



Garlic prawns on the tapas menu at WTF. Photo: Edward Wong

Small bites, big taste

AGAS MUN TOY 1-3-11

With an emphasis on socialising and drinking, it's little wonder tapas restaurants have taken off in the city, writes Vicki Williams

For *tertulia* native Vicki Tarrida, tapas are not a meal, they are something that you tinkle on in the convivial atmosphere of a bar. "In Barcelona, eating out is never just about tapas. Tapas are things to have with drinks at a bar before going for dinner with friends or family. The emphasis is on the socialising and the drinking, but always with tapas, which stimulates the appetite," says Tarrida, chef at Comelons private kitchen.

In other parts of Spain, things are different. In Madrid, people have a meal of just tapas, visiting bars and restaurants specialising in these snacks that are a short walking distance from each other.

In Hong Kong, it is also possible to tapas bar-hop for snacking with

drinks, or have drinks as dinner. But does the food give diners the real taste of Spain?

For Tarrida, who has lived in Hong Kong for 10 years, it increasingly does. "More people in Hong Kong are familiar with Spanish cuisine and so are more willing to experiment. As a result there are now more restaurants serving authentic tasting dishes."

He believes that BCN, which opened in June, is one example: "The food is very good, the tapas are evolved, and I like the social aspect - the interaction with the chef and other diners."

The first British chef to complete an internship at the famed El Bulli restaurant in Catalonia, Spain, Jacek

Adlerstein is hoping to recreate that social vibe. He will be opening a tapas restaurant in West Choi late next month.

So are tapas going to be trend-obscured Hong Kong's next big thing? With the recent opening of BCN, this month's opening of a branch of New York's Boqueria, and Adlerstein's arrival, it's certainly a possibility. Here are some notable entrants of the past few years.

Boqueria Hong Kong

The restaurant is named after Barcelona's famous food market and will feature an open kitchen serving traditional tapas. There will be a second serving more substantial dishes designed for

sharing - whole fish, smoking pig and paella. The menu will be similar to that of the New York restaurant, with signature tapas such as *boqueria de Barcelona* (beef and potato croquettes, *salas bravas*, *alcó*), and *patatas bravas* (scaly-fried potatoes with a spicy tomato sauce and aioli).

Donagh Eusevia Duran beer and a range of Spanish wines, sherry, cava and sangria are planned to complement the food.

David Inquensio, formerly of Uno Mas, is heading the kitchen. He is back in town after spending a year in his native Spain. Centralist dining will feature, and there will also be a tapas bar seating 30. To create a buzz, the restaurant will be hosting a complimentary cocktail-style tasting

Tapas town

Key places for small plates



evening of paella, snacks and sangria on September 18.

BCN

This features intimate bar seating that provides direct interaction with Spanish chef Edgar Benabarro, who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of the cuisine and Michelin restaurant experience. It also gives a modern take on tapas that attracts a Spanish-speaking clientele. So it is little wonder that BCN (Bar Coké) is fully booked for dinner for the next two months, although single diners and couples may get a seat.

Thankfully, lunch is still an option, and a good one as it allows diners to inexpensively sample many of the dishes served in the evening (tasting menus only). Included in the five courses at lunch is a changing selection of three tapas, such as the *escudella*, a piece of toasted bread that can have different toppings. One BCN version has a base of béarnaise sauce onion compote, topped with a slice of Iberico ham and a cube of foie gras with a caramelised sugar topping.

Also included is the *pulido a la Catalana*, slow-cooked octopus infused with paprika served on potato, and a classic salted cod croquette. A must-try is the Andalusian gazpacho that is striking in appearance and taste.

A new tapas trio is about to hit the menu: *gilda* – green pepper, garlic, olives, anchovy, octopus, potato, and garlic sauce; and Iberico ham croquette.

BCN has a good selection of Spanish wine and sherry.

WTF

The first thing to note is that WTF stands for wine, tapas, fun. The second is that the place feels more like a late-night bar than a restaurant, and is open until 2am.

The wine menu includes dishes however resembles WTF. This dish of scrambled eggs has prawns, Iberico ham, mushroom and

asparagus, with a variety of tastes and textures that stand up to those with the late-night munchies.

For vegetarians, there are the champions of *Arroz* (risotto) in a sherry sauce with four varieties of sautéed mushrooms (portobello, button, shiitake and oyster) given a flavour lift by the sherry, with red and green pepper for colour and textural contrast.

Other options include *patatas bravas*, grilled sardines and a variety of *albóndigas* (meatballs). There is also paella for those with larger appetites. The wine list is disappointing due to the lack of Spanish options, but there is a variety of sangria by the glass or jug.



Tapas are something to have with drinks at a bar before going for dinner with friends. The emphasis is on socialising and drinking

LUIS TAMBARA, CHINA'S PRIVATE READER

Mesa 15

This is a good option for contemporary Spanish cuisine, including tapas. Noted chef Alejandro Sanchez, who has a Michelin background, is now cooking in the restaurant full time.

The selection ranges from the traditional to Sanchez's modern interpretations of tapas. On the traditional side are Iberico ham croquettes, crispy, pillow-like parcels containing a finely-tuned balance of salty ham and creamy cheese sauce. The thoroughly modern Spanish "steak" with fresh sea urchin and tempura *botan de* (sweet prawn), served with a pungent potato salad, meshes with

one's expectations of tapas but the flavours come together nicely.

A new addition to the menu is the Mediterranean mussels, paprika, fresh tomato sauce and béchamel. The out-of-shell mussels are nicely tender, and paprika provides a bite that is balanced by the sweet tomato sauce and slow-cooked onion. The white sauce adds a creamy element.

It is so good that bread or a spoon to finish the sauce is a must.

On the beverage side, a Spanish-only wine list includes wines by the glass, and sangria.

Tapo

This restaurant, with its bar seating, has been focusing on traditional tapas for almost six years. It has a large à la carte menu that is supplemented by six or seven weekly specials, such as *foie gras terrine* with sherry jelly. A good start is the *pan con tomate* (bread with tomato), an old school dish given a Tapo touch by blending poached tomatoes with garlic and salt, spreading them on toasted crusty bread with olive oil and a touch of sweet paprika. Big on flavor, hand-filled anchovies make a good accompaniment to the classics, marinated in a mixture of vinegar, olive oil, garlic and thyme. Tortilla, a potato, egg and onion omelette, is a staple tapas dish.

Tortilla are often served as slices, but individual ones are cooked to order here for a fresh taste. For a bit of kick, there is the *garraux pi pi*, shell-oft prawns sauced with garlic slices, smoky spicy paprika, and a touch of cayenne and coriander.

There is ham with tomato and spices. The tender lamb is replete of curries and star anise, and is served with a zesty parsley sauce. There is a good selection of Spanish wine and sherry, with a recently expanded by-the-glass and half-bottle selection. foodandwinegroup.com



1) Hand-filled white anchovies; 2) Slow-cooked crispy suckling pig from Mesa 15; 3) Salt cod and potato fritters from WTF; 4) Foie gras from BCN; 5) Lamb skewers with parsley sauce from Tapas; 6) Patatas bravas from Bocanera. Photos: Ricky Cheng, May So, Edward Wong, KY Cheng