for 20 years. Her Borough Market stall opened in 1999, joined in 2001 by the Exmouth Market showroom, and in 2004 by Tapas Brindisa, a loud and lively, walk-in tapas bar. Now, Brindisa is going beyond tapas to a more rounded dining experience with Tierra Brindisa in Soho, to be followed next month by the larger Casa Brindisa in South Kensington – not so much a chain as a bracelet. Tierra Brindisa still serves up simple platters of jamon, bowls of almonds and unadorned cheese boards, but Spanish-born head chef, José Pizarro is smart enough to know when to just toss something on a plate, and when to do something with it. He stops short of lab experiments, preferring to tease your appetite than play with your head. So on the one hand, there is a platter of expertly carved Joselito Gran Reserva ham (£20) with its pleasing ratio of fat and lean, and on the other, a single, just-cooked, Scottish scallop, simply dusted with garlic and chilli, and accessorised with crunchy crisps of Iberico ham (£5.25), turning it into a sweet and salty treat.

A strongly paprika-laden chorizo from Leon (£5.25), is split, grilled and piled on to grilled bread with piquillo peppers – good hangover food, either before or after – while tortilla comes in long triangular wedges in well-flavoured potato or spinach versions (£4).

Portions such as these are more raciones than tapas, but one dish is more clearly a "main course" as we know it. The cazuela of arroz Caldoso (£15) is a wet, soupy Levantine rice stew loaded down with chunks of red mullet, clams, mussels and two mushy-fleshed langoustines. The soupiness takes some getting used to if you grew up with the Italian idea of risotto, but it tastes generously of the sea. It's an effortless match with a crisp, fresh 2006 Vega de La Reina Sauvignon Blanc from Rueda, a bargain at £23 from the all-Spanish list. What is not to like? An escabeche of quail, apricots and prunes (£5.75) is wet and pallid, and I don't enjoy the so-called "country" bread, which is too namby-pamby for the tough gastronomic work it has to do. Why not just split a good roll, so that it has the extra gravitas of the crust on each base to cope with the load? To end, a so-called "crema catalana" (£4.60) is a joyous take on the original; a light sabayon spooned over ripe figs and drizzled with sticky toffee.

Don't expect miracles from Tierra – it's just a cute little shop-front in Soho that hides a tunnel-like, slatted-wood and tiled dining-room ending in a light-filled bar and kitchen. This is Tapas Brindisa for grown-ups, where you can reserve a table, sit down and relax, match interesting food with interesting wines, hear yourself talk, and see what a good chef can do with some of the best produce from Spain. It's a lot like my weekend lunches: simple enough, but with all the right ingredients.