



El Faro in the Meatpacking District is one of the oldest Spanish restaurants in New York.



Txikito in Chelsea boasts a small but lively bar scene.

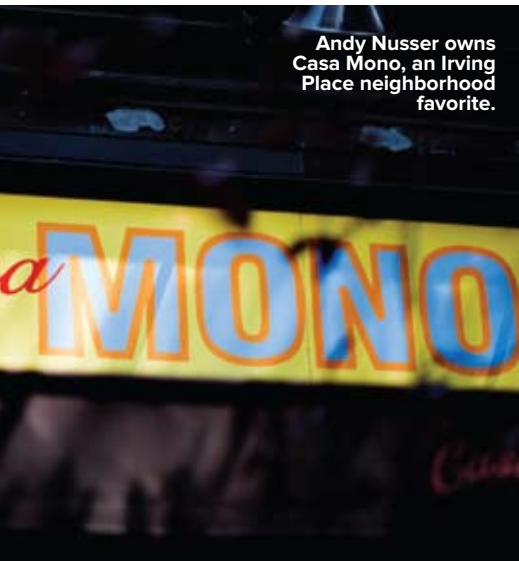
The Amazing Taste

It's about time small-plate dining took over America. **Liz Johnson** goes on a quest to find the ultimate tapas run in New York City

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AARON KOTOWSKI



Andy Nusser owns Casa Mono, an Irving Place neighborhood favorite.



The first time I was at Alta, a tapas restaurant in the West Village, I was with a bunch of people, crowded around a wooden table under chandeliers lit with flickering candles, sharing more than a dozen dishes and drinking so much wine that the end of the evening is rather hazy.

The other evening, I was there again, sitting at the copper-and-wood bar with a favorite old friend, catching up over one of the restaurant's signature small plates: brussels sprouts with warm apples and crunchy pistachios, a lovely combination of bitter and sweet.

Eating tapas is like this everywhere in New York. One evening, you're bacchanalian, reveling as you spear a forkful of food from the platter being passed across you, standing up to slosh sangria

into the glass of your friend four seats down. The next, you're quietly nibbling a couple of bites, dabbing the crumbs from the corner of your mouth with a white linen napkin and calling it a night.

New York is not like Spain, where the streets are lined with tapas bars and you can sip and snack at one, step outside into the warm summer night and walk a few steps to the next. Instead, like those two evenings at Alta, the tapas bar experience in New York depends on what you make of it. And if you're looking to make a true, Spanish-style tapas run, it's not easy. But if you plan ahead, are up for a bit of walking and get real, real lucky, you can get close.

And when you do, there's nothing like it. You might say it's the ultimate tapas run.

Beginner's Luck

I did my first New York *tapeo*, or tapas crawl, on a chilly night in November. Five of us started with cocktails—at a place about as far from a tapas joint as you can get: Mario Batali's fancy Del Posto restaurant. We listened to the tinkling of the grand piano and sipped Bellinis while plotting our evening's course. Afterward, we zipped up our coats and walked up Tenth Avenue to Tia Pol.

This restaurant came onto the scene in 2004, introducing fun new creations such as sea urchin with roasted eggplant alongside classic tapas such as patatas bravas, which are fried chunks of potatoes with romesco sauce.

With a tony, eight-seat bar up front, tall two-top tables lining the right side of a narrow dining room and one table tucked in a nook in back, you'd be lucky to get a seat here—and that evening, we were not. The wait was an hour and a half. We left, thinking we were in for a difficult night.

then pressed on a panino grill. The flavors were briny and spicy, the textures creamy and crunchy—all at once. It was truly a new and exciting taste, and we were thrilled.

We found the food to be just as innovative at our final destination of the evening, Txikito (shee-KEE-toe; the name is Basque). There's a small bar up front and the walls and ceiling are covered in grayed, weathered wood reclaimed from a barn. One foot above each table a tiny tray juts out from the wall—perfect for resting your bottle of wine out of the way of your food. This being one of those slightly bacchanalian evenings, we ordered two bottles, both of them the Basque txakolina (sha-ko-LEEN-ah), a bright, citrusy, nearly effervescent wine that's almost as much fun to say as it is to drink.

Octopus carpaccio with lemon oil, mayonnaise and pimente d'espillette was refreshing and spicy; blood sausage egg rolls were very, very rich; crostini with

Visiting these three restaurants in one night—all are within two blocks of one another—is about as close to a modern tapas run as you're going to get in New York. And *modern* is the key word: These restaurants benefit from kitchen talent that's not afraid to experiment.

