



BY JENNY NGUYEN

### Going tapas

Tapas, meaning "to top," were originated in Spain, where a small plate was placed on top of a drink to keep bugs out. It wasn't until later that nibbles started to show up on the makeshift lids. Now the word "tapas" has been tender-bendered into any small-plate food item, Spanish or not. Weary of the tired term? Here are three places that will have you singing a word in Spanish:

#### Fernando's Hideaway • 824 S.W. First Ave.

All candy cane arches mimic mosques of Cordoba. Tile mosaics and flamenco posters dress the walls. Our gentle host guides us through a dimly lit cavern of tall wooden booths; the romance of Fernando's was working its magic. The magic ends there. Unable to maintain a monstrous tapas menu of more than 45 items, half our food came out tasting a little off. On the other hand, the paella bites were excellent, the calamares fritas (fried squid) was tender and crispy although heaped onto a large plate, and the tortilla de espinaca was perfectly cooked. Fernando's is ambitious in its grandeur, but the food takes some flak for it.

#### Bar Pastiche • 3731 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd.

The owners of Pix and Navarre have consummated a perfect marriage with this tiny delicatessen neighboring Pastaworks. Using top-quality imports and fresh local ingredients, it's an authentic tapas doppelgänger. The Flag—a toasted baguette slice topped with Cabrales (Spanish blue cheese), a bocarone (white anchovy) and red and yellow roasted bell pepper slivers—is simply divine. Rum-soaked dates wrapped in thick caramelized bacon are sinfully delicious. Tender chili oil-marinated shrimp comes in its own steeping shot glass. Dice-sized manchego, topped with quince preserves, melts into a salty-sweet combination well worth fiddy cent. With nothing more than \$3 (!) and a beautifully orchestrated wine list, Pastiche offers the best bargain for your fistful of dollars.

#### Cobras & Matadors • 232 N.W. 12th Ave.

Formerly 750mL, this tapas joint joins the flock of fancy feast Pearl eats. Dim, burgundy, mirror-filled walls and simplified menus make C & M feel like a million other places you've been to, but the déjà vu ends there. The food is stellar-swanky in rich sauces with over-the-top aromas that are priced to match. Roasted beet salad (\$8) is a sweet and tangy palate cleanser. Roast game hen is steep (\$12) but delicately seasoned and prepared with apples and guava; this small plate is huge on flavor. The classic truffle-scented fries and tortilla española are here, too, but don't pass up the sautéed mussels with spicy chorizo or the chickpea salad. Definitely an American hybrid, this place is unlike true Spanish tapas in every way, but damn if the food ain't good. **JM**

Do you have a restaurant you want reviewed? I'll be gentle, sentimental.... Write to JENNY NGUYEN at [jenny0080@hotmail.com](mailto:jenny0080@hotmail.com).

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