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Make It a Tapas Party!

An impressive spread of authentic Spanish nibbles sets the mood for a memorable fiesta

BY SARAH JAY



Ever since living in Spain 17 years ago and falling in love, first with the food, and then, much later, with my future husband, I've been stuck on that country's wonderful cuisine. There's paella and gazpacho, of course, but I think Spain's most brilliant invention is its tradition of tapas. Order a glass of wine or a beer at a bar, and alongside you'll be served a little morsel of something delicious. That's a tapa. The concept also plays out in homes. When I visit my mother-in-law in Madrid, dinner is often just a spread of the most basic tapas—cheeses, cured meats, olives, perhaps a salad—and we all just nibble on what we please. Dress up the dishes a bit, and you have the makings for a great party.

So the next time you're casting about for an idea for a different kind of dinner gathering, you can make it easy on yourself and fun for your guests by serving tapas. The dishes I'm offering here are completely typical of what you'd find in Spain: They're rustic, earthy, a little bit lusty, and utterly easy.

Recently I hosted this tapas party for some new friends. The tapas did the magical thing they always do: They loosened up the crowd and got the party rolling. And I was relaxed, too. That's because I prepped the heck out of the recipes (following my timeline on p. 79), so it was smooth sailing once people started to walk through the door. It was one of the best parties I've thrown in a long time.



Manchego Marinated in Olive Oil & Herbs very good

Serves eight.

This is an easy way to make supermarket-quality manchego cheese taste extra special. Eat the cheese within 3 days. (I keep the infused olive oil refrigerated and use it within 10 days for sautéing.)

- 1 cup extra-virgin olive oil; more if needed
- 3 large sprigs thyme
- 2 4-inch sprigs rosemary
- 1 small dried red chile, cut in half or thirds
- 8 ounces manchego (more aged is better), rind cut off, cut into ½- to ¾-inch cubes

In a small saucepan, heat the 1 cup oil and the thyme, rosemary, and chile over medium heat until the oil is hot (160°F) and looks shimmery, about 2 minutes. Set aside to cool completely at room temperature.

Put the manchego in a glass or ceramic bowl. Pour the olive oil, herbs, and chile on top. Add more oil to cover, if needed. Cover and refrigerate for at least 4 hours. Remove from the refrigerator a few hours before the party to return the oil to room temperature.

To serve, transfer everything to a pretty bowl, with toothpicks alongside for spearing the cheese.

Olives & Peppers on a Pick with Scallion Vinaigrette good

Serves eight; yields about 40 skewers.

These little skewers are good with just olives and peppers, or you can add a third element, such as pickled onions or feta.

- 1 lemon
- ¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- 1 small scallion, white and light green parts very thinly sliced (to yield 1 tablespoon)
- ½ teaspoon chopped fresh thyme leaves
- ½ teaspoon seeded, minced red serrano chile or jalapeño
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- 7 jarred piquillo peppers (for sources, see p. 92) or 2 jarred roasted red peppers
- 40 small pitted green olives (from about a 2½-ounce jar)
- 40 pickled sour cocktail onions (from about two 3½-fluid-ounce jars) (optional)
- 12 ounces feta (creamy feta holds together better than dry, crumbly feta), cut into ½- to ¾-inch cubes (optional)

Finely grate enough of the lemon zest to get ¼ teaspoon packed zest. Cut the lemon in half and squeeze to get 2 tablespoons of juice. Put the zest and juice in a small bowl. Whisk in the olive oil, scallion, thyme, chile, and salt and pepper to taste. Let the vinaigrette sit for at least 20 minutes (or up to 12 hours in the fridge; bring to room temperature before using) to meld the flavors and soften the scallion.

Cut the peppers lengthwise into ½-inch-wide strands, then cut the strands in half crosswise—you'll need 40 pieces of pepper. Fold a piece of pepper in half and thread it onto a toothpick. Spear an olive onto the pick. Then spear either an onion or a cube of feta on the end, if using. Set the pick in a shallow serving dish. Repeat with the remaining ingredients. If not serving right away, refrigerate.

About 30 minutes before serving, give the vinaigrette a good whisk to emulsify as best you can, then drizzle it over the olive picks.

Prep ahead for a stress-free party

If the following timeline looks long, it's only because I've broken it down into very small steps.

Up to 3 days ahead:

Make the tomato sauce for potatoes.

The day or evening before:

Prep and refrigerate:

Make the marinated manchego.

