

If Spain invented snacking, then bar hopping for light bites may be the ideal way to see its capital. Yvonne Gordon enjoys small plates across the city



We came here for a drink, not a lifetime commitment, but the menu entry “Marriage, €13” catches my eye. It turns out that the dish is a non-romantic partnering of fresh anchovy with vinegar-cured anchovy — a classic Spanish recipe that is part of a long list of seafood appetisers on offer. No need for pre-nups before ordering, then.

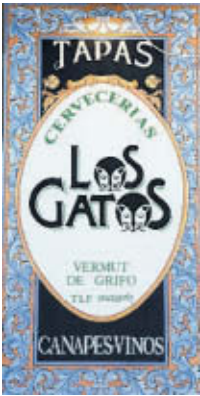
We’re at El Diario, a buzzing *cervecería* — beer bar — on the corner of Calle de las Huertas and Calle de Jesús in Madrid’s pedestrianised Barrio de las Letras. This is the literary quarter of the Spanish capital, where writers such as Cervantes and Lope de Vega lived. The ceiling is covered with newspapers to complement the bar’s press theme (El Diario means The Daily), while the glass cabinets and low hanging round lights are a reminder of the bar’s Victorian origins. At 3pm on a Saturday it is packed, the air filled with noisy chat and the clinking of plates and glasses — and while the area is popular with tourists, it is nearly all locals who are enjoying beer and tapas.

It may have evolved into Spain’s best known cuisine, but there is more than one potential origin story for tapas, the name for a variety of appetisers that can be eaten as a snack or combined to create a full meal. The tradition of having small snacks in bars is said to come from the slices of bread or meat which were once placed on top of sherry glasses to keep fruit flies out (the verb *tapar* means “to cover”). Another suggestion is that prior to written menus, small samples of dishes were offered to give customers a taste of a tavern’s fare. There are also

Take a tapas tour to get a taste of the real Madrid

stories of kings making it compulsory for inns to serve small portions of food with alcoholic drinks. Whatever the explanation, anyone who has been to Spain will know that going for tapas before dinner — or even lunch — is a big part of the culture, and most bars will serve small dishes of some type. It is also relatively inexpensive: the average we pay for two small beers and two tapas in Madrid is €8.

In addition to its literary associations, Barrio de las Letras is also home to some of the city’s best tapas bars, so we enlist Madrid tour guide Sean Retana Vallely, whose father is Spanish and mother is Irish, to help us get the full experience. Venues offer calamari (squid), *pulpo* (octopus), *bacalao* (cod) and *gambas* (prawns), while glass counter displays show small plates of everything from tuna to tortilla. Over tiny cups of *caldito* (ham broth), Retana Vallely tells me that tapas come in so many forms, even Spaniards make mistakes. “It’s confusing,” he laughs. “Even for us.”



Graze of glory
Markets like Mercado de San Miguel, above and below left, and bars such as Los Gatos, below right, let customers hang out among the hams

We move on to Los Gatos (Calle de Jesús, 2, 28014), a tiny square space that somehow manages to house an entire bar, lots of antiques — an old cash register, an ancient bicycle, the head of a bull, a life-sized mannequin of a choir boy — and a full house of customers. I manage to shout an order over the heads of a group at the bar, above which hangs a row of hams and chorizos. *Gato* means cat, but there are no felines here: it is also the local term for someone from Madrid. There isn’t anything about marriage either. In fact, this may not be the place for *matrimonio*: a statue looking down on the room holds a sign that reads: “Next time, bring your wife.”

Our next port of call is Toma Jamón (Calle Cava Baja, 10, 28005) to taste some *jamón ibérico* — Iberian ham. A chef carves us thin slices from a giant leg to sample. “There are only two types of cured ham in this part of the world,” says Retana Vallely. “One is Iberian ham — and then there is all the rest.”

He explains that the pigs live free range in semi-wild conditions, feeding on acorns whenever possible, and that the leg of ham we are sampling will have been cured for at least three years — although some are cured for up to seven. We discuss the city’s huge fish market, which supplies 1,000 tonnes a day, and the best quality of olive oil. According to Retana Vallely, Spanish food is so good, it’s hard for Spaniards to leave Spain because they can’t give it up.

We move on for an aperitif at Bodega Ángel Sierra (Calle de Gravina, 11, 28004), which specialises in vermouth. Best known for partnering gin in a martini, vermouth is more than a famous cocktail ingredient in these parts: the fortified wine can contain up to 60 botanicals and each bar has its own formula. Cloudy, dark red, and served from the tap, ours accompanies pickled anchovies (sadly, unaccompanied by any non-pickled spouses) and green olives, both of which complement it well. The bar, with its mediterranean tiling, tin-plated counter and wall of dust-covered sherry and anis liqueur bottles, forms the perfect atmospheric backdrop.

Bars may be its traditional home, but tapas is also becoming popular in Madrid’s municipal markets — former produce markets which now feature gourmet food stalls. On the upper level of Mercado de San Antón (Calle de Augusto Figueroa, 24B, 28004), small food outlets serve everything from Spanish tapas and seafood to Japanese and Greek cuisine, with tall tables and stools around a central atrium providing a laid back but lively place to dine. We try some cloudy natural cider, which is poured high from a bottle to awaken the flavours.

Perhaps the most well-known of Madrid’s gourmet markets is Mercado de San Miguel on Plaza de San Miguel, near Plaza Mayor. Open all day — and up to 2am on weekend nights — there are plenty of bars, stalls and mobile food

carts in the former market building to provide something for everyone. On the evening we visit it’s packed with more tourists than locals, sampling everything from cocktails to croquettes, and even sea urchin — though prices are a little higher than in the bars.

For a more relaxed feel, we head to Mercado de San Ildefonso (Calle de Fuencarral, 57, 28004), a three-storey

food emporium in the city’s Malsaña area. There are street-style food stalls on the ground floor, while on the first floor, gourmet food stands serve everything from seafood to steak. Seating is informal and there’s a bar at one end and a DJ playing funky tunes.

With three of the planet’s best museums all on one street — the Prado, the Reina Sofía Museum and the Thyssen-

Finger food
Traditional bars such as El Diario, above left, are favourites with locals, but outlets featuring gourmet stalls, above right, are becoming increasingly popular

Bornemisza Museum — there is no shortage of sights for when you have had your fill of small plates. The so-called Golden Triangle of Art is connected by the Paseo del Prado, a grand 18th century boulevard with gardens, trees and fountains.

For those who enjoy pottering, there are boutiques, bookshops, and vintage stores on the pedestrianised cobbled streets around Barrio de las Letras and

Plaza de Santa Ana, where the words of famous authors are set in brass into the pavement. On a Sunday morning, *Madrileños* and visitors alike head to El Rastro, the city’s huge flea market, to buy crafts, antiques and books, and enjoy live music among the area’s cafes and bars: the La Latina neighbourhood comes alive at lunchtime with post-market and pre-lunch tapas.

If you are in the city for more than a few days, take a day trip 50km south to Aranjuez, once the holiday residence of Spain’s monarchs. You can tour the rooms of the Royal Palace and relax in the surrounding Prince’s Garden. Then there is the winery of Charles III of Spain built underneath the Royal Estate of San Isidro: a long, subterranean cellar built in 1782 to supply the royal household. Wine is still aged here. Even if the Spanish kings didn’t invent tapas, they definitely had firm ideas on what to drink with it.

Aer Lingus and Ryanair operate direct flights from Dublin to Madrid. Tapas walking tours of the city are available, priced from €35, from a variety of tour companies including madridfoodtour.com, gomadrid.com, walksofspain.com and madridtapastour.com



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