



THE REIGN OF SPAIN From left: The 122-seat main dining room of Tavernita in the former Martini Park space; a glimpse inside the adjacent bar, Barcito

Small Wonders

Both foodies and scenesters are flocking to Tavernita, thanks to its dynamic small plates and big boisterous atmosphere. | By Michael Nigrant | Photography by Anthony Tahlier |

The conventional take on a mullet, the infamous haircut preferred by '80s country music stars and many current hockey players, is that it is business in front and a party in the back. Tavernita—a new Spanish- and Latin-influenced small plates restaurant in River North helmed by chef/partner Ryan Poli—is in some ways the mullet of Chicago restaurants. That is to say, it has successfully found a way to provide a boisterous bar-like fiesta in the back while maintaining some serious dining credibility in the front.

This is no easy feat. Generally, most places seeking to be *bar/restaurants*, or *barstaurants*, have failed for being too loud and obnoxious for serious foodies or for providing a too-fussy or too-expensive menu for those looking for a fun and reasonably priced night out.

Tavernita—which is owned by the Mercadito restaurant group—bypasses these problems by using a huge set of wood doors to smartly separate its serene *Architectural Digest*-worthy dining room from its San Sebastián-inspired tapas and *pintxos* bar spot, Barcito. (Tavernita does have its own bar, which, in comparison, is fairly calm.) While the main dining room is outfitted with tufted chocolate leather, inlaid

pottery tile and silvery beaded room dividers, Barcito is significantly more rustic and laid-back with its graffiti-esque design elements.

The feat of being all things to all people is not just a trick of architecture, but also a function of the selection of Poli as chef. Poli, who once worked at Napa Valley's famed French Laundry, is also a South Side boy, the son of a former Chicago homicide detective. He's equally comfortable catering a party as he is being the life of it.

As for that party aspect, Poli gets a nice hand from NYC beverage consultants the Tippling Bros., who constructed an impressive cocktail menu at Tavernita and Barcito. I was a bit worried when I first saw the menu, with its "kegged" cocktails, sangria, vermouth and wine. Suddenly I was having flashbacks of my college roommates holding my legs over my head while I sucked down a gallon of Natural Light. (Sorry, Mom!)

But there is nothing light about Tavernita's kegged Quixote cocktail, a smooth citrus and grape-flavored mix of Spanish brandy, sherry and Grand Marnier featuring a touch of bitters from Yellow Chartreuse. There's a nuance and complexity here that you usually only find in aperitifs at fancy places like Henri CONTINUED...



Tavernita

★★★
151 W. Erie St.,
312.274.1111

What the stars mean:

★ fair,
some noteworthy qualities

★★ good,
above average

★★★ very good,
well above norm

★★★★ excellent,
among the area's best

★★★★★ world-class,
extraordinary in every detail

Reviews are based on multiple visits. Ratings reflect the reviewer's overall reaction to food, ambiance and service.

WHAT TO WEAR

Your best shiny dresses and shirts—it's a party

WHAT TO ORDER

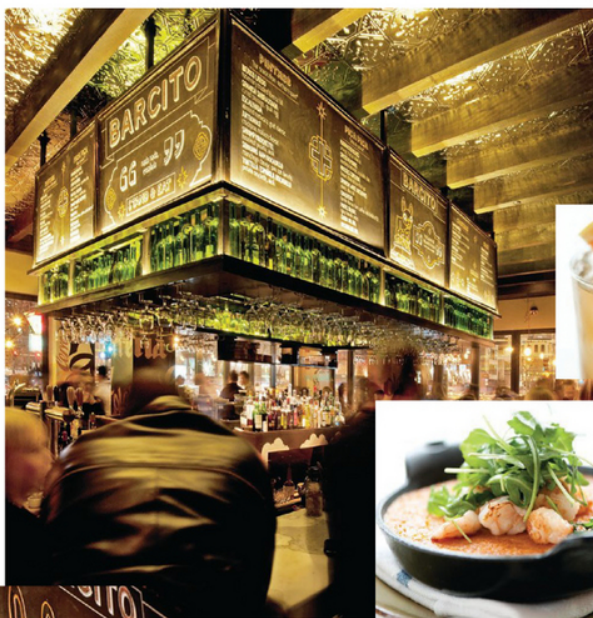
Greg's Meatballs, *croquetas* and corn pudding