Make the scallion vinaigrette.

Assemble the olive and pepper picks.

Slice the chorizo, put in bowl with the thyme sprigs.

Peel the shrimp and put in a paper-towel-lined bowl. Put the peeled garlic, washed chives, and washed lemon in a smaller bowl.

Wash and cut up mushrooms; put in a damp-paper-towel-lined bowl along with peeled garlic and washed parsley.

Set jamón on serving plate; cover with plastic.

Prep and keep at room temperature:

Cut up chocolate for toasted bread.

Slice bread for the chocolate toasts and for the chorizo and store in separate zip-top bags.

Wash the potatoes, put them on a sheet pan, along with the pre-measured oil in a measuring cup, and salt and rosemary (not chopped) in dishes.

Measure pimentón and red pepper flakes for shrimp into a small dish.

Measure sherry for the shrimp into a small dish.

Measure sherry vinegar for the mushrooms into a small dish.

2 hours before guests arrive:

Put the manchego in a serving bowl and set out.

Measure red wine for the chorizo into a small dish.

1 hour before guests arrive:

Drizzle scallion vinaigrette over the olive and pepper picks and set out.

Set out the jamón.

Sprinkle shrimp with the salt and toss; refrigerate.

Slice chives for shrimp, wrap back up in damp towel.

Slice garlic for shrimp and put in the dish with the pimentón.

Grate lemon zest for shrimp into a small dish; set with the shrimp.

Chop garlic and parsley for the mushrooms, wrap in damp towel, return to mushroom bowl.

Chop rosemary for potatoes. Toss potatoes with oil, salt, and rosemary.

15 minutes before guests arrive:

Start roasting the potatoes (set timer for 15 minutes).

Reheat the tomato sauce.

When guests arrive:

Offer wine or sherry and as people nibble on the manchego, jamón, and olive and pepper picks, mingle and relax. (Turn the potatoes when the timer goes off, and set it twice more for 15 minute intervals.)

Take a few minutes out to cook the mushrooms and serve them.

When the potatoes are done, set them out with the warm sauce.

Chat with guests, then take 5 minutes to cook chorizo and serve with bread.

At a break in conversation, take 5 minutes to cook and serve the shrimp.

When you're ready for dessert:

Make the toasted bread with chocolate.

Tip: Choose all your serving plates and platters the night before and tag them with the dish that will go in each one.

Tip: Tape the recipes to a cabinet or wall near the stovetop so they're in view (but off your countertops) as you're cooking during the party.

Tip: Try to start out the party with an empty sink and dish rack (or dishwasher) so dishes that pile up during the party have a place to go.

Tip: Make up "kits" for the dishes with last-minute cooking. Prep all the ingredients, nestle them together in a big bowl, then set in the fridge or right on the pan you'll use for cooking. When it's time to cook, you can grab the bowl, and everything is ready.



Stocking your Spanish pantry



JAMÓN SERRANO 6

Sliced paper thin and set on a plate alone or with manchego cheese, jamón (pronounced ha-MOHN) serrano is the simplest tapa of all. This cured ham looks just like Italian prosciutto, but its unique curing and aging process translates into more complex and intense flavors. Salty, sweet, rich, and mellow, jamón serrano surely makes the best ham sandwich you'll ever have. It's just starting to appear in regular supermarkets in the United States and is usually available in specialty food shops.

For the most authentic Spanish flavor in your tapas, seek out these ingredients in upscale supermarkets or see *Where to Buy It* on p. 92 for mail-order sources.

CHORIZO 1 Consisting primarily of pork, pimentón, and garlic, this dry-cured sausage adds a meaty note to stews, pastas, and eggs. Some dry-cured chorizos are hard and ready to eat. Others are softer (though not raw) and benefit from a little cooking; that's what you want for the sautéed chorizo recipe on p. 82.

SHERRY VINEGAR 2 Sharply acidic with sweet sherry undertones, this vinegar has become my everyday vinegar at home. Use it instead of red-wine vinegar and you'll never go back.

MANCHEGO 3 Spain's most well-known cheese is made from sheep's milk and always features a basket weave pattern on its rind. Look for aged manchegos (1 year or older), which have a firmer texture and nutty flavor.

