

INVITING IDEAS

Doing tapas is fun way to help put lid on winter



RUTH MOSSOK JOHNSTON

I love using the word Tapas. Those unfamiliar with this term usually think I am saying "topless" — what fun watching their quizzical faces, waiting for me to continue — the Spanish word for Tapas means lid. Its use probably came from the old custom, and

actual decree, of insulating on the plying of a small plate over a glass of wine in drinking establishments — this plate contained small edibles to ensure some level of sobriety among the clientele, especially the nation's coach drivers. Tapas bars pepper the waterfront barrios of Barcelona and are ever present throughout Spain. The tradition of tapas incorporates many types of appetizers, savory and piquant, with a heavy emphasis on fish and shellfish. Individual tapas bars will reflect the regional origins of the proprietors, and the number of selections could be as few as half a dozen or just under 100.

One of my favorite restaurants in Chicago is "Cafe Ba-Ba-Reebah," part of Lettuce Entertain You Enterprises Inc., on Halsted Street. This upscale trendy spot specializes in Spanish cui-

sine and only tapas, those popular hot and cold "little dishes of Spain" — small appetizer-type portions of wonderful tastes and flavors.

Doing tapas at home makes for an interesting form of entertaining, either an intimate gathering for two, or a large party (lunch, dinner or just for snacks). The number of dishes is up to you. Add some delicious wine, warm crusty bread with plenty of goat cheese, and enjoy the experience — remember, the party is yours, you can do any type of ethnic cuisine you choose, it doesn't have to be only Spanish.

Here are some traditional tapas selections, or use your favorite paella recipe.

MUSSELS ESCABECHE

40-50 mussels, scrubbed well and debearded

4 cloves garlic, peeled and left whole
3 slices of lemon, whole lemon round, sliced thin

Ingredients for Escabeche:

1½ cups olive oil (high quality)
¼ cup red wine vinegar
1 clove garlic, peeled and minced
1 small onion, peeled and minced
1½ tablespoons chopped fresh parsley

2 teaspoons chili powder

¼ teaspoon cayenne pepper
Juice of 1 fresh lemon

Freshly ground sea salt (or kosher salt) and freshly ground black pepper to taste

When cleaning mussels, make sure they are all closed — tap on any open ones, if they don't close — discard.

In a large non-reactive pot, add approximately 2 inches of cold water, the garlic and lemon slices. Steam the mussels until they open. Gently refresh under a small stream of cool water.

In a large glass bowl, mix together the Escabeche ingredients — olive oil, wine vinegar, minced garlic, minced onion, and chopped parsley. Gently add the chili powder, cayenne pepper, and lemon juice. Add the fresh ground salt and pepper to taste. Add the mussels to the Escabeche and refrigerate 12 hours or overnight. Serve the mussels cold in their marinade on individual plates. Serves 8.

GRILLED WHOLE SHRIMP WITH AIOLI SAUCE

Ingredients for shrimp

6 garlic cloves, peeled and coarsely chopped

½ cup olive oil (good quality)

2¼ to 2½ pounds whole shrimp,

washed well and left in shells

Chopped parsley, washed well

Ingredients for the aioli:

3 cups mayonnaise

1 teaspoon lemon juice

6-12 cloves garlic, peeled and finely minced

In a glass bowl, place garlic, olive oil and shrimp — marinate for ½ hour.

Prepare the garlic mayonnaise while shrimp is marinating.

In a bowl, whisk together the mayonnaise and the garlic, slowly adding the lemon juice. Set aside for serving of shrimp.

On the top of the stove in a heavy skillet, or a stove top grill (or grill pan), heat the oiled pan over medium high heat until hot — add shrimp, a few at a time, to keep under control. Add a little of the marinade oil to the shrimp while it's cooking — cook the shrimp two minutes on each side, adding a little oil to prevent it from drying out.

Keep the cooked shrimp warm — do not over cook. When the shrimp is ready, sprinkle with chopped parsley and serve with the garlic mayonnaise. Serves 8.

Ruth Mossok Johnston is an author and food columnist who lives in Franklin. To leave a Voice Mail message for Ruth, dial (313) 953-2047, mailbox 1902.

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