

SPANISH MAINS

There may be some cultural differences, but the cuisine of Spain has a few things in common with Cantonese food, writes **Vanessa Yung**

YOU CAN HEAR the late-afternoon buzz in the kitchen of Spanish restaurant Catalunya in Wan Chai. Slices of bread are spread with a layer of truffle paste, which will be combined with Iberico ham and mozzarella cheese for the crisp-on-the-outside, gooey-on-the-inside *Bizini* sandwiches.

Fresh fruits are pitted and chopped, all ready to be infused with different aromatic herbs, such as mint and cloves, for the seasonal fruit salad dessert bowl, which is presented with puffs of dry ice.

In case you're wondering why Spanish food has become so popular around the world, it's because of chefs such as Alain Devahive Tolosa. He leads the kitchens of Catalunya in Singapore, and the branch in Hong Kong, which opened in April. He worked for a

decade at the now-closed *El Bulli* restaurant in Roses, Spain, and his dishes at Catalunya mix the ideas he learned from revered chef Ferran Adrià with classic Spanish cuisine.

"Basically, 60 per cent of our menu is based on traditional tapas, and 40 per cent is our vision of tapas with a modern twist. Some of the tapas don't exist in the traditional cookbooks," says Devahive Tolosa. "What I'm trying to do is to make what I'd like to find when I go to eat. I don't like boring menus."

"What puts our dishes on the modern side is the techniques. We use foams, gels and different temperatures to create dishes with unique textures and flavours. There are always [new techniques] that you can have fun with," he says.

Pickles made with yuzu, which are vacuum-packed to keep out oxygen and preserve the colour and taste, are an example of the close attention paid even to the basics. Catalunya tomato tartare with potato foam will fool your

palate into believing you're eating something more than a mere vegetable, while the Segorcia-style roasted suckling pig is so tender, it can be cut with a plate.

The menu is almost an exact copy of the one from the original restaurant in Singapore. But within two months, the team will give it a revamp. Because tables have been so hard to book for dinner, they started opening for brunch this month with a slightly different menu.

Although Quim Marquet of Quermò in Wan Chai didn't work at *El Bulli*, he has Adrià to thank for bringing Spanish food to international attention.

"For a long time, Spanish cuisine has been a hidden gem," he says. "Luckily, we have one big ambassador, who is Ferran Adrià, and he opened the door for all the Spanish chefs. Spanish food is famous because of him." Marquet, who is self-taught, has made his own name over the years with *El Quim de la Boqueria* in Barcelona,

which has counter seating and stools, and has been going for 25 years. He says Quermò, which he runs with Aitor Olabeagaia, executive chef of *Migao* in Beijing, added a modern twist to his native Catalan cuisine.

As suggested by the waxy-side-up egg printed on his chef's jacket, Quim says *El Quim de la Boqueria's* fried egg, served with ingredients such as mushrooms, squid or chorizo, is something not to be missed. He isn't afraid to experiment with different combinations and go beyond what people are used to.

"When I started doing fried egg with garlic prawns in Barcelona years ago, people thought I was crazy. It's not a typical plate. Now people love it, and we do it with many different ingredients, including cauliflower," he says.



Clockwise from bottom left: Catalunya's tomato tartare; the *Bizini*; Segorcia-style suckling pig; chef Alain Devahive Tolosa. Photos: Paul Yip

Clockwise from below left: Quermò's Catalan-style squid on pasta with cauliflower and chorizo; fried egg with fish glue and mushrooms; chef Quim Marquet. Photos: Neil Yu

