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The art of tapas-style entertaining

By Tiffany Owens
Special to MSN

Tapas, or "little plates," are Spain's national culinary passion. At first glance, they may seem similar in appearance to *hors d'oeuvres* and appetizers (at least in portion size), but the tapas ritual is more than just food enjoyed with drinks or before a meal. It is an indispensable part of daily Spanish life.

Eating tapas is part of the *tapeo*, the daily congregation to eat, drink wine and socialize, starting at midday and continuing into the night. Spaniards traditionally go to tapas bars or *tascas* before meals to meet friends, converse and people-watch, usually "tasca-hopping" for several rounds of small plates and drinks before settling into the evening's chosen restaurant.

"It's hard to think of a tapas bar as an eating establishment because it functions more like a conversation establishment," notes author and Mediterranean food connoisseur Clifford A. Wright. "Conversation ranges from the mundane to the philosophical, and the food ranges from the simple toasted almond to the complex *callos* [tripe and sausage stew]. You will be able to taste snippets of a huge variety of foods just as you would hear snippets of conversation about the lottery, bullfighting or local politics."

A tradition born of necessity

The tapas tradition is believed to have originated more than a century ago in Andalucia, Spain's sunny south, where a clever barkeep is said to have started placing slices of cheese or ham on top of drink glasses to keep out the dust and insects. Hence the "tapa" term, which means "cover" or "lid."

The practice quickly caught on with Spain's other little bars to eventually become a social staple wherein small plates were passed around and shared communally with drinks. This tapas tradition spills over onto the other regions of the Mediterranean as well: in France as *hors d'oeuvres* and *entrées*; in Italy as *antipasti*, *primi piatti* and *cicchetti*; in North Africa as *mukabalatt*; and in Greece, Turkey and the Middle East as *meze*.

Plan your own tapas party

Tapas parties provide all of the fun with less of the fuss and formality commonly associated with sit-down dinner parties. The tapas themselves are also as versatile as they are delicious, giving guests an opportunity to appreciate innumerable dishes with as many different flavors, textures and colors as the ensuing conversations themselves.

Small-bite tapas are perfect for warmer evenings when you don't feel like stuffing yourself, and sherry is the authentic Spanish accompaniment that enhances their flavor. Just like sparkling wine can only be called Champagne if it comes from that region in France, sherry can only be called a sherry when it



comes from the Jerez region in Spain. The different kinds — fino, manzanilla, oloroso and amontillado — range in sweetness, dryness and color, from light yellow to dark brown.

No sherry on hand? Try pairing tapas with sangria (made from red wine and fruit) or a light-bodied red wine, such as a Chianti or Merlot.

The secret to successful tapas-style entertaining is to provide enough food (with enough substance and variety), to give guests the feeling that they've had a full meal. Wright recommends that dishes should be also balanced between dry and saucy, spicy and savory. "Too many dishes become an assault on people's stomachs and foods begin to clash," he warns. "Too few dishes leave people bored and hungry."

For a tapas-style cocktail party, have olives and almonds in several bowls around the room and hand guests a glass of wine or sherry as they arrive. Then bring out the small plates together, with a dish of toothpicks for spearing if necessary, as everyone begins their second drink.

Wright also advises that for cocktail parties without dinner, eight dishes would be appropriate; for an eight-person *meze* dinner, eight to 10 dishes to pass around (or served as courses) will suffice. Prepare tapas ahead of time and serve at room temperature to encourage leisurely consumption.

Now we're cooking

But which plates to choose? This new trio of cookbooks offers sage and sumptuous advice for creating your own memorable tapas party menu:

Little Foods of the Mediterranean: 500 Fabulous Recipes for Antipasti, Tapas, Hors D'oeuvre, Meze & More

by Clifford A. Wright

The James Beard award-winning author has amassed another impressive collection of recipes that not only takes the reader on a culinary adventure across the Mediterranean region, but also encapsulates the very essence of tapas: simple, delicious, unpretentious and easily consumed. The 500 recipes are organized by type and region, from Canapes, Crostini, Bruschetta and other bread-based delights to such "Saucy Little Dishes" as Chickpeas with Chorizo Sausage and Polenta with Porcini Mushrooms. Wright has also thoughtfully included 41 suggested à la carte-style party menus, such as the Summer Tapas Party or Sultan-Style Meze Party for eight, 12 or 20 people, that takes the guesswork out of which and how many plates to serve.

From Tapas to Meze: Small Plates from the Mediterranean

by Joanne Weir

Weir is an award-winning chef, public-TV-cooking-show personality and regular contributor to the likes of *Bon Appétit* and *Food & Wine* magazines. Her love of first-course Mediterranean foods is evident in this melodious collection of traditional and authentic recipes culled from the region's best home cooks and chefs. This newly revised version (and winner of the Gourmand World Cookbook 2004 Award for Mediterranean Cuisine) includes 160 of her favorite small-plate recipes, like Stuffed Eggplant with Oregano and Mint, or Risotto with Red Wine. Of special note is the "Mediterranean Basics" section, with Weir's expert advice on how to toast pine nuts, smoke an eggplant or make Mascarpone.

César: Recipes from a Tapas Bar

by Olivier Said, James Mellgren and Maggie Pond

In the spirit of its namesake Spanish-style tapas bar in Berkeley, Calif., the *César* cookbook unveils more than a hundred of the restaurant's secret and signature tapas and cocktail recipes, including the popular Papas Fritas and Piquillo Peppers Stuffed with Shrimp and Saffron Alioli. The book also features a

Spanish specialty-products resource with information on where to get harder-to-find ingredients.

Tiffany Owens is a Portland, Ore.-based freelance writer and avid wine and culinary enthusiast.

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