

## HOME & DIGITAL

# U.S. Tapas Bars Open a Whole New Can of Seafood

By ALINA DIZIK

At Bar Vivant, “a proper tapas bar” in Portland, Ore., as the menu says, a \$10 appetizer of scallops in tomato sauce is ready in 30 seconds flat.

A server opens the can behind the bar, places it on a plate and presents it to the diner, displaying the hand-packed arrangement of delicate mollusks inside. Diners spear them with a fork or toothpick.

Restaurant owner Cheryl Wakerauser says she added the dish, known in Spanish as *conservas*, for the simplicity. “We wanted quality bar food that didn’t need a whole lot of preparation,” she said.

Adventurous diners on the prowl for the next trendy appetizer have discovered *conservas*, imported seafood like clams, anchovies, oysters, mussels and octopus that are preserved in brine, oil or a tomato-based sauce and often served straight from a vintage-style tin.

Tapas bars and Spanish-inspired chefs find U.S. diners are willing to spend top dollar for the delicacies. Restaurateurs like the zero prep work as well as the expiration dates that are years, not days, away.

The *conservas* served at Donostia, a Basque-style bar with two New York City locations, include briny razor clams and olive oil-soaked nail sardines—many imported from regions in the north of Spain.

“Canning itself is an art form,” says co-owner Jorge de Yarza, whose menu features some 65 kinds of *conservas*. Many are displayed like a kaleidoscope and available for retail purchase. This fall, Donostia became the sole U.S. distributor of the Espinaler seafood brand.

Tinned seafood is a specialty of the Basque, Galicia and Cantabria regions in northern Spain, and a popular offering in tapas restaurants, says Joseba Encabo, associate professor of culinary arts at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. who specializes in Basque cuisine. “Americans are waking up to the potential of delicious food out of a can,” he says.

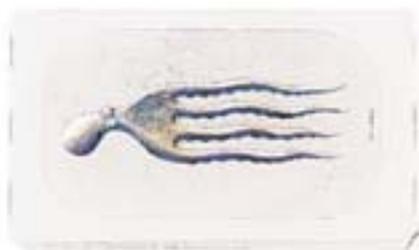
Depending on how *conservas* are served, diners don’t always realize that the seafood isn’t fresh. Rajani Tewari, a 54-year-old therapist, says she thought the fish she had ordered on her first few visits to Donostia were “locally sourced ingredients.” “Tinned food was something you did if there was a hurricane,” said Ms. Tewari. She says she enjoys the sharper flavors of the tinned fish, including hard-



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: GREG POWERS/THINKFOOD GROUP; GALDONIES PHOTOGRAPHY; HEIDI'S BRIDGE/MAIDEN LANE

### Raise Your Appetizer

*Conservas*, preserved often seafood straight from the tin, is a popular bar snack. Clockwise from above, sardines and mussels from chef José Andrés; Jose Gourmet octopus and La Brujula sardines from Wixter Market; octopus from Maiden Lane bar.



to-find sardines, paired with a sherry wine.

Some U.S. restaurateurs are starting to run nice side businesses selling the colorful tins at retail. José Andrés, the Washington, D.C., chef, began selling the tins two years ago at his restaurants to fans in the know, and now has partnered with Los Peperetes, a Spanish cannery. The full range is available through an online Spanish food retailer, La Tienda, and in some Whole Foods stores. Mr. Andrés’s line also includes preserved vegetables, such as roasted Piquillo peppers.

“While a fresh clam is delicious, a clam that has been canned has become a different product,” says Mr. Andrés, whose restaurants include The Bazaar by José Andrés in Los Angeles, and Oyamel Cocina Mexicana in Washington D.C.

Rather than masking the seafood with heavy sauces, Mr. Andrés serves *conservas* with just a drizzle of olive oil, a squeeze of lemon, a pinch of paprika or a handful of potato chips—simple preparations that Basque *pintxo* bars are known for. Even bread is optional, Mr. Andrés says. “You can be climbing Mount Everest

and in less than two minutes you are enjoying a high quality snack.”

Seafood becomes tender when preserved in olive oil, a tomato-based sauce or its own brine, chefs say. Small producers in Europe and elsewhere clean and pack the fish at its peak; the tins can be opened and contents served years later.

Most contain a portion of only several ounces of fish, little enough to eat in one sitting. “The Spanish have always looked at [tinned seafood] as a luxury ingredient,” says Gareth Maccubbin, co-owner of Maiden Lane, a New York cocktail bar that opened two years ago and

now offers more than 50 varieties of *conservas*. In addition to Spanish imports, Mr. Maccubbin offers smoked oysters from Ekone Oyster Co., based in Bay Center, Wash., which sell for \$15 a can. He says Icelandic cod liver with a “mild” taste is a best-seller at \$9 a can.

Four months ago, Matt Wixter opened Wixter Market in Chicago, a seafood shop specializing in flash-frozen fish. Spanish-style canned seafood now makes up 30% of sales, he says. The store might open up an \$8, 4-ounce tin of *ventresca*, or tuna belly, for customers to sample in hopes they will splurge. Last month, he started a distribution company for imported tinned seafood and is working with local restaurants to offer it on their menus.

Many Americans seek out *conservas* for the first time after a Spanish vacation. Home from a recent trip to Barcelona, Anthony Luzius went online to order two cans of razor clams from La Tienda. He found the product can take some getting used to.

It “wasn’t the most pleasing thing to look at,” he says, about opening the can. As Mr. Luzius was making dinner with his wife, he served the clams as an appetizer with a glass of wine. Before picking up the long-shaped clam, “she made a face,” he said.

At Aatxe, in San Francisco, chef and partner Ryan Pollnow says diners feel “safer” about the idea of *conservas* when it is local seafood preserved in glass canning jars. He is creating appetizers that he says “mimic the Spanish technique.” He smokes his own albacore tuna, steams clams with a parsley-filled salsa verde and uses paprika to prepare mussels *escabeche*. In November, he’ll start offering house-prepared mackerel and sardines.

Mr. Pollnow, who opened Aatxe in April, says his \$12 jarred mussels appetizer is one of his most popular dishes. “Almost every table was starting their meal with a jar of mussels,” he said.

Some retailers promote canned fish as “aged,” a process that makes the fish more tender and mellows out flavors. Two years ago, Zingerman’s Delicatessen, in Ann Arbor, Mich., introduced five-year-old French vintage sardines. Customers are encouraged to taste.

Now, Zingerman’s features a “tin of the month,” says William Marshall, the deli’s retail manager. He estimates 20% of sales at the deli now come from tinned seafood, which Zingerman’s sells in the store and online. “We kind of created a little craze for it,” Mr. Marshall says.