

# Barcelona

**"For me, being a Catalán, there is something almost 'ethnic' about tapas,"** said Francesc Calafell, 42, a human-population geneticist at Barcelona's Pompeu Fabra University. We were eating a tapas lunch of fried calamari, grilled asparagus, and *esqueixada*, a Catalán shredded salt cod salad, in La Ribera, an ancient neighborhood near the city's port. "It's similar to the way an English person would know about curry. Serious tapas, in the sense that you can make a whole meal of them, are something that came to Cataluña with the wave of Andalus immigration in the 1950s and '60s. Before that, during my parents' generation, a tapa was nothing more than a snack of potato chips or olives or anchovies you got with Sunday noon's *vermut*, when people would go out for a vermouth after their morning stroll and before they went home for a proper meal. It was only about 20 years ago that young, middle-class Catalanes discovered that you could have a cheap dinner at Andalus bars by sharing *raciones* of ham or *patatas bravas*."

I had first heard of Calafell in a December 2008 *New York Times* article about a study he coauthored showing significant Jewish and Moorish markers in the genetic makeup of modern-day Iberians. Suggesting that there must have been mass conversions to Catholicism in the 15th and 16th centuries, the study further undermined the old-school, Francoist view that Spanish civilization is inherently Catholic and that the influences of Judaism and Islam are foreign to it. The findings also seemed especially timely in an increasingly secular Spain, where fast-track divorce and gay marriage are now legal and a judge recently barred crucifixes from the walls of a public school.

"Most Spaniards today understand that our

country was formed by many different peoples," said Calafell, as he took a bite of typically Catalán tomato-smear bread. "But with the exception of Gypsies and recent immigrants, and taking into account some geographical variations, we Spanish aren't so different genetically. What might distinguish us from one another are regional cultural differences."

After my lunch with Calafell, I spent the rest of a drizzly weekend in Barcelona with friends Manuel Galindo, 46, and Javier Vallhonrat, 47, who showed me how Catalanes have made tapas their own. "It's not the same as the tapeo in Madrid, where you move from one place to another and have a bite at each, and where you stand at the bar," said Manuel, gesturing at the half-dozen small plates filling our table at Tapas 24, a trendy, informal restaurant where a line of hungry customers waited to score a seat. "Here, you sit and are served, and often you stay long enough to have dessert and coffee."

At Tapas 24 and again at Mundial Bar, an old-time spot decorated with photos of prizefighters and specializing in seafood, we sat down to trenchermen's meals—steamed mussels and the small clams known as *berberechos*; chunks of fried eggplant drizzled with honey; addictive *bombas*, meat-filled mashed potato balls first created in a Barcelona portside bar; *calçots*, a winter Catalán dish of smoky grilled onions napped in romesco sauce; tender Galician-style octopus sprinkled with smoked paprika. After the bar meal, there was a single mussel left, which we each declined. "*Es el de la vergüenza*—it's the 'shame' portion that everyone is too embarrassed to take," said Javier, sliding it onto my plate.

