

GRAND TOUR

Food

DINE ON TAPAS!

By Gena Bell

THE POPULARITY OF TAPAS IS INCREASING EVERYWHERE. In the States, tapas can be any freshly prepared finger food, such as appetizers and small plates—generally foods we're familiar with already; sometimes more exotic. But eating tapas for a meal, as opposed to an appetizer, can be a treat. What makes tapas such a great mealtime choice are the variety of rich, satisfying flavors served in small bite-sized portions. Ordering or preparing several different types of tapas offers a variety of dining tastes, aromas and textures, as opposed to just a meat and potatoes meal, making the dining experience more satisfying.

Tapas originated in Spain. Some believe that tapas were developed as small meals for farmers to eat at lunchtime, so they could make it through the day without a siesta or nap. Others believe the King of Spain created tapas as a finger food to be eaten with wine to minimize the effects of alcohol. Traditionally, tapas consisted of a small slice of smoked ham or cheese, served flat over the top of a wineglass to protect it from flies.

Today, tapas can vary in style and complexity, which gives you a chance to get creative with your preparation. Most traditional style tapas are served slightly warm or at room temperature, but today tapas can come in any fashion—hot, warm, cold, casual, and over-the-top! Two of my favorite tapas are Skewered Dates Wrapped in Prosciutto (broiled until light and crisp) and Brandied Mushrooms with Grilled Bread (see recipe). Other types of tapas that are always popular are mini potato omelets served with crème fraîche. Simply prepare your favorite omelet, except don't fold it over, let it finish cooking flat in the pan and then cool. Cut the omelet into squares and serve with a dollop of sour cream and chives. There you have it—tapas! Keep in mind that to create a great small plate, make something you already know how to do, and simply scale down the size.

And if it is tapas or small plates restaurants you are looking for, in San Francisco try Bocadillos—a unique restaurant that serves a favorite Spanish style sandwich and is a big hit with the lunchtime crowd. Another new San Francisco spot is COCO500—an amazing small plates restaurant serving tempura style green beans, braised beef cheek nachos, and a variety of other small plates.

In Los Angeles, Tim and Lisa Goodell of Troquet and Dakota have opened a tapas restaurant called Meson G on Melrose, which specializes in Mediterranean style tapas. And in Costa Mesa, if you enjoy the club scene, Sutra Lounge offers small plates to inspired guests who are looking for a little nibble with their adult beverage.

So expand your food repertoire and try tapas with your fam-

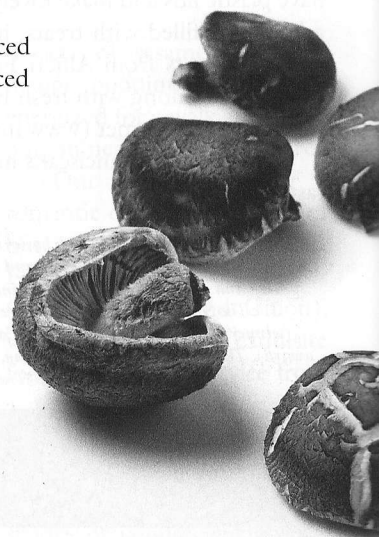
ily and friends. Tapas are simple and full of flavor—much more satisfying than a salt-filled, drive-thru burger!

BRANDIED MUSHROOMS WITH GRILLED BREAD

1 pound crimini mushrooms, sliced
1 pound shitake mushrooms, sliced
2 tablespoons butter
3 tablespoons olive oil
2 cloves garlic, minced
2 tablespoons flour
2 cups of beef broth
1/4 cup brandy
3 tablespoons heavy cream
1/4 cup fresh parsley
1 loaf fresh crusty bread, sliced
salt
pepper

To Prepare:

1. In a large sauté pan over medium heat, add butter, olive oil, mushrooms and garlic. Stir mixture and cook for about 8 minutes until mushrooms are soft.
2. In a large grill pan or grill, place sliced bread in pan or on grates and grill until you see grill marks on bread. Flip each piece and grill on the other side. Remove from heat and place on a platter.
3. When mushrooms are soft, sprinkle flour over the top of them and stir gently. Cook flour into mushrooms for 3 minutes until it is incorporated. Add broth, brandy and cream and continue to cook for about 5 minutes until sauce is slightly thickened.
4. Stir in fresh parsley and salt and pepper to taste. Spoon mushrooms over grilled bread. Enjoy! ©T



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