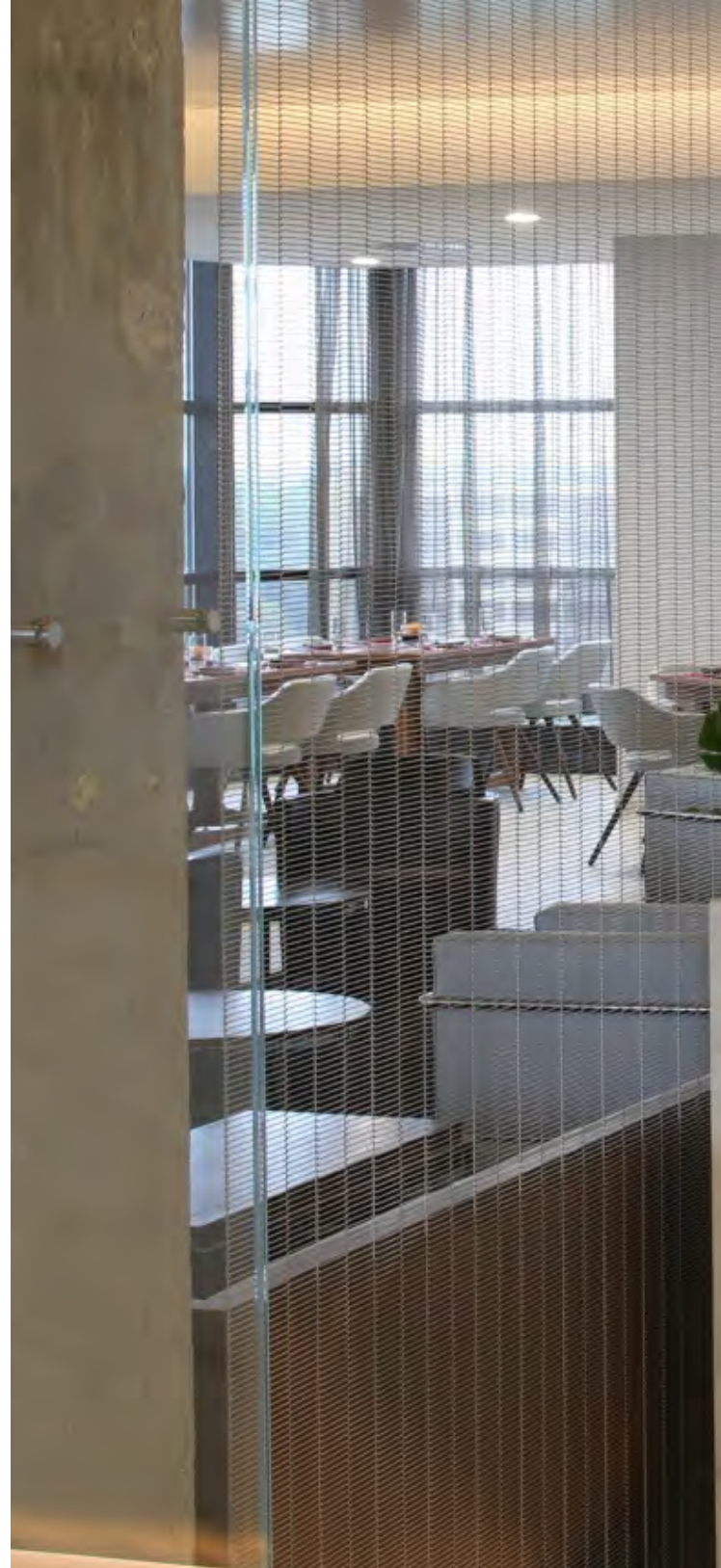


Chicago Tapas for Two

By Karin Leperi





El-Tapeo-Restaurant-Entrance

Whenever I feel in need of an engaging chat with friends, I always think of tapas as a way of promoting the great art of conversation. Maybe it's because you don't have to worry about getting messy fingers, smearing sauce on your chin, or gracefully cutting a thick steak and then chewing it relentlessly. Since tapas is the fine art of serving small dishes, both hot and cold, it is easy to munch and dine while engaging in light-hearted or even serious conversation. Best of all, portions are usually bite-size, so all the cutting has been done for you. And it is so much easier to talk.

Tapas may be the Spanish word for small dishes, but in many restaurants tapas have evolved into a sophisticated cuisine that uses only the finest ingredients. Some even offer small portion-sized entrees. I recently went to two tapas places in the Chicago area that embody this philosophy of tapas; both are fine-dining with impeccable service, and both use nothing but highest quality ingredients.

