

Tapas

When I arrived in Sydney, Australia, on a working-holiday visa in 1993, I bought a Nissan E20 Camper and travelled around the coast on the highway number one. Eventually, I reached Perth and found work there as a grill and larder chef at a Spanish tapas bar in the restaurant area of Northbridge. I loved my time at this restaurant.

The following is an expert from the chapter, Tapas, and paints the picture of the pace and action in a busy à la carte restaurant on a Saturday night.

First guests were expected at six o'clock and, in Spanish style, the kitchen would not stop its service until there were no more hungry and paying customers. This meant that Friday and Saturday's service would normally function until half past twelve. These long hours helped me to become acquainted with Spanish cooking quickly.

The first docket, or order, reached us: Two baby octopuses, one Cabrito, one chicken liver, one mussel followed by two Paella, one Ravioli de Conejo and one lamb salad. The next docket was for the large table: four mussels, three Gazpacho, two serves Pinchitos de Carne, two chicken fillets and one Ensalada de Hongo followed by three Paella, one Zarzuela, two more Ravioli and one vegetarian.

'They want two serves of olive bread with their mains, Steve. And two serves of extra Chorizo as well, Erik.'

I read the next new docket: three serves of sardines followed by two Paella. Ah, I thought, too easy.

'Let's go on table eight if we're all ready?'

'Yes!' Everyone from the different sections in the kitchen agreed in unison, and they started to plate up.

The cold larder chef was virtually finished with his three plates and was gently wiping oil droplets of the sides. The cold larder chef constantly had to clean up the mess from all the marinating, which was unavoidable with Spanish dishes. There always seemed to be two or three drops of juices and oil that refused to join the rest of the meal and tormented as it lingered on the edge of the plates. They were, what we in the industry call, “the arrogant flavours” because they refused to be part of the team.

The second chef grabbed a pan from the stove, quickly sautéed the ingredients for the last time, he then turned 180 degrees to grab a Spanish clay pot from a shelf and poured his Shellfish Medley into it. He grabbed the garlic oil with his right hand and gave the dish a swirl and garnished it with roughly chopped parsley. He spun around again to grab another pan from the stove, but luckily he noticed that the pan’s handle was close to the flame from another burner. Most likely he knocked the pan over the flame when he removed the Shellfish Medley, but one thing was certain – the handle was hot now. Without much hesitation, he flicked a tea towel into his right hand and moved it without injury to himself. If he hadn’t noticed the error in time, then we would have been short one chef for rest of the evening.

Again, the second chef turned 180 degrees and grabbed a white plate, returned and laid generous lamb pieces in the centre making sure the mushrooms were evenly laid around the meat. Then he poured the glazed sauce over the dish. I had two pieces of grilled pancetta ham on my grill that he grabbed with tongs to garnish it with. My grill was full, but there was enough for only two serves of sardines to fulfil this order. I quickly placed five of them onto the tapas plate, spinning to and fro as I worked. After the fifth piece was in place I hung the tongs to the front of the grill and returned to the dish to garnish it and finished with a spoonful of Alioli. The head chef checked all dishes that we finished as well as plate up and garnish Paella. He made sure the mussels were opening towards the guest. The large prawns were placed on top of the pile of seafood that was nestled in the middle of the large platter. And lastly, he made certain the Chorizo and chicken was clearly seen and not covered by the thick tomato and wine stock that the dish had been cooked in. He wiped the edge of the plate and rung the bell.

The head chef said, ‘Table eight away!’

He was nothing like the second chef who was a bully and found delight in shouting at the floor staff. The head chef was gentle and kind, which resulted in everyone respecting him – the sort of thing that was needed in a busy place like this. Thirty seconds later and the meals were gone from the kitchen.

A new docket: two chicken livers followed by two fish specials. The second chef ordered me to put the livers on straight away.

‘I am going to put the fish in the oven now.’

‘Erik don’t burn the skewers, you Danish-git,’ the head chef shouted.

‘Sorry!’

‘Hear that, Second? He’s sorry.’

‘Nah, mate, it’s us that are sorry that we have to work with you, you skinny bastard.’

Everyone laughed. Humour was the only thing that would get us through the onslaught of never-ending dockets tonight.

New docket – and it was a beauty: Gambas Romesco, one lamb salad, one Ensalada de Hongo and one baby octopus followed by one Paella, one vegetarian, one special rabbit and one Ravioli de Conejo.

‘Can I put that with the others?’ the second chef asked.

‘No, it will get out of hand. Put it in its own pot and make sure to reduce that sauce, get some flavor through it. I want that sauce to glaze it.’

The next docket consisted of desserts.

‘Steve, one Catalan crème Caramel and one cheesecake with figs, remember to pour some Callesay Liquor over it.’

New docket: three Gambas Romesco, a Coca la Plana and two serves of marinated artichokes and a portion of olive bread followed by one Pork and one Ravioli.

‘Steve, check how much rabbit there is left in the fridge.’

The order continued: one chicken liver as main and a Cabrito also as a main.

‘We should’ve got Simon in tonight, bugger it,’ the head chef said when he looked through the door to the restaurant.

One of the floor staff brushed past him with empty plates. ‘It’s going to be a busy one, ladies,’ he quipped.

‘We know!’

‘Can we have some cold drinks for the kitchen please?’

At midnight we were indulging in a drink of Spanish red wine and eating Coca la Plana, flat bread baked with oven-dried tomatoes, crumbled goat’s cheese, slices of olives and pesto. We mingled with the customers and talked about the evening. Some of the boys were back from changing from their chefs’ whites to smart casual clothes, and poured more wine into their glasses as they debated which club they should head off to. I had to be back for the breakfast and lunch shifts, which started at eight o’clock in the morning so I was unable to join in with the fun. And considering I had to work with the head chef, I decided it was best if I remained focused.