PIQUILLO PEPPERS 4 These pointy-tipped little peppers (piquillo means "little beak") are slow-roasted over a wood fire, peeled by hand, and canned or jarred in nothing but their juices. They have a wonderfully sweet flavor with a kick. Traditionally they're stuffed with salt cod, but I use them in pastas, sandwiches, omelets, sauces, or anywhere else I might use a roasted bell pepper.

PIMENTÓN 5 This is Spanish smoked paprika, and it can be sweet (dulce), spicy (picante), or sweet-spicy (agridulce). Use it as you would paprika, and you'll find its smoky flavor adds an intriguing background note to whatever you're cooking.



Crispy Potatoes with Tasty Tomato Sauce (Patatas Bravas) *Excellent*

Serves eight.

Roasting the potatoes in a good amount of olive oil gives them a crispy fried flavor without the hassle of deep frying. The sauce can be made up to three days ahead.

FOR THE SAUCE:

- 1½ tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- ⅓ cup chopped onion (½ small)
- ⅓ cup chopped carrot (1 small)
- 2 medium cloves garlic, smashed and peeled
- 1 tablespoon dry white wine
- ¼ teaspoon sweet pimentón (or paprika)
- ¼ teaspoon ground cumin
- 1½ cups canned tomatoes with juice, chopped coarsely
- 3 large sprigs thyme
- 1 teaspoon granulated sugar
- ¼ teaspoon Tabasco, more to taste
- Kosher salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste
- ¼ teaspoon sherry vinegar

FOR THE POTATOES:

- 2½ pounds (about 8 medium) Yukon Gold, white, or red potatoes, scrubbed and cut into 1-inch pieces (no need to peel)
- ½ cup extra-virgin olive oil
- Kosher salt
- 1 teaspoon chopped fresh rosemary (optional)

Make the sauce: In a small (1- or 2-quart) saucepan, heat the 1½ tablespoons olive oil over medium heat. Add the onion, car-



pot, and garlic and cook, stirring frequently, until softened but not browned, about 5 minutes. Add the wine and let it reduce until almost evaporated, about 1 minute. Add the pimentón and cumin and stir for about 15 seconds. Add the tomatoes and juice, thyme sprigs, sugar, Tabasco, ¼ teaspoon kosher salt, and a few grinds of pepper.

Reduce the heat to a gentle simmer and cook, uncovered, stirring occasionally, to reduce the sauce somewhat and intensify its flavor. This should take about 1 hour; depending on how much juice you started with, you may need to add up to ½ cup water during simmering to keep the consistency saucy rather than dry.

Fish out the spent thyme sprigs. Purée the sauce with an immersion blender or a regular blender until it's smooth and creamy; you can thin with a little water if needed. Stir in the sherry vinegar. Taste and add salt and pepper, if needed. The sauce should be slightly spicy, and you should have about 1½ cups.

Roast the potatoes: Heat the oven to 425°F. Toss the potatoes with the olive oil, 1 teaspoon kosher salt, and the rosemary (if using) on a large rimmed baking sheet. Roast, turning the potatoes with a metal spatula every 15 minutes, until they're browned and crisp outside and tender inside, about 45 minutes.

Put the potatoes in a serving dish and put the sauce in a small dish next to the potatoes, along with a spoon.

Sautéed Mushrooms with Garlic & Parsley *Excellent*

Serves eight.

5 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
1 pound white or cremini mushrooms, washed well, trimmed, and cut into quarters (or sixths, if large)
Kosher salt
5 to 6 medium cloves garlic, minced (1½ tablespoons)
1 tablespoon sherry vinegar
2 tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

Heat the oil in a 12-inch skillet over high heat until it's hot and shimmering. Add the mushrooms, season with ¾ teaspoon kosher salt, stir to coat in the oil, then let the mushrooms cook undisturbed until the liquid released by the mushrooms evaporates and they're deep golden brown, 5 to 7 minutes. Stir and continue sautéing, stirring occasionally, until most sides are nicely browned, 3 to 5 minutes more.

Reduce the heat to medium, add the garlic, and cook just to soften it, 15 to 30 seconds. Add the vinegar and stir, scraping the bottom of the pan, until the vinegar evaporates, about 15 seconds. Remove the pan from the heat and toss in the parsley. Season to taste with more salt, if you like. Transfer to a dish and serve with toothpicks for spearing the mushrooms or a serving spoon for putting on individual plates.

