



## Eating out

Giles Coren

'Usually, I'll write some stuff about the pace of life on the Iberian peninsula, but I can't do it again'

**G**enerally, I begin writing about a Spanish restaurant with some guff about my travels in Spain. There's often a defence of the bullfight, which can attract up to seven, sometimes eight letters of complaint, and so then I heave myself over to my desk and start writing back about how the life of a fighting bull out on the range is so much better and freer than that of a bull bred for... Yawwwwwn, stretch, just 40 winks instead, I think.

Then maybe I'll write some stuff about the different pace of life on the Iberian peninsula, the long hot days in the shade, the beads of cool on the beer bottle, the need only for occasional bites of something strong and spicy to accompany cool salty glasses of manza... Would you mind awfully just passing me that revolver over there so that I can shoot myself?

Then, if I've only blown part of my brain away and am still keen to file the piece, I'll be on about the price of fish, literally, and how only the Spanish will fork out the sums needed to secure the best stuff, sometimes £100 or more for a turbot which two people will share, about how only in Spain can you be sure your prawns are from the Atlantic and, if you're really lucky, I'll tell you about the time I paid €50 apiece for a pair of langoustines (possibly with a digression on the differences between "langostinos" and "gambas") that I ate grilled with salt and a cold beer standing up at the counter at a little place in...

But I can't do it again, I just can't. I've been to a perfectly good new little tapas place in Goodge Street, and that's really all I want to say on the matter. I don't want to



give it context. I don't think I can bear to say again how once upon a time all the Spanish food in London was terrible greasy tapas but then along came Moro and Fino and Brindisa and so now there is some really good stuff at the top end if people are only prepared to pay for proper...

No, I just can't do it.

I said as much to my mate, Bob, the proper Hispanophile in my life, from whom I get

all my heartfelt convictions and prejudices about Anglo-Spanish cooking.

"Bob," I said. "This is quite a good little tapas joint."

And he said, "Yes, it is. There are more and more of these popping up. Good, but nothing to write home about."

"Or to write for your paper about."

"Well, you could write about how there are a lot of good little tapas joints

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popping up, but that it's nothing to write home about."

"I could," I said. "That should show all those Facebookers and Twitterhounds and Blogmuppets that there's nothing like a good old-fashioned newspaper!" And I tore another piece of very good but not extraordinary ham from the plate, and chewed it, and then swallowed. As I so often do.

I had ordered the very good but not extraordinary ham deliberately, for the first time. It was £6.75 for 40g of the jamón ibérico cebo (we had three plates of it in the end) as opposed to £13.50 for the same amount of jamón ibérico bellota. Normally, I have the bellota, because with that stuff the pigs are born and raised and spend all their lives in the oak forests of somewhere or other and so are guaranteed 100 per cent acorn-fed. It is unbelievable ham, but have three plates and you're into big red banknotes before you blink. So what with all these very-good-but-nothing-to-write-home-about little tapas bars popping up everywhere, I thought I should stop being so extravagant and have the stuff which, because it is made from pigs that spend a lot less time in the forest and are fed partially on grain, is only half the price.

And you know what? It tastes exactly the same. So that's about £3,000 or £4,000 I've done over the years on unnecessarily expensive ham.

So that's a thing.

Ach, snap out of it, Giley. This place, what is it called... (checks front of menu on desk)... Barrica, is really very good indeed. It's got a lovely, woody, intimate feel (although the lighting could be improved - we were a bit spot-lit, while other parts of the room were patchily penumbrous) and a fantastic list of sherries: plenty of great palo cortados and dryish olorosos to go with the nice selection of finos and manzanillas (and if you're about to protest that manzanilla is not strictly a sherry, then may I refer you to the 143 previous reviews of Spanish restaurants in which I have made that qualification at bone-chilling length). The wine list is also all-Spanish and very thorough and inspiring.

They're very friendly and helpful. They buy good ingredients. They cook well (though they might have de-pooed the gambas al ajillo by removing the digestive tract). With glasses of Las Medallas manzanilla we had agujas in olive oil: little fish that are maybe anchovies, maybe sardines, maybe something else altogether, but small and silver and needle-shaped.

### Barrica



And we had ham croquetas, pimientos de Padrón (not salty enough), fried artichokes, sautéed sweetbreads with beans, a really good escalivada (which is piles of grilled strips of red pepper and aubergine and onions in oil), and then some exceptionally good, rich veal cheeks braised in pedro ximénez, that dark, treacly sherry ("PX" to the cognoscenti), in which you could really taste the treaciness, and then plates of cheese, manchego and garrotxa, with glasses of oloroso, and actually, you know, I think Barrica is maybe something to write home about, after all.

And if I'm going to write home about Barrica, I should write home about El Pirata Detapas, too, which is a good little tapas joint on Westbourne Grove. Only it's a bit embarrassing because I went there and started writing about it, but only halfway through did I realise that I had thought it was Pix Pintxos, which is a little tapas joint on Westbourne Grove (a few doors further up) whose press release I have had in my desk drawer for six months, and which was where I thought I had been eating.

At El Pirata we were beautifully welcomed and offered a table in the bustling upstairs with a whisper that the table next to it was rather boisterous and we might, as a boy and girl, be happier in the quieter downstairs, which we said we would be. (It was not Esther that I was with, though, it was Stefanie Marsh of this paper, so we only wanted the quieter table so we could talk more easily, not so we could, you know, do anything.)

We had the very expensive jamón ibérico this time, the pata negra gran reserva (one has to show off to girls, even ones with whom one has no plans to do anything), and it was

With glasses of manzanilla we had agujas: little fish, maybe anchovies, maybe sardines, maybe something else, but small and silver and needle-shaped

very nice. And we had glasses of La Goya manzanilla, and ham croquetas and pimientos de Padrón (not salty enough), and excellent black rice, squid and black aioli, and some scallops, and some slow-roasted pork belly that was less exciting.

And the atmosphere here was good, too, and the staff were friendly, and we had big hams hanging in a glass case to look at and a good bottle of wine and it was all rather good value.

And that's that, really. Except to say that I have heard that the other little tapas joint on Westbourne Grove, Pix Pintxos, where I accidentally did not go, is a perfectly good little tapas joint. But I think that'll do for good little tapas joints for me, for a while. So if you fancy it, you just go right ahead, and I'll take your word for it that it's fine. ■

#### Barrica

62 Goodge Street, London W1  
(020-7436 9448; barrica.co.uk)

Good: 6

Little: 7

Tapas: 8

Score: 7

Price: go easy on the booze, stay off the poshest ham, and you're out for £35/head.

#### El Pirata Detapas

115 Westbourne Grove, London W2  
(020-7227 5000; elpiratadetapas.co.uk)

Good: 5

Little: 6

Tapas: 7

Score: 6

Price: pretty much the same as Barrica - it's so hard to average out tapas like that.