Tapeo Classico

You have other options for a tapas run in New York. El Faro in the Meatpacking District, which opened in 1927, and El Quijote, which opened in 1930, have been serving the same Spanish dishes, such as gambas al ajillo (shrimp in garlic) and tortilla espanola (a Spanish omelet, usually with potatoes) for more than 70 years.

"They are old school," says Andy Nusser, who owns Casa Mono and Bar Jamón on Irving Place. "They're the foundation of what Spanish food was."

Comparing these classic and modern styles locally is a lot like exploring



The walls and ceiling at Txikito were fashioned from reclaimed wood from a barn.



But when we walked into El Quinto Pino, around the corner closer to Ninth Avenue, we found five adjacent seats open at the tiny horseshoe-shaped marble bar, as if they had been waiting especially for us. We ordered two kinds of anchovies—Basque (tomatoey, a little sweet and salty) and white (briny and vinegary)—and placed them gingerly on slices of baguette. We shared potato hash with chorizo and quail egg (insane) and braised pork belly cured for days and then deep fried (who are you kidding?).

And then we tasted the uni sandwich. Sea urchin, Korean mustard oil and butter are spread onto a thin ficelle and

a gratin of artichoke, Roncal cheese and ham were creamy, meaty and cheesy; and my favorite dish, brussels sprouts and cauliflower with an anchovy sauce, had the best of all worlds: salty, sweet, bitter and creamy.

Our knowledgeable waitress told us that elvers—tiny baby eels—are a hard-to-find delicacy, so Txikito makes fake ones by fashioning noodles out of a kind of fish sausage of shrimp, scallops and such. Then they smoke them and serve them with a warm vinaigrette. Because we had been asking about them, chef-owner Alex Raij sent out a plate. They were delicious.

what's going on in the Spanish culinary scene, too. There, rustic basement bars with bullfighting posters on the walls and paella on the menu share the spotlight with avant-garde cooks challenging conventional techniques. But in both Spain and New York, says Raij, tapas restaurants are where the two can always meet and be happy.

"There's a spirit of the creative aspect," she says. "Tapas have always been thinking-out-of-the-box places. You could restyle [classics] as long as the type of hospitality you were offering was really convivial, and the bar being an important part."

Make Your Own Tapas Run

Mix and match restaurants and neighborhoods with our plan for these ultimate tapas crawls. And take our suggestions for don't-miss dishes along the way.

In Spain, where the competition is tough, tapas bars have to be resourceful; each place develops its specialty out of necessity.

"Someone got creative one day and it worked so well they became known for it—like the wings in Buffalo," says Raji. "Every bar has a story like that."

El Quinto Pino, which Raji also owns, has the uni panino, which became legendary almost as soon as it hit the menu, getting mentions everywhere from blogs to *The New York Times*, which proclaimed it the sandwich of the year.

"It was a combination of wanting to show our range as cooks but also set a new standard and give a new vocabulary for tapas," she says. And so she put twists everywhere, even on the classics. Instead of preparing a traditional gambas al ajillo, for instance, her shrimp dish also came with ginger and jalapeños—"to have a signature style."

What helped Raji, Nusser and other tapas chefs along was the small-plates phenomenon. On menus everywhere, people were embracing the entire concept of grazing, or sharing lots of little tastes. Diners were willing to take more risks on small dishes—if you don't like it, it's only a few bites—and so chefs were willing to experiment.

"There's not as big a commitment as the appetizer-entree-dessert kind of structure," says Raji. "It's also just really social."

And, says Raji, a tapas evening forces you to slow down a little. It seems really fast at first, because you might order a flurry of dishes at once. But then there's also a lot of patience involved.

"It's good for people who live a fast pace and in a harried environment," she says. "It's a luxury."

Ooh, It Looks Like Ice Cream

Tucking into a plate of three tiny lamb meatballs with a dollop of sweet butternut squash foam and a garnish of labne back at Alta, I certainly take my time enjoying the rich, juicy meat tempered with the tang of the yogurt and the brightness of a few sprigs of cilantro.

This, my second visit to Alta, is part of another tapas run—this one more leisurely than the first.

