

A Briton Tinkers With Tapas in Hong Kong

[Dine]

By LARA DAY
Hong Kong

Jason Atherton's first foray into the city is already drawing crowds, and queues, despite having opened just weeks ago. It's no wonder: 22 Ships stands out from Hong Kong's growing ranks of tapas bars by offering just 35 seats, taking no reservations, and marrying a casual vibe with plates that use Spanish flavors as a mere starting point.

The Chef & Owner: Mr. Atherton, a Gordon Ramsay protégé turned independent restaurateur, is best known for his London restaurant Pollen Street Social. He is expanding his Asia empire rapidly, opening Table No. 1 in Shanghai, Pollen, Esquina and Keong Saik Snacks in Singapore and now 22 Ships in Hong Kong (and plans to add a more formal location in the city as well).

Yenn Wong, the Singaporean entrepreneur who financed 22 Ships, says it's intended "to introduce Jason as a chef. We wanted to start with something quite small and casual." Ms. Wong herself is no dining slouch: Her past projects include Hong Kong's 208 Duecento Otto and Shanghai's

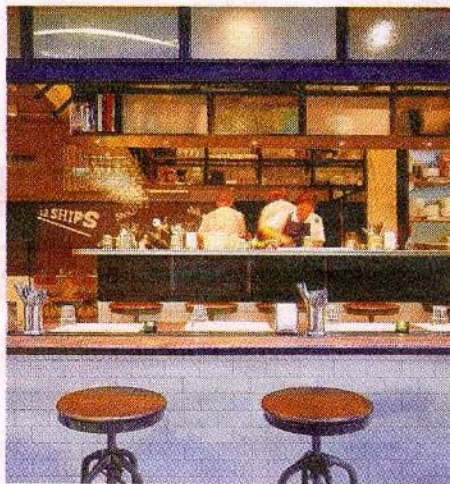


Goat cheese sorbet with honeycomb at 22 Ships, which recently opened in Hong Kong.

22 Ships (2)

Capo, both of which pair a flair for design with modern, international cuisine.

Food & Drink: Though the restaurant styles itself as a tapas bar, don't expect standard Spanish fare. Instead, look for what are somewhat British takes on classics, such as toasties laden with Manchego, and minted peas and broad beans with goat curd and jamón Iberico. Standout dishes include the foie gras with sweetbread empanada, a pe-



tite, melt-in-your mouth portion enlivened with red-onion jam, and the D.I.Y. tuna tartare, served with crouton slivers that will be refilled on request. The tightly edited menu will change over time to keep curious diners coming back, says Ms. Wong, but core dishes like suckling pig with roasted apples and piquillo-pepper jus will remain in place. Drinks include a selection of Old World wines with a couple of New Zealand bottles, Spanish beers such as Ferran

Adrià's Estrella Damm Inedit, and a respectable house-made sangria.

Setting: While the food here is serious, the setting is relaxed. The open-fronted space in Hong Kong's gentrifying Wan Chai district was designed by Shanghai firm Neri & Hu, and touches such as textured glass, steel countertops and exposed brick create a laid-back, industrial feel. Seating is communal, so you may want to save this spot for a friendly tête-à-tête or casual date rather than a larger group. The best vantage point is at the bar, where you can watch the chefs at work. The row of window seats, while tempting for people-watching, unfortunately doubles as a crowded thoroughfare for the staff.

Our Tip: Steer clear of the few traditional items on the menu—the gambas, served in shell as a garlic-and-chive-topped trio, are fussier and less hearty than the original, while the roasted Padrón peppers don't distinguish themselves enough to justify the price tag. The desserts, however, are a must: The chocolate ganache with olive-oil brioche and sea salt, and the goat cheese sorbet with honeycomb, are not to be missed.

22 Ships, 22 Ship St., Wan Chai; Tel. +852 2555 0722; 22ships.hk. Dinner for two around 760 Hong Kong dollars (US\$98).