

Turn on the TAPAS

Itty-bitty bites are huge. Maybe it's time you featured a mini plate of Chilean tripe // By Ibi Kaslik

There are many versions of the origin of Spanish tapas. One of the most famed stories is that Spanish King Alfonso the 10th was encouraged to eat small bites of food with wine during an illness. After the king recuperated, he demanded that no wine be served in the land of Castile, unless it was paired with food (wise king). Another legend has it that a slice of ham was served over a glass of sherry in order to keep flies away. The bar that provided this slice of ham — or “tapar,” which means “to cover” in Spanish — found that in addition to keeping flies out of the wine, the ham slice also boosted alcohol sales.

In Canada, where flies and monarchy are no longer an issue, establishments selling tapas have been enjoying immense popularity. Maybe it's because diners are watching what they eat, or that their appetites are fickle, but one thing is certain: hearty meals are a thing of the past.

“The spirit of tapas is inherently appealing for people who are going for a night out on the town,” says Kathryn Borel, a food reviewer at *eye weekly*. “It's communal, there's a bounce and verve to the experience of trading dishes, figuring out which ones appeal to each person and why. It also encourages people to talk about food.”

Torito, a new Spanish spot in Toronto's Kensington Market, has been hopping since it opened at the beginning of the year. Decorated in red-and-black Matador posters and simple wooden benches, the restaurant seats about 60 tapas fiends. “People love tapas because it gives them the opportunity to taste different things, from soup to fish,” says head chef and consultant, Carlos



Hernandez. They tend to eat less when they order several small dishes, he says. “Psychologically your mind tricks you into thinking you're eating more,” he adds.

Born in El Salvador, Hernandez is not afraid to tackle such risky fare as Chilean tripe stew (\$8) and braised beef cheek and tongue (\$9). In fact, after only four months on the menu, cow stomach is a favourite among diners. “I might change the preparation of the tripe but it's staying,” insists the chef. Less adventurous, but equally tasty, are traditional Latin American specialties: fish ceviche with

corn and yam (\$7) and chestnut and chorizo soup (\$6). Other ingredients also take a page from Latin American cookbooks such as corn, potatoes, chilies and beans, which Hernandez combines with heavier European meats and flavours.

Though he's never been to Spain, Hernandez is fond of the country's food flair, and Middle Eastern influences. “I try to make the dishes more Spanish traditional, but there are definitely Mid-east influences in some of the dishes, like the roasted quail with pomegranate glaze and calabaza mash (\$11), and the lamb loaf