

Tapas Hopping for the Holidays

Portland's Pearl District beckons

Story and photos by Tracy Beard • Photos by Brittney Beard

The holidays are a special time of year. Most people eagerly anticipate the parties, festivities, shopping, visiting and dining with friends and family. However, hosting a dinner or party is a great deal of work. When people choose to dine out for an occasion, they typically visit one restaurant and indulge in several courses over one or two hours, then leave, feeling stuffed. Instead, this year take a break from your traditional gatherings and try tapas hopping.

This method of entertainment is relatively stress-free and assures that you will visit several venues, walk in-between sites, and finish feeling comfortable at the end of the evening, having experienced great food and fun with friends or family.

Tapas hopping originated in Spain as a before-dinner gathering of friends, wandering from bar to bar snacking on great food and drinks before a late dinner out. I — and others around the world — discovered the art of transforming this practice into an active event filling an entire evening by sharing food and drinks with friends or family while on the move. The best way to tapas hop is with four to six people who enjoy tasting a wide variety of foods and do not mind sharing from a communal plate. The only preparations involve choosing three to four restaurants within walking distance of each other that serve small plates, appetizers, or items that can reasonably be divided. Emphasize tasting and sharing various foods and drinks at several unique places. The concept is to order a few plates and maybe a drink at each site, spend an hour savoring the food, restaurant atmosphere, and the company of friends or family... then move on to the next place.

Tapas Hopping in Portland

For a fun and memorable evening out, drive an hour and visit the Pearl District in Northwest Portland. One of the many charming neighborhoods in Portland, the Pearl is filled with shops, art galleries, and restaurants. Rated one of the top three food cities

in America, Portland is a great place for an evening experience. To begin your evening, I recommend Oba as a first stop.

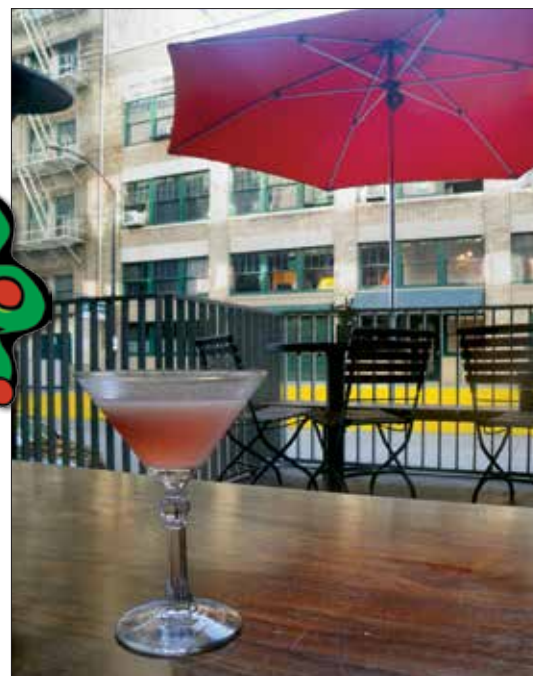
The easy listening jazz music drifts through the windows of the orange-stuccoed building inviting you inside. Stepping in off the street, and opening the door, you notice the scent of cumin and chili in the air. Oba is a Latin fusion restaurant offering an array of delicious and beautiful items to devour.

The boisterous open bar is alive with busy waiters, giving the impression you have just arrived at a party. As you take a seat on a tall bar stool, a friendly bartender asks, "What can I get you?" The brightly colored prickly pear mojitos and habanero mango martinis arrive and you are instantly transported to another place and time.

These drinks are simply spectacular. Your shoulders relax and you begin to breathe slower as you sip on the sweet, tangy and spicy cocktails.

You and your friends peruse the menu, and your mouth waters, simply thinking about what's next. Tapas hopping is always a tasty adventure. By sharing several plates with friends throughout the evening, your odds increase that you will all relish new, sweet, salty, familiar flavors and undiscovered dishes.

With all the choices available at Oba, the vote is cast and you all agree on trying the Yucatan arepas and Empanada de Res. The arepas arrive--two lovely disks of corn cake topped with braised pork shoulder marinated in citrus-achiote. Habanero mojo and cilantro adobo are tossed with the meat. This is then crowned with a touch of cabbage and pickled onion, creating a sensational taste mix of spicy, sweet and savory. The spices give the dish a bite, while the corn cake offers a touch of sweetness. Melting in your mouth, the savory meat excites your palate while the cabbage brings a wonderful crunch to the dish. Finishing with a speck of acidity, the pickled onion tops off the dish with perfection. Moments later, the empanada arrives.



