

FOOD DRINK TRENDS

BY KATIE K. BELL



Pura Vida's dining room (left) and salmon ceviche (right)

ON TAPA THE WORLD *Spain's ubiquitous small plates travel from the 42nd parallel to land on the tables of the ATL*

It used to be that tapas, or small plates of food designed for sharing, were reserved for the occasional restaurant in Atlanta that dared to be different. But, now it seems you can't dine out without coming across some interpretation of this Spanish tradition that is as much a social experience as a culinary one.

"Atlantans have really embraced the tapas concept, in part because of the social nature of sharing plates, but also because people have discovered the excitement of having so many dining options. It's not just steak and potatoes anymore," says Hector Santiago, chef at Pura Vida in Virginia-Highland. Kevin Rathbun, chef/owner of Rathbun's and Krog Bar, agrees. "I really think the movement is all about variety, sharing and going out in groups; people love that."

While the idea of tapas may be on the rise in Atlanta, the tradition has been around for eons. Tapas are, without doubt, the soul of Spain's culinary life. Spanish for the verb "to cover," tapas are said to have originated when tavern owners placed a lid or plate over a glass of wine to keep out the fruit flies. At some point, tavern owners began placing nibbles of *jamon Serrano* or smoked cheese on top as an added bonus to customers, or so the story goes.

Equally popular is the theory that small meals—usually cured meats, cheeses, olives and roasted meats—"covered" the appetites of Spaniards

between the time they left work and the time they ate their evening meals, usually after 10 p.m. Often Spaniards even enjoy a *tapeo*, or tapas crawl, where they make an evening of traveling from tavern to tavern, collecting friends and small bites along the way.

Now Atlanta may not be the best place to partake in a *tapeo*, but we certainly have our fair share of restaurants where you and friends can get together and enjoy the tapas tradition.

One of Atlanta's most authentic tapas bar experiences is at **Krog Bar**. Steeped in Old World style, the atmosphere is scented with a rich mixture of leather, wood and spice, and was designed with a sense of community in mind. "In Spain, people often stand around and talk while eating tapas and a baguette because there are no seats at the bar," Rathbun explains. "[At Krog] I want to offer artisan ingredients, mainly cold plates, served in that communal style." Indeed Krog's communal tables make ideal staging areas for the small plates of Serrano ham and smoked *idiazabal* cheese with quince paste, or lamb meatballs in a spicy, screamingly fresh tomato sauce. Kevin's "Krog Street mozzarella" is always a winner, as is the dark chocolate bruschetta. I know it sounds strange, but it's good, and experimenting is what this is all about. Go early (it opens at 4 p.m., Monday through Saturday) and talk wine and food with the expertly informed servers. CONTINUED...



Kevin Rathbun's Krog Bar



Small plates at Krog Bar

CONTINUED... If you want to take experimentation to the next level, I suggest heading to **Pura Vida** in the Highlands where Santiago—who is originally from Puerto Rico—is executive chef. Santiago has trained in the kitchen of José Andrés' Café Atlantico in D.C. (Andrés is considered America's finest tapas chef), as well as kitchens in Spain. His eagerness to reinvent the average and ordinary has made Santiago's tapas restaurant one of Atlanta's most award-winning culinary values. "I love the freedom a tapas menu gives me," he says. "I get bored easily and like to change the menu a lot. Tapas allow me to do that."

The 37-year-old Santiago, who moved here from New York almost 10 years ago, raises the empanada—a staple in Latin cuisine—to the level of artistry when stuffed with chicken, *sofrito*, raisins, cilantro and diced eggs, and then topped with chili-sugar cane vinegar. The grilled hanger steak *pinchos* are served on skewers and are tender and savory with a fragrant herbal *chimichurri* sauce for added zip. Santiago also weaves Spanish, Mexican and French cuisine together with sheer technical finesse in creations such as the *malanga*, *bacalao* (Spanish dried salt cod) with *buñuelo* (a natural fungus found on corn—it's considered a delicacy) and French truffles. Finally, try the allspice-tempura breaded *calabaza* (butternut squash) rings slathered with the accompanying *crema Mexicana* for a decadent treat.

One of the newest tapas bars in town is **Sabroso Tapas Lounge** in Little Five Points, where the culinary team of Denise Dunio and Jose Rivera (a native of Puerto Rico) brings even more global influences to the menu. The coconut shrimp with a light pumpkin curry sauce expands the tapas concept with unusually bold ingredients. However, traditional

items outshine the rest of the menu. The potato tortilla is a hearty fest of eggs with shavings of potato, red onion, manchego cheese and capers served in a mini cast iron pan. The *albondigas* (Spanish meatballs), comprised of chorizo and beef in a spicy marinara, is zesty and rich, and the open-faced prosciutto sandwich with tomatoes and manchego tastes best al fresco.

For a festive, slightly bohemian tour of Spain, **Eclipse di Luna** will take you there, one small bite at a time. Many of the menu items are derived from uniquely Spanish ingredients. Its version of *albondigas*, for example, features lamb meatballs in a sherry broth topped with an almond-cilantro relish. Other classic Spanish meats play starring roles in the rustic fare, including the *Serrano*, *lomo y chorizo*. It's a small plate of thinly sliced Spanish ham, cured

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chorizo and cured pork loin, with a roasted pepper salad and marinated olives. Another sure hit is the traditional Spanish salt cod (*bacalao*) with fragrant garlic saffron chili oil, and served with bell peppers and potato.

Finally, **Fuego Spanish Grill's** executive chef Rodney Wedge artfully applies Asian techniques to Spanish ingredients. The chorizo and mozzarella spring rolls are a "must try," as are the "dream dates," bacon-wrapped dates stuffed with Gorgonzola that are grilled for an added smoky twist and a medley of texture. Grab a jar of the sautéed almonds seasoned with Fuego's magical mixture to take home. But beware, they're addictive. ▲

Pura Vida, 656 North Highland Ave., 404.870.9797, www.puravidatapas.com
Krog Bar, 112 Krog St., 404.524.1618, www.krogbar.com
Sabroso Tapas Lounge, 351 Moreland Ave., 404.475.8888, www.sabrosotapas.com
Eclipse di Luna, 764 Miami Circle, 404.846.0449, www.eclipsediluna.com
Fuego Spanish Grill, 1136 Crescent Ave., 404.389.0660, www.fuegocafe.com