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Taking a bite out of a shark

Sea anemones, marinated shark and tuna ham are among the tapas served at Clausen's Bistro Podenco. Chef Eduardo Ramos makes a case for turning a meal into an adventure.

By Ricardo J. Rodrigues
Photos Lex Kleren

A slice of *Pulpo Negro* ham, which Podenco buys from a local producer near Cadiz. Below, the author (right) and chef Eduardo Ramos testing some of the food described in this article.



The *tapa* it takes Bistro Podenco the longest to prepare is the *croquette*. First, staff boil *big jamón* bones for six hours. Then, they make a reduction of the marrow, add flour and ham leftovers and deep-fry the result in the form of small cakes. “In summer, we use up to three entire *jamóns* a week”, says Ramos, who also owns the place. He gets his big salted pork legs from a local producer in Cádiz, in the Southern Spanish province of Andalusia – his home turf. “It’s a great product. The thing is, we only slice three kilos of meat out of a piece that weighs around nine. Most of it is fat and cartilage. But well, we’re using every bit to extract flavour.”

Tapas may seem like humble snacks but can be highly complex culinary works. Bistro Podenco’s menu has 39 options, plus half a dozen seasonal offers. There’s *pata negra* ham and *manchego* cheese, sure, but the menu is far from obvious. Take *cazón*, for instance, little fritters of vinegar-marinated shark. These come from an abundant Mediterranean species that is bycatch in Southern Andalusia, and normally sent to waste. People near the shores around Gibraltar turned it into a delicacy – and it’s mind-blowing that you can eat it in Clausen.

An adventurous eater should also consider *ortiguillas*, sea anemones harvested from the rocks during low tide. Extremely uncommon on restaurant menus, they are served with home-made salt that – strikingly – is turquoise-coloured. In summer, Podenco even serves *mujama*, a salted tuna ham you rarely find outside people’s private kitchens in restaurants. Much of the menu, though, is more mainstream. Meat brochettes, *patatas bravas* and *pimientos padrón* make a safer choice for beginners. “Nevertheless, you should at least order something you have no idea of what it tastes like”, Ramos insists. “One *tapa*, just for fun. I bet you’ll be surprised.”

Tapear, the Spanish word for eating *tapas*, is a noisy business. It’s all about sharing food, eating slowly, preferably with your hands. A dinner can take hours and comes with large amounts of wine, heated discussions and some good laughs. That explains the roar echoing on the road from Clausen to Pfaffenthal – especially on a hot summer’s evening. When a client calls for a table, Ramos usually issues a gentle warning: “Be sure to take your time.”

Menu dégustation

Tapas gained global recognition in the middle of the 20th century, then formed the basis for a culinary revolution: the *menu dégustation*. “In the tradition of France’s *haute cuisine*, a restaurant usually served a three-course meal – starter, main course and dessert. Italians added a fourth option, offering a pasta dish. “When Spain brought the *tapa* to the world stage, they installed a new concept”, say authors Simone and Inés Ortega in their



The Book of Tapas. “Suddenly a dinner could have eight or twelve small courses and a meal could evolve like a symphony, with a crescendo of flavours being presented through small food samples.”

In true Spanish tradition you shouldn’t order all the *tapas* at the same time. “First you should go for the charcuterie and the cheeses”, Ramos suggests. “Then you should ask for boiled products, mostly seafood. After that you go for the fritters, like *calamares* or *cazón*, and you leave the grilled or stewed meats to the end.” Eating *tapas* is a noble art, he says, and he is committed to offer the real thing to foodies in Luxembourg. “When I arrived, five years ago, I was afraid people wouldn’t get it. So I had 20 main courses on the menu, which I gradually reduced to eight. Now I decided to cut them off completely by the end of the year. I don’t want to waste valuable time in the kitchen cooking big portions. Not when I can use it to refine a small delicacy.”

Bistro Podenco is based in a 16th century hunting pavilion once part of the now destroyed Mansfeld castle. The patio is usually crowded – not only because it can sit 50 people, but also because of the view. “If you let yourself go, you might well forget you’re in Luxembourg”, the chef says. “*Tapa* after *tapa*, we’ll take you to Spain.”

Ramos is a proponent of “*tapear*”, which brought about a culinary revolution in fine dining by introducing multi-course meals consisting of small bites

When and where?

Bistro Podenco is open for lunch and dinner, closing on Sunday evenings and on Mondays. The average price of a meal is between €40 and €50. Reservations advisable!