Portland Pearl District Tapas Hopping Sample Itinerary

OBA
555 NW 12th Ave.
Phone: 503-228-6161

Blue Hour
250 NW 13th Ave
Phone: 503-226-3394

Piattino
1140 NW Everett Street
Menu: piattinopdx.com

A single empanada lies naked on the plate, adorned solely with a lime wedge and dipping sauce held in a small white bowl. Compelled to slice the empanada in half for sharing, you cut through the crisp corn pastry. The braised beef and Oaxaca cheese ooze onto the plate. You refill your half and dip the corner into the huacatay-chipotle crema and take a bite. The combination of crunch, perfectly seasoned beef, gooey cheese and slightly spicy crema explode in your mouth.

Immediately you are transported to a warm Latin country, listening to Spanish conversations. As you relax and enjoy your cocktail, you realize you have left the cold and rain of Portland and arrived in paradise. This beautiful moment is surpassed only by the thought that this is just the first stop in your evening of tapas hopping. Next, why not try Italian or French food? You have at least two more places to explore. Where will they take you? I recommend walking to Piattino where you can design your own decadent cheese and salumi plate and drink a luscious pistachio martini. For a third stop, try the Diva or fig martinis with the grilled corn at The Blue Hour. Try something new for the holidays. Grab your significant other and a small group of friends and go tapas hopping tonight! This is my favorite way to dine out — maybe it will become yours, too.

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TAPAS HOPPING PART 2

A Moveable Feast

Hometown tapas hopping in Rainier

Story by Tracy Beard
Photos by Laura McCartney

Tapas hopping can be accomplished anywhere you can share plates of food with friends. To try out the tapas hopping concept locally, we selected four restaurants in Rainier, Oregon: Cornerstone, El Tapatio, Evergreen Pub, and Interstate Tavern. Each of these restaurants serves good, sharable food options and is within easy walking distance of one another.

Begin at Cornerstone, because they close at 8pm most nights. Order the onion rings which arrive crispy on the outside, soft and squishy on the inside, and stacked tall with just the right amount of cold, creamy ranch dip on the side. Another option is the warm, gooey mozzarella sticks. Shuffle up to the counter or grab a table, place your food order, and pair it with a glass of Pinot Gris or a beer of your choice. Cornerstone also serves a limited selection of spirits. When finished, head downhill to El Tapatio.

El Tapatio serves a variety of flavorful Mexican appetizers. I recommend the quesadilla delivered hot with cheese overflowing onto the plate. Pair it with a pineapple jalapeno margarita and you will have a match made in heaven. These days, it's very trendy to infuse spirits with various peppers and use them in cocktails. Finally, stretch those legs and hike partway back uphill to the Evergreen Pub. This watering hole is known for their hamburgers and I would recommend the Oink Burger. Delivered hot, on a soft bun, the burger is topped with

bacon, American cheese, special sauce,

fresh tomato, lettuce, pickle and onion. It is large enough to cut in four and divide amongst friends and there are plenty of fries to share. Then, continue on up the hill to the Interstate Tavern.

End your evening with fresh crab piled onto French bread with melted cheddar cheese. A slice of tomato and onion accompany the sandwich, along with cocktail sauce.

The crab, shipped in fresh every 72 hours, tastes of the sea. The horseshoe bar welcomes guests to visit, and I suggest you end your evening with a friendly game of pool — a great tavern tradition and fun way to finish the evening during the holidays or any other time of year.

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Tapas Tips

- Invite friends who are open to sharing communal plates
- Nominate a designated driver
- Be adventurous and look for bars/eateries serving appetizers or small plates. For local ideas, see *Columbia River dining Guide*, page 38.



Good friends share good food — along with a river view — on a foggy winter's night in Rainier. Food, from top: Interstate Tavern's open-faced crab sandwich, Evergreen Pub's Oink Burger, Cornerstone's tower of onion rings. At left, Bartender Jay presides over Evergreen Pub's evening festivities; above, Cornerstone Cafe's welcoming warm glow, Interstate Tavern proprietor Jolee takes a break at the circular bar while Tracy Beard enjoys a cocktail.



Tracy Beard, a former Longview resident now lives in Vancouver, Wash. Passionate about travel, gourmet cooking, writing, and most outdoor activities, she is continuously on the lookout for trendy new food, wine, and outrageous adventures. Read more about her at <http://tracysblog.blogspot.com/>