Vinos for tapas

Dry sherry is a traditional partner for tapas. The nutty, briny qualities of a fino or manzanilla sherry match perfectly with the tangy, salty, and savory flavors in the tapas. So when guests arrive, offer them a small glass of chilled sherry to sip as they begin to enjoy the spread. Try Emilio Lustau Puerto Fino Sherry (\$16) or Bodega Hidalgo Manzanilla "La Gitana" Sherry (\$12 for 500ml bottle).

As for wines, **crisp dry whites** with citrus and mineral notes, such as Albariño, and **dry rosés** with tart red berry and citrus fruit are both versatile tapas wines. I'd recommend 2004 Vionta Albariño, Rias Baixas (\$14); 2004 Nora Albariño, Rias Baixas (\$14); 2005 A to Z Rosé from Oregon (\$14); and 2006 Goats Do Roam Rosé (\$12) from South Africa.

Finally, a **ruby port** would be delicious with the Toasted Bread with Chocolate. Good ones include Graham's Six Grapes (\$16) and Fonseca Bin 27 (\$16).

—Tim Gaiser, contributing editor



Sautéed Chorizo with Red Wine *excellent*

Serves eight.

You'll need a softer cured chorizo here, not the very firm types that are meant to be eaten without cooking (see sidebar, p. 80). You can find domestic cured chorizos in Hispanic markets and gourmet markets. For sources, see p. 92.

- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 1½ pounds cured but soft chorizo, cut into ½-inch-thick slices
- ⅓ cup dry red wine
- Good country bread, cut into large cubes

Heat the olive oil in a large (12-inch) skillet over medium heat. Add the chorizo slices and cook until they begin to turn a deep brown on one side, 3 to 5 minutes. Stir and continue to cook, stirring occasionally, until the chorizo is deeply browned all over, about 5 minutes more. Carefully add the wine (be ready in case it flames) and let it simmer, scraping the pan to deglaze it, until it has reduced somewhat but is still saucy, 1 to 3 minutes. Pour the chorizo and juices into a dish. Serve with the bread, for dipping into the sauce.

Seared Shrimp with Pimentón & Sherry *good*

Serves eight.

- 1½ pounds large (31 to 40 count) shrimp, peeled and deveined, patted dry with paper towels
- Kosher salt
- 3 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil
- 6 medium cloves garlic, very thinly sliced
- Heaping ¼ teaspoon sweet pimentón (or paprika)
- Heaping ⅓ teaspoon crushed red pepper flakes
- 3 tablespoons fino sherry
- ¼ teaspoon finely grated lemon zest
- 1½ tablespoons thinly sliced chives
- Fresh lemon juice to taste

Sprinkle the shrimp with ¾ teaspoon kosher salt, toss, and let sit for 10 minutes (or refrigerate for up to 1 hour).

In a large (12-inch) skillet, heat the olive oil on high heat. Pat the shrimp dry with paper towels and add them to the skillet. Sprinkle with ¾ teaspoon kosher salt and sear until they're pink and a little golden on one side, about 1 minute. Sprinkle the garlic, pimentón, and red pepper flakes over the shrimp, and sauté, stirring, until the shrimp are almost completely pink, about 1 minute. Add the sherry and cook, stirring to deglaze the bottom of the pan, until the shrimp are pink all over (the sherry will evaporate quickly but you should still have some juices in the pan).

Remove from the heat. Toss with the lemon zest and chives. Pour the shrimp and juices into a serving dish, squeeze on lemon juice to taste, and serve.

good

Toasted Bread with Chocolate

Serves eight.

Bread and chocolate is a popular snack for kids in Spain. Adding a drizzle of olive oil and a pinch of salt, a twist I picked up from celebrity chef José Andrés, is a sophisticated touch.

- 8 ½-inch-thick slices good bread, such as a rustic peasant bread or a real baguette
- Best-quality extra-virgin olive oil for drizzling
- 4 ounces best-quality bittersweet chocolate, very coarsely chopped (scant 1 cup)
- Sea salt, kosher salt, or any specialty salt

Position a rack 4 inches from the broiler element and heat to high. Put the bread on a baking sheet and toast until light golden on both sides, 1 to 2 minutes per side. Drizzle the bread with olive oil. Distribute the chocolate evenly on top of the bread. Turn off the broiler and return the bread to the oven until the residual heat melts the chocolate, about 1 minute. Smooth the chocolate with a table knife, if you want. Sprinkle a pinch of salt on each slice and serve.



Sarah Jay is Fine Cooking's executive editor. ♦