



Spanish inquisition

Could the tapas at Tierra Brindisa rival the best of Barcelona?

Jay Rayner investigates

Eating at restaurants run by the Spanish produce suppliers Brindisa makes me do very odd things. Like count the number of anchovies on a plate. Or look up euro-to-sterling exchange rates. It brings out the obsessive compulsive in me, which is never attractive. Here's why: a few years back, when the first of their restaurants, Tapas Brindisa, opened in London's Borough I wondered out loud whether a vertical company like theirs, which imported the produce direct from Spain, ought not to be able to pass on the obvious savings to diners in their restaurants. I focused on a plate of nine very good salted anchovy fillets sold for £8. This seemed to me like excessive profiteering. It resulted in a long to and fro with one of the company's founders - read argument - which ended with us having to agree to disagree. She felt it was reasonable that the restaurants sourced their ingredients from the wholesalers at the market rate even though they owned those wholesalers. I was unconvinced.

Now they have opened a new tapas restaurant in Soho and I can't help myself being forensic on the prices. The good news? There won't be an argument this time. To my eye, the prices have dropped in real terms. The bad news: it still ain't cheap. But then really good Iberian ingredients aren't. You want a plate of the sweetest of hams, with fat that melts on the tongue, from happy pigs raised on acorns in true piggy heaven? That will be 20 of your pounds, and you should be grateful for it. By my calculations, they won't even be making the standard 70 per cent gross profit. (Maths corner: Joselito Jamón Ibérico de Bellotta currently costs about £54 a kilo retail. Be generous and take £10 a kilo off that for wholesale. The serving is around 200 grams, so £9 a plate. Allow for VAT, and they really aren't hurting anyone. Apart from the pig.)

The important thing, of course, is what they do with those ingredients. We are, rightly, obsessed with provenance these days, but it is useless if the kitchen then takes lots of lovely stuff and tortures it to death. The chef Simon Hopkinson once said to me that he'd rather have the cheapest of factory-raised chickens cooked by someone who knows what they are doing, than the finest of organic birds, sacrificed by a numpty. I agree.

Here, they treat ingredients with the utmost care and sensitivity. It's also a smart space. Where Tapas Brindisa is all bare wood, an attempt to build a local artisanal vibe for City boys just over London Bridge, this is sleek and airy: white and olive-green tiling, a vault at the back where there is a bar next to the open kitchen. The only problem is the tables, which are tiny. A meal here is part feast, part jigsaw puzzle, as waiters and diners collaborate to find space.

It's worth the effort. As well as that ham, served the right side of room temperature, we very much liked the jamón croquettes. Sure, they are just a way to use up the offcuts from the bloody expensive ham legs, but they are a very good way to do so; the little cubes of ham are set in a solid, creamy béchamel, the cylinders rolled in breadcrumbs and fried. This is bad food for good people. More subtle was the carpaccio of cod, the thinly sliced raw fish dressed with orange and marjoram. The anchovies - six of them - came with a salad of baby gem lettuce and roasted red peppers (and cost £6.75). On the meaty side there was, of course, an impeccable piece of grilled chorizo dribbling its crimson juices into the toast below, a couple of chargrilled lamb chops which demanded expert bone nibblage, and a tender quail with sweet, autumnal fruits. All of these dishes are priced at between £5 and £8, with only a couple breaching that.

We finished with fresh figs, the colour of a new bruise, swamped by an avalanche of crema catalana, then blowtorched to give it the requisite caramelised shell. Best of all were tablets of bitter Rovira chocolate melting on to thin toast and dressed with olive oil and salt, served alongside a scoop of bright, fresh orange sorbet. A few weeks ago, after my Alice in Wonderland experience at El Bulli, I craved simplicity. I was taken by a friend to a top place in Barcelona for tapas. It was, as you would expect, very good. But better than Tierra Brindisa? No, not particularly. And it was certainly more expensive. Take that as a recommendation.