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ICEX FWS Restaurants from Spain

Arroz Bomba

When it Comes to Spanish Cuisine, Tapas Are Just the Start

The famous small, shareable plates open up a world of culinary tradition in Spain

Whether or not you've been to Spain, you're likely quite familiar with one of the country's most famed culinary exports: Tapas. Spanish tapas bars dominate major cities on every continent, serving shareable, bite-sized morsels of traditional and creative cuisine. Like the Spanish culinary culture itself, going for tapas is an inherently social experience. Plates are passed, glasses of wine are sipped, and stories are shared. In fact, tapas are so much a part of the fabric of life in Spain that there's even a special word for it: *tapear,* a verb meaning to go for tapas.

Tapas are the unofficial ambassadors of Spanish cuisine, introducing curious foodies from around the globe to the exciting variations and vast delights of the country's foodie-embedded culture—everything from cured meats to aged cheeses to briny olives and so much more. But tapas are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the complex, ever-evolving culinary scene Spain is famous for, and there is much more to be explored.

Extra virgin olive oil is used to dress lettuce and tomato salads, roasted vegetables, and a host of other dishes. Some of the country's most traditional dishes, from croquettes and red mullet to eggplant and squid, are fried at approximately 180° C (356° F) in extra virgin olive oil.

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Spanish fried food

When you hear the term "fried food" in America, the first thing that comes to mind is often the greasy fast food variety. In Spain, that designation couldn't be further from the truth. Fried food is one of the most outstanding facets of Spanish cuisine and it is crafted with expert levels of care and quality.

This is, in large part, because Spain is the world's leading producer of extra virgin olive oil, one of the highest quality and healthiest sources of fat. Spain's high concentration of thriving olive groves helps to produce this nutrient-rich oil, which is used as a base for delicious fried foods. Some of the country's most traditional dishes, from croquettes to red mullet fish to eggplant and squid, are fried in extra virgin olive oil. Olive oil is also used to dress simple salads, roasted vegetables, and a host of other dishes. One taste of high-quality, pure olive oil and you'll be able to taste the difference from the generic store-bought brands. The flavor is richer, and the oil is more fragrant, making for outstanding fried dishes.

A great place to sample some of these delicious fried delicacies is at José Andrés' Jaleo in Orlando, Florida. The communal, tapas-style menu creates a social and authentically Spanish environment, while the fried cod fritters and fried squid showcase the flavor and texture of fried Spanish favorites.

Boards, perfect for sharing

What started as a hard, non-counter surface for chopping and cutting in the kitchen has morphed into a vehicle for the most social, shareable dish of them all—charcuterie boards. You see them at parties, social gatherings, and on almost every menu, but these boards of aesthetically-placed snacks—usually cured meats, cheeses, and other tapas-style bites—are the ideal way to introduce curious foodies to the vast variety of Spanish meats and cheeses that exist.

When served at Spanish restaurants, charcuterie and cheese boards typically come with tasting instructions. The mild meats and cheeses should be consumed first, with diners gradually moving on to the most intense ones so as to not overpower the more delicate flavors. Spanish cheese boards feature cured cheeses made from sheep's milk, like Manchego, goat's milk with paprika, like Majorero cheese from the Canary Islands, and smoked cheeses, like the cow's milk San Simón da Costa from Galicia. When it comes to cured meats, must-haves include rich options like sobrasada from Mallorca, leaner meats like dried beef from León, and well-cured meats like sausages from Catalonia.

Rice, the key ingredient

It might not be the first thing that comes to mind, but rice plays a prominent role in Spanish cuisine. With the flagship dish of Valencian paella, a brothy, rice-based seafood dish served in a shallow pan, Spanish cooking often features a variety of different rice dishes. Rice cooked in a paella dish over a wood fire, oven-baked, or made in a creamy broth—with just vegetables, with fish or meat, with tomato, with squid ink—the possibilities are endless and there's a rice dish to satisfy any palate.

The Spanish tradition of cooking with rice is evidenced in its immense production—Spain is the second-largest rice producer in Europe after Italy. For a taste of some of the most inventive, flavorful rice dishes out there, José Andrés' Spanish Diner in Bethesda, Maryland features Spanish comfort food with an exciting variety of paellas. At La Taberna del Alabardero in Washington DC, eight different variations of rice grace the menu, including vegetable paella, black rice, and seafood paella.

The bounty of Spanish seafood

Given its peninsula location surrounded by both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic Ocean, Spanish cuisine has always been deeply rooted in the tradition of seafood. Experienced fleets of fishermen have supplied markets with fresh fish and seafood that have been used as the backbone of many of Spain's most venerated dishes, from tinned seafood to whole fish to seafood stews and much more. Spain is one of the countries that consume the most fish per capita, proving that seafood has always been and will always be a Spanish favorite.

A visit to a number of quality Spanish restaurants will prove this point. At Michelin-starred Porto in Chicago, the entire restaurant is an homage to fishing villages and farmsteads along Spain's Galicia. The staff even take annual trips to Galicia and northern Portugal to soak up the seafood culture of the Atlantic coast and bring it back with them—the whole roasted turbot is not to be missed. New York's Tomiño serves impeccable seafood platters featuring prawns, scampi, and scallops, an authentic feast for anyone who enjoys the taste of the sea that is so popular in Spain.

Spanish tapas are just the start of the flavors you can expect when enjoying Spanish cuisine. To discover more authentic Spanish restaurants, check out ICEX's "Restaurants From Spain" list.

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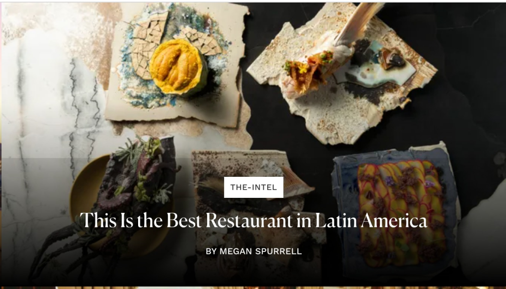

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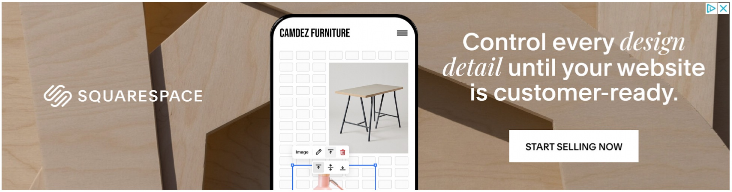
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