

Torito's tapas hit bull's eye

Torito

Address: 276 Augusta Ave. at College St., 647-436-5874
Chef: Carlos Hernandez
Hours: Tuesday to Saturday, 6 to 10:30 p.m.
Reservations: Not accepted
Wheelchair access: No
Price: Dinner for two with sherry, tax and tip: \$100



Amy Pataki Dining Out

Tapas, like dancing, is all in the rhythm. Either you got it or you don't.

The small dishes should hit the table at the right time, with the right attitude and with the right amount of Latin flair. If you've ever seen the dance floor at a Saturday night salsa club, you know what separates the *muchachos* from the *hombres*.

That blend of mastery and panache doesn't always translate to the kitchen. Chris McDonald, the latest chef to open a tapas bar with his Cava, displayed two left feet in his opening weeks. And with the slew of restaurants jumping on the bandwagon — Mistura will soon be offering small plates at its new Sopra lounge upstairs — it's good to know at least one restaurant where the tapas are fast and funky.

Torito is everything Cava isn't. (See chart.) It's not run by a cult chef. It's not patronized by the rich and famous. It's not even in a particularly nice part of town; it's hard to imagine the Gucci-hood crowd at Cava stepping around the steamy garbage piled up on the sidewalks of Kensington Market. But what beats at the heart of Torito is Latin blood coupled with a genuine desire to please. Here is where small dishes make a big impact.

Torito (Spanish for "little bull") is what happens when a stylish restaurateur joins forces with a veteran chef. The restaurateur, Veronica Laudes, sold Lathide three years ago and travelled through South America and Spain. The chef, Carlos Hernandez, introduced Toronto to Nuevo Latin cooking at Xango back in the day, blending Latin and Spanish flavours. They opened Torito in January.

"The whole menu is extremely, extremely simple. There's no place for the flavours to hide. They stand alone," says Hernandez.

With its brick walls, brushed steel accents and bullfighting posters, Torito is warm yet minimalist. The stripped-down décor includes bar seating, a large window table with stools, a few picnic-style benches and a handful of tables for two — none of which can be reserved. Arriving at Torito before 7 p.m. is the only way to guarantee a seat.

What is guaranteed is a smiling welcome immediately followed by a waiter gliding over to take your drink order. With 18 sherries by the glass, listed from dry to sweet (\$5 to \$16), it helps to have some guidance. The waiter recommends Tio Pepe Fino as an all-around match for the 24 tapas dishes. Service remains attentive and the dishes well-paced throughout.

Hernandez has a healthy respect for tradition. Yes, there's a *tortilla español* (\$6), the iconic Spanish potato omelette here served with moist watercress. Plump crab croquettes (\$11) are as crisp as those at any seaside tapas bar in Spain. Another ocean treat, this one Peruvian in origin, is heart-stoppingly fresh ceviche (\$8), the white bass-slaked in lime juice with Peruvian popcorn and soft white yams for contrast.

It's the updates, though, that command attention. Hernandez takes the archetypal Spanish ingredients of manchego cheese and almonds and makes a bracing salad (\$7). He brushes quail (\$11) with tart pomegranate molasses after roasting it mahogany and serves it with sweet mashed squash for balance. Plump shrimp *al quillo* (\$) becomes a classic in its own right once Hernandez tempers the heady garlic with sherry and smoked paprika. The garlic toast alongside is killer.

There are other standouts, like the slippery roasted piquillo peppers stuffed with smooth whipped salted cod (\$8) that tastes neither fishy nor salty, an astonishing act of grace and skill. With the pair of peppers afloat in an earthy black olive sauce, one order suddenly seems too small to share. Demand your own. Trust me.

There will also be tense moments when it comes to giving up just one spoonful of chocolate flan (\$7). It is

- ★★★★ Outstanding
- ★★★★ Excellent
- ★★★ Very good
- ★★★ Good
- ★★ Fair
- ★ Poor
- ★ Awful



Arrive early at Torito, as the restaurant does not accept reservations.

where good eggs go when they die. The soft and wobbly custard is subtly laced with bittersweet Callebaut chocolate. The texture is perfectly smooth, free of air holes and other flaws from overbaking. Any kitchen that can make flan this well should have better sweet endings. How disappointing, then, to encounter the whiff of overripe fruit in a dull pineapple gratin (\$7) and be unable to try Torito's third dessert, fresh figs with caramels cheese and honey, because the kitchen has run out of figs.

There are other disappointments. Salt levels can be a problem — as in, too high

— and while the majority of fish and seafood dishes are well turned out, there's no salvaging a terrine built around dried octopus tentacles (\$8). As for the tripe stew (\$8), while it may follow the recipe used by Laudes's grandmother in Chile, the mushy texture doesn't work well in Toronto.

Much like your dance partner stepping on your feet now and again, such flaws don't detract from the fun and flow of dining at Torito. If only all our tapas bars had such rhythm.

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Tale of two tapas

Tapas sure are hot these days, but not all are created equal. By Amy Pataki

Tapas Bar:	CAVA	TORITO
Address:	1560 Yonge St., 416-979-9918	276 Augusta Ave., 647-436-5874
Neighbourhood:	Upper Rosedale	Upper Kensington Market
Crowd:	Fans of chef/co-owner Chris McDonald's previous restaurant, Avalon	Fans of chef Carlos Hernandez's unpretentious Latin fusion
Opened:	May 12, 2006	Jan. 5, 2006
Sherries by the glass:	6	18
Serrano ham:	Hand-sliced in gloriously thick chunks	Machine-sliced and less than fresh
Beef cheeks:	Cooked 48 hours and served with cumin-heavy chimichurri sauce	Cooked two hours and served with tongue
Items for sale:	No	Yes, including smoked paprika and Spanish olive oil



There are 18 kinds of sherry ready to wash down the tapas at Torito.