

The best places to eat in Madrid are these six markets

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Madrid has never really been at the centre of Spanish gastronomy. Despite being almost smack bang in the middle of the country, the capital was always on the margins, food-wise. Valencia, far to the south-east, remains the true home of paella. The finest traditional tapas is still served close to its origins in the Andalusian taverns of Seville, Granada, Cordoba.

Pintxos – tasty bar snacks impaled on bread by toothpicks – were long ago perfected in Bilbao and the surrounding Basque Country. No less delicious, though often even trickier to order, are the Catalan specialities of Barcelona and Girona, such as esqueixada and xuixos.



Photo: iStock

Madrid does have its own stew-centric, ham-heavy cuisine, but to some it seems that this city also cherry-picks the best dishes from other regions, and serves them up to tourists as if they were all invented here. Which doesn't mean that this is not a great place to eat. Where Madrid really rules is in its markets, drawing farm-fresh produce from the across the interior, and surprisingly high-quality seafood from the distant coasts.

(Old Catholic custom ruled out eating meat on Fridays, and land-locked Madrilenos developed an abiding taste for octopus, or pulpo, in particular.) Almost every neighbourhood used to have its own marketplace – mercados para los vecinos – that also functioned as a social hub and casual, communal dining venue. As in many other cities, supermarkets slowly killed them off, but recent years have seen a robust revival.

Some of those long-dormant mercados are now back in business, with vendors trading on the current artisanal foodie scene and capitalising on the latest trends in Spanish culinary culture. A few others have managed to stay open and unchanged through the decades, weathering the Franco era, the rise of suburban malls, and the hard times that followed the crash of 2008 to remain a vital part of everyday life in the city. Here are six of the best.

"It's also about music, the atmosphere. It's a great place to meet people."

Gonzalo Hurtado, Platea

MERCADO DE SAN MIGUEL

Madrid's most famous market is a glass-and-iron palace modelled on Paris' Les Halles Centrales, first built in 1916 and expensively restored in 2009. Now, in its centenary year, Mercado de San Miguel has become a major foodie destination, attracting almost as many visitors as the neighbouring Plaza Mayor (which was itself the city's chaotic central market square before the Hapsburg kings prettied it up with colonnades and porticos).

An average of 60,000 people come to browse and graze here in masse every week. The effect is something like a crowded all-day gala event where everyone seems to be holding, if not spilling, a glass of rioja, or vermouth, or some fancy fruit smoothie, while balancing a paper plate piled with stuff from 33 different stalls: mounds of caviar; chicken and chorizo croquetas; chunks of mozzarella and burrata topped by figs, blueberries and almonds.

Quality is at a premium, and prices are "pretty high" admits manager Begoña Ubierna from her office in the rafters. In that sense, she says, the market's present incarnation is more modern than traditional, more international than truly local – the surrounding apartments of the historic centre are mainly occupied by pensioners who can't afford to eat here. But the stalls themselves, however new-fangled, are apparently run on old-fashioned inter-vendor resentments. "One of them sees another stall selling more of one particular food, and they want to sell the same thing," Ubierna says. "Half my job is telling them 'no, you can't'."

She's got her own favourites among them, and recommends the olives at La Hora Del Vermut, and the salted cod at La Casa Del Bacalao.

MERCADO SAN ANTÓN

A designer updating of the old-school neighbourhood market in the gay-friendly, hyper-trendy Chueca district. On the first floor you can shop for wine, cheese, fresh fish and meat to take home. On the second you can order to eat in – Andalusian fried squid and mussels, Galician-style octopus and cod-based tapas, cups of cask cider for €1 (\$1.50). The real draw, though, is the third-floor roof terrace, where you can sit down to the always decent menú del día (daily set menu) at La Cocina San Antón, or take a stool at the bar. The old iron balconies and coloured facades of surrounding residential buildings look best in the glow of Spanish evening sunlight, an effect only enhanced by a jug of the house sangria.

PLATEA

Not so much a market as a kind of gourmet food court, set within the former Carlos III cinema in the swanky Salamanca district. "When you come inside, you think 'wow'," says director Gonzalo Hurtado, accurately enough. "But then what?"