WHAT TO KNOW

Can't score a reservation at Tavernita? Head to Barcito, which features plenty of tasty small plates exclusive to the adjacent bar

WHAT IT COSTS

Small plates \$4-\$21



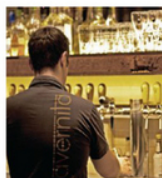
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...CONTINUED or Alinea. Likewise, the Turista, a mix of tequila, preserved cherries, grapefruit, black pepper syrup, lime and barbecue bitters conjures an afternoon of eating finger-licking ribs and sipping Paloma cocktails in the backyard. Doing a keg stand behind the Tavernita bar would be an honor, and based on the quality coming out of the tap, a sign of maturity.

The cocktails make great companions to Poli's small-plates menu of seafood from the raw bar, bread-based selections ("En Pati") and larger, shareable "Platos."

The only major problem, and a great one to have, is that it's impossible to decide what you want. On paper, absolutely everything seems like a must-order. Sure, on the memory of your mother's mushy version, you might want to mix the Brussels sprouts, but you'd be missing out on swoon-worthy, smoky, caramelized, tender husks coated in crispy chestnut and fontina cheese.

I'd like to ask my server for help in parsing the menu, but it's almost as hard to hail a waiter here as it is a Chicago taxi during a snowstorm. As a result of a mix-up over server assignments, our table waits for almost 10 minutes before someone stops by to take our drink orders. Our hunger grows during the interminable wait, and so



SI, SEÑOR!
From top: inside Barcito; Turista cocktail; corn pudding; Pintxo; Barcito's mascot; the Patatas; the on-draft cocktail system at Tavernita

we almost order one of everything, which at an average of about \$12 to \$13 a plate, is fairly affordable to do.

Our server disappears and is immediately replaced by a procession of food runners bearing dishes; once your order is placed, Tavernita's quick delivery rivals a fast food joint. Some of the food runners give flowery detailed descriptions, while others drop dishes like they're grenades, running off quickly without a word.

One needs little description to understand Greg's Meatballs, tender golf-ball-size orbs of Wagyu beef and pork blanketed in velvety hazelnut romesco (a traditional Catalan sauce made with roasted nuts and red pepper). Most chefs use almonds, which are generally overpowered by the assertive red pepper flavor. Poli's use of hazelnuts is smart.

They're assertive and the red pepper fades a bit into the background, which creates a sweet balance for the dish.

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Not quite as memorable is the duck confit flatbread. While the crust is puffy and the confit is meltingly rich, the tomato *sofrito* sauce has a raw flavor that channels bad canned tomato paste. Just as disappointing is a mound of gummy, overcooked housemade pappardelle.

Poli redeems himself with a corn pudding, which is not a Jell-O-style concoction, but more like savory British bread pudding. Poli used to do a riff on this when he first opened Perennial. It was one of my favorite dishes, and I feared it was gone forever. Diving into this version, piled high with thick plump shrimp and roasted poblano chile, is like coming home again.

If you keep the cocktails coming, or the glasses of nicely dry sparkling Avinyo Brut as we did, you might want to consider sopping up that alcohol with the Patatas, a relatively traditional take on the tapas staple *patatas bravas*, featuring mahogany skinned potatoes swimming in rich tomato sauce heavily peppered with smoked paprika. To bring the plate into hangover-helper realm, Poli tops the whole thing with a fried egg.

Because of the great drinks and comforting food, Tavernita is the hottest restaurant in Chicago right now, and the kitchen must pump out thousands of plates a night, which they do remarkably well. To do that, the cuisine has to be straightforward and easy to execute. One thing I know about Poli is how incredibly intricate he can be. Given free reign, he could easily open a four-star temple if he wanted. Though I'll take his work in any form, I also hope that the "party in the back" that is Tavernita will eventually allow him to open up a spectacular French Laundry-like effort that's all business in the front. ■