El Tapeo

El Tapeo - a Spanish tapas restaurant - is conveniently located in the Oakbrook Center at Le Meridien. With a \$25 million transformation, the hotel recently debuted in late July 2014, offering



El-Tapeo-restaurant-area

Meson Sabika



Meson Sabika
Escalivada con Queso



Meson Sabika Queso
de Cabra

172 guestrooms and suites, as well as an Executive Club Lounge. Whether staying at Le Meridien or not, I recommend a relaxing spa treatment at Le Meridien's Spa Suites – the first to offer the spa suite that I know of in the Chicago area. Afterwards, meet your friend(s) for authentic Spanish tapas at El Tapeo. Located on the ninth floor of Le Meridien, the 58-seat restaurant features floor-to-ceiling, wrap around windows with a separate bar and lounge.

The menu is the genius of culinary artist and Chicago native, Chef Franco Diaz. With his emphasis on great food with quality ingredients and refined flavors, this place will appeal to gourmands with a wide variety of palates.

Since my friend has a shell-fish allergy, I knew I would have to forgo delectable choices such as the Croquetas de Marisco (crispy lobster and prawn fritters and piquillo aioli), Gambas (shrimp sautéed with garlic), and Pulpo (Spanish octopus terrine with

potatoes and pimento oil). After friendly deliberation with my friend and the waiter, we chose the following:

From the tapas section: Datiles (fried medjool dates stuffed with almonds and wrapped in bacon).

From the embutidos y quesos section (cured sausage and cheese): Selección de Quesos (selection of three Spanish cheeses, almonds, and olives).

From the sopas y ensaladas section (soup and salad): Sopa de Calabasa (roasted butternut squash bisque, granny smith apples, serrano ham and mahon cheese) and Salpicon Cangrejo de Mar (jumbo lump crab, avocado and blood orange). This last selection was for me only, as I just had to try at least one shell fish.

From mariscos y carnes (fish and meat): Carne Asada (wagyu skirt steak, arugula, manchego and piquillo pepper) and Estofado Carrillada de Cerdo (rioja wine braised pork cheek, olive oil

potatoes and shallots).

From the verduras section (vegetables): Setas (sautéed wild mushrooms and cana de cabra cheese).

Since the dessert menu changes often, the waiter will let you know what choices are for any given evening. We asked for a recommendation and were brought a dessert very similar to traditional flan, but with texture of a cheesecake. It was downright divine.

Absolute standouts include fried and stuffed medjool dates (medjool dates are the most prized and used to be reserved for royalty) and wagyu skirt steak – tender with intense marbling and full of flavor. My friend praised the pork cheeks and we both indulged in the sautéed wild mushrooms.

I should mention that El Tapeo has an excellent selection of wines and champagne, handcrafted cocktails, and a signature Sangria. Hours are 6 to 10pm Monday through Thursday and 6 to 11pm Friday and Saturday, with extended bar hours.

El Tapeo in Le Meridien
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www.eltapeorestaurant.com

Meson Sabika

Whereas El Tapeo is one of Chicago's newest tapas restaurants, Meson Sabika is just the opposite; it has been open since 1990, serving guests and actively promoting Spanish culture through food, music, and art. Located in the historic Willoway Manor, you feel as if you are entering your rich Uncle's home. The ambiance is elegant, yet the mood is familial and inviting. Lace curtains lend a European gentility and refinement, as do the ceramics, vases and mosaics.

My friend and I knew we were going to love this place from the moment we stepped foot inside the mansion. We were greeted as if we were family and escorted to our table as if we were royalty.

Choices are many, so best to ask your waiter for some recommendations around your likes. Our waiter did a superb job accommodating our likes, dislikes,

and food allergies. There appears to be an overwhelming number of choices, but that is primarily because the menu is divided between cold tapas and hot tapas – with many choices under each category. What is particularly notable is that the menu easily accommodates vegetarians, as well as those on a gluten free diet. These dishes are notated on the menu. Given the variety of choices, this is ultimately what we ordered:

Cold Tapas

Escalivada con Queso – Portobello mushrooms, peppers, onions, fennel, asparagus, tomato, and fresh mozzarella cheese on toast points.

Patatas con Alioli – Robust garlic potato salad.

Hot Tapas

Champinones – Mushroom caps filled with spinach and cheese, with tomato basil sauce.

Pipirrana de Buey – Skirt steak, sautéed onions and potatoes, with Cabrales blue cheese sauce.

Pimientos del Piquillo – Imported Piquillo peppers, stuffed with a blend of cheeses and spinach, served with black bean sauce.

Queso de Cabra – Oven-baked goat cheese in tomato basil sauce, served with garlic bread.

Real standout winners were the garlic potato salad, skirt steak, and the stuffed peppers. My friend really gave high marks to the Queso de Cabra. However, all tapas dishes were superb.

Since we had a difficult time deciding on dessert, we ordered a plate consisting of several choices. Basically, our dessert medley included sautéed banana with caramel sauce and pistachios, flan of the day, puff pastries filled with vanilla ice cream and topped with chocolate sauce, and a soft-centered warm chocolate cake. True, it was such an indulgence, but we enjoyed every moment and sticky lick. What we didn't eat we took home with us for a second seating of sinfully delicious desserts. It was divine even the second time around.

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Patatas con Alioli



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