

EATING

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EATING

After holding fast to its rather unexciting local cuisine for centuries (aided, it must be said, by loyal locals who never saw the need for anything else), Madrid has finally become one of Europe's culinary capitals.

This is a city that grew and became great because of immigrants from all over Spain who made Madrid their home. On their journey to the capital, these immigrants carried with them recipes and ingredients from their villages, thereby bequeathing to the city an astonishing variety of regional flavours that you just don't find anywhere else. Travel from one Spanish village to the next and you'll quickly learn that each has its own speciality; travel to Madrid and you'll find them all. Throw in some outstanding restaurants serving international cuisine and the choice of where to eat well is almost endless.

There's not a barrio where you can't find a great meal. Restaurants in Malasaña, Chueca and Huertas range from glorious old *tabernas* (taverns) to boutique eateries across all price ranges. For more classically elegant surrounds, Paseo del Prado, El Retiro, Salamanca and northern Madrid are generally pricey but of the highest standard and are ideal for spotting royalty and celebrities. In the central barrios of Los Austrias, Sol and Centro, as is their wont, there's a little bit of everything. Splendid tapas bars abound everywhere, but La Latina is the undoubted king.

Aside from the myriad tastes on offer, it's the buzz that accompanies eating that defines the city as a memorable gastronomic experience. Here, eating is not a functional pastime to be squeezed in between other more important tasks; instead, it is one of life's great pleasures, a social event always taken seriously enough to allocate hours for the purpose and to be savoured like all good things in life.

Madrid celebrates a number of food festivals. In addition to [Madrid Fusion](#) (p17) in January, there's the [Taller de los Sentidos Gourmets](#) (www.gourmets.com, in Spanish) in April, where you can sample products from around the world on the sidelines of a major food trade fair, and the [Feria de la Tapa](#) (Tapas Festival) held in the Casa de Campo in mid-June.

If you read Spanish, watch out for the annual (and indispensable) *Guía Metropoli – Comer y Beber en Madrid*. It's available from news kiosks for €11.90 and has reviews of over 1800 Madrid restaurants and bars by the food critics of *ABC* newspaper. And for a range of websites, some of which cover Madrid's food scene, see [p21](#).

ETIQUETTE

Love them or hate them, Spanish waiters are unlikely to leave you indifferent. In smarter establishments, waiters are often young, attentive and switched on to the needs of patrons. In more traditional places, waiting is a career, often a poorly paid one, which is the preserve of old men (sometimes one old man; sometimes one grumpy old man) in white jackets and bow ties, for whom service with a smile is not part of the job description. In such places, they shuffle amid the tables, the weight of the world upon their shoulders, struggling with what seems a Sisyphean task. Getting their attention can be a challenge. On the other hand, they know their food and, if you speak Spanish, they can help tailor your order in the best possible way.

If you're just eating tapas, in many bars you can either take a small plate and help yourself or point to the morsel you want. If

you do this, it's customary to keep track of what you eat (by holding on to the toothpicks for example) and then tell the barman when it comes time to pay. Otherwise, most bars have a list of tapas up behind the bar which you can order as a *pincho* (*tapa*), *media ración* (half ration) or *ración* (full ration). In some bars you'll also get a small (free) *tapa* when you buy a drink.

In simpler restaurants, you may keep the same knife and fork throughout the meal. As each course is finished, you set the cutlery aside and the waiter whisks away the plates.

Don't jump out of your seats if people passing your table address you with a hearty '*buen provecho!*' They're just saying 'Enjoy your meal!'

And if you're in a bar, don't be surprised to see people throwing their serviettes and olive stones on the floor – you might as well join them because a waiter will come around from time to time to sweep them all up.