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PATRICIA VONNE & ROBERT RODRIGUEZ

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Stay: The elegant InterContinental Madrid, a centrally located hotel built atop a former palace. I love its insider packages, which include a tapas tour, an art triangle tour (Madrid has three of the world's finest art museums: the Prado, the Reina Sofia and the Thyssen-Bornemisza) and the shopping package. *Intercontinental.com.*

Taste: The many different kinds of tapas, such as jamón ibérico, boquerones en vinagre, tortilla Española, pulpo a la gallega, setas, gambas al ajillo and queso de cabrales

Shopping: Hit El Serrano Shopping District for posh brands, both global and Spanish, and check out El Rastro, an immense flea market, on weekends.



Tapas Territory

A TASTING TOUR OF MADRID

WE'RE SIPPING COCKTAILS IN BAR 49, just off the lobby of Madrid's posh InterContinental hotel, when a waiter brings an immense plate of thinly sliced jamón ibérico de bellota. This silky, chewy cured ham with a nutty aftertaste—the caviar of Spain—comes from special black pigs that harbor the good sense to feed only on acorns. The citizens of Madrid, or Madrileños, have an almost sacred reverence for it. Still, it's not just ham that pleases the palate here. It's food in general. "In Madrid, we love to eat," says my friend, devouring the final pink piece of jamón with a shrug of apology. "And we eat a lot."

Having lived in Spain, I know this to be true. Take tapas, for instance. The art of the tapeo is in the limitless ramble from bar to tavern, pausing just long enough to nibble a meatball, a couple of garlicky shrimp, a few olives or a forkful of octopus and washing each tiny bit down with a sip of the adult beverage of your choice. Tapas may be small bites, but all those teeny platefuls add up, and Madrileños—perhaps the most skilled partakers of the ritual in all of Spain—can last all night, energized by the sustenance of these multiple small meals. The offering of tapas reportedly began in Andalucía, in southern Spain. But Madrid, the geographical center of the country, became a sort of cultural net, catching all the varied regional traditions of Spain and adopting them as its own. Combine that with Madrid's extroverted personalities, collective gift of gab, enthusiasm for food and herd instincts, and

Tapa has become part of the global vernacular.



ABOVE: Plaza de la Cibeles **RIGHT, TOP:** Tapas and spices for sale in a Spanish market. **RIGHT, BOTTOM:** Alfonso XII's monument in Parque del Buen Retiro city park.



it makes sense that these people evolved as the most proficient at grazing, imbibing and staying up until dawn.

During an entire evening of tapas-ing in this capital city, one might taste something from every province in Spain: blue queso Cabrales from Asturias, octopus from Galicia, patatas brava with aioli from Catalonia, paella from Valencia and sherry from Jerez. And that's just a start.

We begin our tapas crawl, as most Madrileños do, in the early evening. Though I'm accompanied by some veteran tapas-goers and, in fact, am one myself, we decide to take advantage of an insider tour. It's offered by the InterContinental in conjunction with Adventurous Appetites, a guide service that leads hungry souls to Madrid's hidden corners, to bars with local clientele and cherished specialties. Best of all, this four-hour program demystifies the ritual of the tapeo with a sort of tapas 101.

After our first stop, where we drink cider and sample a piquant blue cheese, the uninitiated tapas-takers among us share their first impressions. Naturally, our first-timers had tried tapas in places like New York, Austin and London, but they'd never had tapas quite like this. "I thought we'd be sitting at a little table with white tablecloths, and daintily sampling things," says one conferee, as we stand smashed against a throng of swanky Spaniards in an ancient, stone-walled building on a floor littered with napkins. "Yes," I say, pointing to the napkins, "you are supposed to throw them on the floor. If you find a bar with a clean floor—well, something is wrong."

There's a lot to know about the real tapas experience, points out Adventurous Appetites

owner James Fraser. It's his goal to make sure clients throw themselves into the true spirit of the tapas melee in order to truly comprehend the history and energy of Madrid. That's why he makes sure they learn some of the rudimentary customs that define the experience. For example, never sit. Most tapas-goers stand because it's cheaper and more fun to order at the bar. He also urges one to order like a local: Ask for your drink first, then wait five minutes because the barman will usually bring you something for free, like olives or almonds. Everyone, he insists, is welcome in any bar—from seniors to children, Americans to Japanese—especially those willing to order a local specialty. Spicy tripe, anyone?

As we make our rounds from one tasca (tapas bar) to the next, my pals begin to operate like pros. They understand quickly that the point is to hit as many tascas as possible, try as many diminutive bites and down as many mini drinks as can be tolerated. They see there are three sizes of food in some bars: a pincho (a mouthful), a tapa (a saucerful) or a ración (a small plateful). And they marvel at the acuity of the barmen who add your tab with chalk on the bar and charge you by an honor system of plate piles and used-toothpick bunches. At last, they experience the grand finale near dawn: churros and thick-as-pudding hot chocolate—a Spanish post-tapas tradition.

Tapa has become part of the global vernacular. But while chefs elsewhere might make the dishes, only in Spain, and especially in Madrid, can you find the real thing.

Tascas: Mesón de la Guitarra, La Trucha, La Venencia and El Museo del Jamón

Drinks: Sherry, Mahou beer, cava and cider

Souvenirs: Sherry from Jerez de la Frontera, olive oil and almonds