**[The Underground Gourmet](http://nymag.com/nymag/critics/restaurants/archive)**

**Pol Results**

A tiny new West Chelsea spot does the tapas tradition proud.

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It’s hard to pinpoint the exact moment during the Great Small Plates Conquest of New York when tapas got a bad name. Despite Spain’s sudden emergence as a global culinary power, tapas—the granddaddy of all small plates—have somehow come to be perceived as gastronomically uninspiring and, worse, terribly unfashionable, and no matter how Iberian his influences or how free his hand with paprika and piquillos, any upmarket New York chef worth his sea salt abstains from using the T-word to describe his ostensibly more sophisticated, don’t-call-it-tapas cuisine.

[Tía Pol](http://nymag.com/pages/details/10309.htm), on the other hand, embraces it. The enthusiastically Spanish tapas bar opened three months ago in the gallery-glutted heart of West Chelsea, and has since become a perpetually packed neighborhood hangout. Of course, with only 34 seats (nine of them at the bustling bar), the place isn’t hard to pack. Dimly lit, brick-walled, and slim as a toothpick, it’s got an atmosphere so charged with high-spirited bonhomie—on display one recent Friday night, when a nattily clad customer who turned out to be an Italian wine distributor sampling the Spanish competition broke out into a sort of yowling, Rioja-fueled aria—that it’s easy to imagine it devolving into yet another bass-thumping bar scene. What saves it from that ignominious fate is the graciousness of the hosts (American-born but Spain-obsessed), the congeniality of the clientele (who, instead of pulling out their revolvers and giving the Italian ululator a Rao’s-style reception, politely applauded him), and most of all the consistently great, supremely satisfying food.

The open kitchen is small and so is the appealing menu, built around a core of traditional tapas. You’d be forgiven for thinking, *Tried one tortilla española, tried ’em all*—forgiven, but wrong. Tía Pol’s is light, almost fluffy, and served warm with a delicious dab of aïoli, which also makes its garlicky presence known, in slightly different, red-pepper-tinged form, drizzled over a cazuela of hot, crisp patatas bravas, which might be better even than cheese fries. Tangy marinated lamb comes on a skewer stuck into a hunk of juice-absorbing bread. Fried chickpeas are nuttily addictive. So are battered and fried whitebait, served in a paper-lined glass with a lemon wedge. Thick slices of rich, garlicky real Spanish chorizo are just that: nothing more, nothing less, and utterly delicious.

This (along with silky hams and nicely garnished cheeses) is simple stuff—Tapas 101, you might say, and the perfect complement to the short, affordable, all-Spanish wine list. Rarely, though, do the basics taste so good. That’s largely a function of great ingredients (note the greenish tint of the fragrant olive oil, the imported Spanish tuna in the lively mixed salad, the sweet char of the grilled, sea-salt-speckled shishito peppers) and careful cooking. In proper Spanish fashion, chef Alex Raij, who runs the kitchen with her Basque husband, Eder Montero, manages to honor tradition (Marcona almond, anyone?) without forsaking innovation. She folds Serrano ham into small triangular packages stuffed with manchego and artichokes, and makes a montadito, or Spanish-style bruschetta, from prosciutto-thin slices of chorizo, melted dark chocolate, and wispy threads of Korean peppers. Odd as it sounds, the combination works—just as well as the natural, flavor-packed marriage of chewy-tender squid stewed in its ink and served with a disc of sauce-sopping white rice.

Most of the menu is available in tasting and sharing-size portions. Stick to the former to save room for Raij’s nightly specials, two or three larger plates that veer from the tapas formula (but not the reasonable price range). This is where she gets creative, as in carpaccio of king oyster mushrooms—thin slices marinated in a spectacular citrus vinaigrette and strewn with diced manchego and almonds. Or medium-rare slices of duck breast lined up on a white rectangular plate, one night’s vinegary lentil salad offsetting the richness of the meat. Her repertoire includes elegant preparations of rabbit and squab, and hearty cold-weather stews (tripe and chickpea, recently) to fill whatever stomach space remains after the cavalcade of small plates.

It’s a testament to her talent—and to the appeal of the well-executed, full-flavored tapa—that there’s never that much.

**Ideal Meal:** Green peppers, lamb skewers, chorizo al jerez, patatas bravas, squid in ink with rice, carpaccio of king oyster mushrooms, duck breast with lentil salad, almond cake.

**Note:** Eating at the bar is as comfortable and spacious as eating at a table.

**205 Tenth Ave., near 23rd St.; 212-675-8805.**

**Hours:** Tuesday through Thursday, noon till 11 p.m.; Friday, noon till midnight; Saturday, 11 a.m. till midnight; Sunday, 11 a.m. till 10:30 p.m.

**Prices:** $1.50 to $16.