



Pimiento con pollo is chicken salad with a twist: Sun-dried tomatoes and olives flavor the chicken, served in tiny red peppers for a whimsical presentation. Photo: Stephen J. Serio

From this week's Business of Life

Lively abundance at Tapas Valencia

By: [Laura Bianchi](#) May 18, 2009

Imaginative small plates and colorful décor make the South Loop's new Tapas Valencia a lively place to break the ice with new or prospective clients.

Sharing is the name of the game, so don't invite any stick-in-the-mud types who are squeamish about divvying up the goods.

Casual and still fairly quiet at lunch, Tapas Valencia opened in February with 200 comfortable seats, including banquettes more generously spaced than most, in the dining room and bar.

Expansive, boldly colored mosaics, inspired by Spanish surrealist Joan Miró, glitter on the walls.

Vegetarians and everyone else will find plenty to like on the menu, with a splash of the unexpected. Sauces, dressings and deftly cooked meats are a strong point; some dishes are so bold and rich, you'll be happy you're sharing. Plan on two or three tapas per person; my lunch bills for two hit \$65 with dessert but without drinks.

The menu is remarkably wide-ranging, particularly in this economy, which has some restaurants abbreviating their lunch options. Here you'll find 44 hot and cold tapas, several paellas and a selection of hot and cold entrees, salads and soups.

From the cold tapas, make your first bite the seafood medley of shrimp, scallops and calamari in vibrant citrus vinaigrette (\$7.95). It's reminiscent of ceviche, but cooked.

Good bets for vegetarians include marinated portobello mushroom with raisins, pine nuts and sharp manchego cheese (\$6.95); grilled eggplant with fennel and roasted peppers is almost melted and topped with goat cheese (\$6.95) for pungent contrast.

Chicken salad in red peppers (\$6.50) sounds humdrum but isn't. Sun-dried tomatoes, red pepper and olives brighten the filling, and the presentation is whimsical. The pointy peppers look like gnome's caps, served upside down on cucumber slices, surrounded by lovely hazelnut pimienta vinaigrette.

Too-thick slices of manchego overpowered cured pork and chorizo in coca del pueblo (\$7.95), a trio of open-faced finger sandwiches. Dabs of zingy, sun-dried tomato and green olive relish are a plus.

TAPAS VALENCIA

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On the hot side we found a mix of homey and upscale.

Tops on the list: four grilled lamb loin medallions (\$10.95), peppery and tender atop portobello mushrooms with white wine paprika sauce and caramelized red onions; and a quartet of grilled sea scallops (\$11.95), luxurious in tomato tarragon sauce with couscous that was too buttery for me, but not for my companion.

Tender strips of skirt steak with blue cheese sauce (\$8.50) are very rich; don't attempt this dish solo. Chorizo-flavored black bean sauce plays well off red peppers stuffed with manchego, Monterey jack and parmesan cheeses (\$7.95).

Chicken brochette (\$5.95) is strictly for the unadventurous. The chicken is perfectly grilled, but the prunes in the butter sauce didn't add much. Another basic: grilled cobia with eggplant, lemon pimienta butter sauce and that buttery couscous (\$12.95).

Desserts are well-composed, with a whopping 10 to select from. Best surprise: warm pound cake with sliced pears, caramel sauce and ice cream (\$5.95).

Sweet orange flan with burnt caramel sauce (\$4.95) cools the palate nicely after a spicy meal.

Servers know their stuff, and it's a good thing. Many dishes are so simply stated, you'll never know how interesting they are unless you ask.

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What do you think?

Jerry K. wrote:

The food is great and well priced, you don't have to spend \$65 for lunch, i have spent \$50 for three and did not walk away hungry. We love this addition to the South Loop.

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