

Tierra Brindisa

Top tapas comes to Soho



© Ming Tang-Evans
By Charmaine Mok

There's something a bit too civilised about this tapas restaurant. Instead of finding raucous, happy punters knocking back mouthfuls of sherry around an upturned barrel, you find muted – almost solemn – diners picking away at their jamón with dainty knives and forks, with thick linen napkins on their laps. For most Spaniards, the very idea of booking ahead for tapas seems absurd. Tapas bar-hopping in Spain is an opportunity to sample deep-fried gooey ortiguillas (sea anemones) in one joint, before moving on to another for its famed costillas (ribs), perhaps.

But this is London, and diners do not flit from Barrafinna to Dehesa, or Salt Yard to Tendido Cuatro – not least because you need to queue to get a seat at the first two, unless you're dining at odd hours. What seems de rigueur in Spain doesn't quite cut it here.

The original Tapas Brindisa, at Borough Market, has a no-booking policy, but this new Soho sibling is far more formal and reservations are advisable. But even if you haven't planned ahead, you might just get lucky and be seated at the buzzing bar at the back of the restaurant (pictured above), right in front of the open kitchen. It's preferable to the dining room, which is far more impersonal and clinical, with spartan decor and awful acoustics.

The Brindisa group's main claim to fame is its status as London's premier importer of fantastic Spanish produce. A simple aperitivo of Gordal (Queen) olives, stuffed with marjoram and aromatic slivers of orange, were sublime – the pleasing squelch of the olive with just the right amount of bite, releasing a torrent of sweet, sour and salty flavours. A dish of Padrón peppers was a delicious game of Russian roulette as the morsels alternated between smoky sweetness and punchy spiciness. Meanwhile, a chilled glass of dry, aged manzanilla sherry (perfectly kept) carried me straight back to the salty shores of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, the home of this sherry style, and the Hidalgo bodega which produced this particular bottle.

It got better – rustic pan con tomate (country bread with tomato), daisy-fresh Catalan-style spinach with pine nuts and fat golden raisins, a zingy slab of dense chorizo atop a blanket of sweet piquillo pepper. But cod (fresh, not bacalau) carpaccio was obscenely oversalted, the accompanying orange slices and red onion doing nothing to allay the onslaught of sodium chloride.

Textures flailed in the most comforting of Spanish dishes – tortilla de patatas (potato omelette) was too dry, too cold; gluey Ibérico ham croquetas, while pleasingly crisp on the outside, didn't trump those served at nearby Barrafinna, where the melty, velvety croqueta innards could have you weeping with joy.

Things were remedied by a rich, amber-hued rare palo cortado sherry, its buttery sweetness and hints of coffee and almonds a fitting partner for a juicy pincho moruno (essentially a kebab) of rare Ibérico pork fillet; likewise for flavoursome tender lamb cutlets.

At the moment, it's difficult to get a reservation unless you're willing to settle for a sitting nearly a week later. With such a high calibre of cooking, and a pantry full of top-quality ingredients, it's to be expected. Still, the surroundings could be cosier, the service more convivial – next time, we might try our luck for scoring a seat at the bar, where it feels more like a tapas joint and most likely won't require booking.

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