CHELSEA

Stop 1: Tia Pol
205 10th Ave.,
212-675-8805

Don't miss:
Anything off the specials board

Stop 2:

El Quinto Pino
401 W. 24th St.,
212-206-6900
elquintopinoyc.com

Don't miss:
The uni panino

Stop 3: Txikito

240 Ninth Ave.,
212-242-4730
txikitonyc.com

Don't miss:
Mock elvers

FLATIRON

Stop 1: Boqueria (Flatiron)
53 W. 19th St., 212-255-4160
boquerianyc.com

Don't miss:
Tortilla espanola

Stop 2: La Nacional Tapas Bar

239 W. 14th St.,
212-243-9308
lanacionaltapas.com

Don't miss:
Caldo verde

Stop 3: Café Riazor

245 W. 16th St.,
212-727-2132
caferiazor.com

Don't miss:
White asparagus with mayonnaise

Stop 4: Socarrat Paella Bar

259 W. 19th St.,



212-462-1000

Don't miss:
Paella for one

Stop 5: El Quijote

226 W. 23rd St.,
212-929-1855

Don't miss:
Lobster in green sauce

GRAMERCY PARK/FLATIRON

Stop 1: Bar Jamón
125 E. 17th St.,
212-253-2773
casamononyc.com

Don't miss:
Serrano and pan con tomate

Stop 2: Casa Mono

52 Irving Place,
212-253-2773
casamononyc.com

Don't miss:
Fried duck egg

Stop 3: Pipa

38 E. 19th St.,
212-677-2233
pipa-nyc.com

Don't miss:
Grilled flatbread with mushrooms, serrano, figs, Manchego and truffle oil

WEST VILLAGE/ MEATPACKING DISTRICT

Stop 1: Las Ramblas
170 W. 4th St., 646-415-7924
lasramblasnyc.com

Don't miss:
Mini skewers of duck sausage, quail eggs and pearl onions

Stop 2: Alta
64 W. 10th St.,
212-505-7777
altarestaurant.com

Don't miss:
Brussels sprouts with pistachios

Stop 3: El Charro Espanol

4 Charles St.,
212-243-5413

Don't miss:
Caldo Gallego, a chicken-beef-pork-white bean stew

Stop 4: El Faro
823 Greenwich St.,
212-929-8210
elfaronyc.com

Don't miss:
Shrimp in white sauce

SOHO/NOHO/ EAST VILLAGE

Stop 1: Boqueria (SoHo)
171 Spring St.,
212-343-4255
boquerianyc.com

Don't miss:
Bacon-wrapped dates

Stop 2: Mercat
45 Bond St.,
212-529-8600
mercatnyc.com

Don't miss:
Fideua negra, noodles cooked with cuttlefish and its own ink

Stop 3: Euzkadi
108 E. 4th St., 212-982-9788
euzkadirestaurant.com

Don't miss:
Goat cheese and honey croquettes

Stop 4: Pata Negra
345 E. 12th St.,
212-228-1696
patanegratapas.com

Don't miss:
Jamón Ibérico de bellota

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The Meatpacking District seems to have grown up around El Faro, our next stop. There's a worn wooden bar, a drop ceiling and a terrazzo cement floor so worn that the step down into the back dining room is soft and rounded. A wispy, wrought-iron grate delineates the bar from the dining room, which is decorated with red leather banquettes and murals of señoras in shawls and ruffled red skirts.

We try the tortilla espanola. Order "the big one" rather than an individual-slice serving, because then you get an eggy, fluffy inside and a nice crusty outside. "Like a big hash brown," says one of my friends.

The shrimp in white sauce, a béchamel made with buttermilk, is served in an old aluminum pot with a black plastic handle on the lid. The shrimp has a nice bite, but the sauce is as thick as a wool blanket. This is heavy food, especially for a tapas run, where you're looking to eat light and continue on through the night.

There's nothing like a leisurely walk after dinner to relax a full belly. We have about 10 blocks to our next destination, and we make the experience all the more enjoyable by walking along the High Line, a reclaimed elevated rail line-turned-park that, with its well-tended plantings and fabulous views, beautifully combines the urban environment with nature. We arrive at Tia Pol happy.

This time, there is no wait. We order a rosé and the bartender pulls the bottle from a big galvanized bucket filled with ice. The pork sausage has a light texture and the richness is cut by a crisp pickled cucumber salad.

The two women next to us order the fava bean purée crostini. It looks like tufts of green cotton candy on a baguette.

"Ooh, it looks like ice cream," coos one.

"I know!" says my friend, leaning toward them. "I saw you order that and I was excited for you."

Our night comes to a close, but theirs is just beginning. Maybe they'll be off to El Quinto Pino or Alta or El Faro next, headed for an evening of revelry and riotous laughter. Or maybe they'll finish their fava beans and call it a night.

Because, in New York, tapas bars are what you make of them. ☞

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