

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Matthew Norman

Over coffee in a south London kitchen 20 years ago, the sister of a friend from university told me about her plan to start a business importing food and sherries from Spain. I offered a few encouraging murmurs, but secretly thought it was obvious it wouldn't work: back in the mid-1980s, there simply wasn't the appetite for aged manchego and beautifully cured Catalan charcuterie that there is today. I gave the project a maximum of six months.

Hindsight's a wonderful thing and all that, and I hate to sound smug, but... Here we are, two decades on, begging for a table in Tapas Brindisa, the restaurant wing of the fabled supplier of fancy Spanish edibles. It is as close to a truly authentic tapas bar experience as you'll find in Britain, the irksome side to which is a no-booking policy. I did ask a nice waiter if he'd go and do some psychotic staring at three women languidly sipping their wine. But while he seemed mildly amused at the first request, by the third his tolerance was palpably ebbing.

So the three of us moaned for half an hour at the bar until a table for two freed up (a table for two midgets on hunger strike, at that), and then proceeded to order enough dishes to break a refectory table of reinforced oak. The ensuing lack of space led

eventually to the most deserved and hilarious rebuke I've had in a restaurant, when another waiter tired of my commentary on his efforts to juggle bowls and bottles, and issued the injunction: "*Kwai at!*" My friends were overjoyed at a look on my face which, they said, put them in mind of Michael Winner struggling with a nuclear-powered haemorrhoid. "I am sorry," said the waiter when he noted the goldfish mouth movements, "I'm only trying to do my job."

If that was the moment we fell in love with this noisy, bustly place – a former chicken factory plainly but pleasingly done out with pink and off-white walls, mirrors with sherry menus painted on them, and a picture of the pigs from which much of the meat is sourced – the succession of dishes that followed only deepened the emotion. The extent of our greed precludes mentioning them all, but almost every one confirmed the seemingly obvious, yet seldom observed, culinary truth that there's

Tapas Brindisa 9/10

Telephone 020-7357 8880.

Address 18-20 Southwark Street, London SE1. Open Mon-Sat, lunch, noon-3pm; dinner, 5.30-11pm (6pm Fri & Sat). Price £25-£30 a head with half a bottle of wine. Wheelchair access and disabled WC.

almost nothing better than wonderful basic ingredients cooked simply and accurately. Or, indeed, uncooked, as in the case of immaculately cured fish (sardines, tuna loin and tongue-zinging anchovies), regional cheeses and two plates of acorn-fed ham, the sweeter of the two cut from the shoulder, the juicier from the loin.

The ideal drink for such food is sherry, but it brings out the Niles Crane in me, so we stuck to a lively Alella at a decent £18. We were well into our second bottle by the time the hot dishes began arriving, which may explain why one of us waited for the deep-fried Monte Enebro cheese before enchanting us with an anecdote from his school days, when his seven-year-old self would puke up macaroni cheese each Wednesday and be forced to ingest the vomit.

Bizarrely, no one touched the Monte Enebro, a pungent and angry goat's cheese, despite the soothing presence of an orange blossom honey coating. However, we did get stuck into fat, garlicky, ultra-fresh prawns served sizzling in a terracotta bowl, excellent battered salt cod with allioli (garlic mayonnaise), and melty duck confit with sautéed cabbage. The absolute picks of the bunch were three very different pig dishes: properly opinionated black pudding sautéed with apples; sensational grilled chorizo cooked in cider; and slices of grilled Iberian pork fillet, served medium-rare to retain the flavour of what must have been a very happy and well-fed porker.

Even those of us who didn't mentally write off the owner's business before it began agreed that this is a terrific little restaurant, as the range of clientele underlined. Apart from the Borough Market foodies and local office workers, at the table next to us sat three middle-aged gents whose Dickensian garb (two wore bob watches) clearly identified them as specialists attached to nearby Guy's hospital. "I'm going to ask if any of them are gastroenterologists," I whimpered when the pain of overeating reached its zenith. "*Kwai at!*" said one of my friends. "Get on with the eating and do your job."