His point being that the dim-lit glamour of the interior – with its triple-deck of bars and restaurants stacked around a stage where the screen used to be – wouldn't count for much if it wasn't worth eating and drinking in.

The "patio" is lined with individual units specialising in oysters, crab, assorted pintxos, and cardboard cones of bite-sized snacks such as chorizo iberico with chocolate shavings. The upper level, El Foso has six separate restaurants, including a sushi bar, and a high-end steakhouse called Vuelta Y Vuelta, where Hurtado himself likes to dine when he can.

He uses the word "concept" a lot, and sees Platea as the kind of idea that might help put Madrid on the world map as a city of gastronomy "like New York or London". It's only been open for two years but it's drawn more than 6 million visitors in that time, filling all 900 seats on busy Friday nights. They don't just come for the food, Hurtado says. "It's also about music, the atmosphere," Hurtado says. "It's a great place to meet people. We are selling an experience." And they're selling it more affordably than you'd expect when you walk in. "This is also a place where you can come and drink a beer for €3."

MERCADO DE MARAVILLAS

The old saying used to go: if you can't find it at Maravillas then it doesn't exist. This is still certainly true if you're looking for any or every type of fresh meat – at least half of the 200-plus units in this vast covered market seem to be carnicerías (butcher shops), selling chorizo from Zamora, blood sausage from Burgos, baby suckling pig from Salamanca.

Fishmongers and seamstresses are also well-represented, and customers can pour their own fresh milk through chilled taps from industrial vats. Which is to say that these businesses appear to be serving the same public, with the same needs, as when the market was first built in 1933. It's a piece of history and a slice of life, beneath a roof fitted with factory windows and utilitarian air ducts, between the barrios of Estrecho and Tetuan.

It's also a cost-effective place for a visitor to fill up the fridge of their Madrid airbnb rental. But it also provides a sanctuary from the more touristy corners of the city, where you can retreat for a merienda (afternoon break) at the market's Raypi bar and coffee shop. Older locals sit at the counter dipping churros into their cafe con leche, or drinking ice-cold beer with a free tapa of potatoes and mushrooms fried in olive oil – greasy, but good.

MERCADO DE SAN ILDEFONSO

There is no point denying the hipster appeal of this stylised urban "street market", which opened in mid-2014 on one of Madrid's cooler commercial thoroughfares, Calle Fuencarral. The interior resembles a run of tuck shops inside a metal works, with fare dispensed via independent pizza parlours, craft taco stands, fancy fish and chip merchants, and so on. If you're only in the market for Spanish food, DP Tapas on the second floor does a selection of authentic-tasting paella and a decent gazpacho soup.

From behind the counter at a grilled-kebab joint called La Brochette, Maria Ruiz claims that hers is "the greatest" stall in the place, and the "hijoputa" is her own skewer of choice.

The name is an impolite reference to its spicy coating, but Maria says it's actually too mild for her tastes. "In Madrid most people don't like hot sauces. If it were up to me I would marinade these for a full day and really spice them up." (This reporter tried one and found it plenty zingy.) A majority of Madrilenos don't tend to go for vegetarian options either.

In the two years she's worked here, she's seen only one stall close down. "There used to be a vegan place across the way," says Maria, nodding towards the opposite stand that now serves Peruvian ceviche.

MERCADO DE SAN FERNANDO

Down the backstreets of Lavapiés – not far from the site of Madrid's rowdy El Rastro flea market, held outdoors every Sunday in neighbouring La Latina – is this old food hall that dates right back to the Spanish Civil War. Formerly essential to the barrio but long in terminal decline, it was saved from final closure by a consortium of local traders and residents, who bought the place over and now share the cost of its upkeep.

The resurrected market is perhaps the most sociable in the city, especially on weekends, when most of the raw food vendors close for the afternoon and the place is given over to something like a block party. A stall called The Fish Market offers seafood platters with two beers for €9. Graciela and José Ángel, proprietors of Bendito, serve fine wines and artisanal cheeses while playing tasteful vinyl records on an ancient turntable.

And La Buena Pinta is the unofficial centre of the action, a craft beer bar run by genial aficionado Juanma Villar. In Villar's eyes it is more or less a crime to drink generic Spanish lagers such as Mahou or Estrella when he could sell you a draft pint of Madrid-brewed La Virgen for only €3.50.