



# Seven reasons why Madrid is Spain's new food capital

Barcelona might have held the honour for some time, but right now another Spanish city is making a case as the nation's – if not the continent's – hottest foodie destination...

WORDS TREVOR BAKER PHOTOGRAPHY CARLOS HERNANDEZ

**F**rom the revolutionary cooking of Ferran Adrià in Catalonia to San Sebastián, where there are more Michelin stars per head than anywhere else, Spain has long laid claim to one of the best and most influential cuisines in the world. But,

until recently, there was always an anomaly: on the list of the country's culinary hotspots, few – if any – ever mentioned Madrid.

Last year, though, it became apparent that this had changed when the city gained five new Michelin starred restaurants, with David Muñoz capturing a coveted third star

for his DiverXo and taking the mantle of the nation's most talked-about cook. In fact, Muñoz is spearheading a wave of exciting projects – at both the high and low end of the price spectrum – that have signalled a serious shake up: for the first time in years, Spain's culinary capital is its actual capital.



Paco Ronquera's two-Michelin-starred *Paradiso del Casino* is one of the best reasons to visit Madrid with an empty stomach



## 1 / It still has the traditional dishes

IN SOME CITIES, if you eat and drink in the most archetypal restaurants and bars, you'll find all the locals have been scared away by tourists. Not so in Madrid. Have the unmissable *bocadillo de calamares* (fried squid baguette) at La Campana ([calamareslacampana.com](http://calamareslacampana.com)) or any similar restaurant near Plaza Mayor and you'll be surrounded by Madrileños gorging on rolls so stuffed with squid that you have to eat a few of the soft rings before you can get it in your mouth.

Equally popular with residents is Los Huevos de Lucio ([tinyurl.com/mabzpb0](http://tinyurl.com/mabzpb0)), where huge plates of *huevos rotos* (broken eggs) are served on mounds of chips. Or visit La Venencia (*Calle de Echegaray*), the bar that time forgot. Order sherry (they don't serve any other drink), sip it alongside the old-timers and enjoy the dilapidated ambience.



## 2 / It has great hotel restaurants

ENTER THE LOBBY of the newly refurbished NH Collection Eurobuilding hotel ([tinyurl.com/orde66k](http://tinyurl.com/orde66k)) and the first thing you notice is that the ceiling is actually a giant video screen blasting out in-your-face visuals.

It's a pretty good indicator that this is not your average hotel – and the food offerings follow suit. In one corner, there's DOMO; Paco Roncero and Diego Cabrera's new gastrobar (see p61). In another, there's game-changing, three-Michelin-starred DiverXO by David Muñoz of whose Chinese-style quail's egg and pig's ear dumplings, food critic Anthony

Bourdain once said: "I love my wife, I love my daughter and then I love this."

The concept at the newly opened URSO Hotel ([hotelurso.com](http://hotelurso.com)) is just as innovative. Instead of a resident chef, different restaurants from around the country are invited to set up one-month-long pop-ups. So far, they've had Galician specialities from Abastos 2.0, Basque cuisine from Etxanobe and the best of Alicante from L'Escaleta's chef, Kiko Moya, all of which boast Michelin stars. This month a new surprise guest will be in the kitchen. Who is it? You'll just have to visit to find out.



Barman Diego Cabrera works a little magic behind the bar at DOMO.



## 3 / It's the new home of the culinary magicians

AT THE TALLER DE PACO RONCERO ([pacoronceroataller.com](http://pacoronceroataller.com)), in the Casino de Madrid, the meal starts with a Bloody Mary cocktail that spins around on the table to the sound of the Rolling Stones' *Let's Spend the Night Together*. After the second course, images of butterflies are beamed onto the side of the plate just before real butterflies flutter out of the ceiling.

It's no surprise to hear that Roncero once worked with the godfather of culinary magic, Ferran Adrià. Now in Madrid, he's one of the high-end chefs revolutionising

the city's dining scene. At the very highest end, a table for eight at the Taller (right) will set you back at least €8,000. The same Asian-influenced food, without the theatrics, at his two-Michelin-starred Terraza del Casino de Madrid, is €135 for the tasting menu. Elsewhere, his chefs cook everything from ham croquettes at tapas bar Estado Puro ([tapasenestadopuro.com](http://tapasenestadopuro.com)), to an oyster served with foam of Margarita that he and barman Diego Cabrera dreamed up at DOMO ([tinyurl.com/orde66k](http://tinyurl.com/orde66k)), housed in the NH Collection Eurobuilding.

"The food is always the most important thing," says Roncero. "In the past, we've seasoned it with salt and pepper. Now, we're trying to season it with emotion, too."





Foreign flavours, such as those found at Sudestada Thai, are converting the locals

## 4 / It's the best place in Spain to enjoy foreign food

THE MOST COVETED reservation in Madrid in the past year, with waiting lists of a couple of months, has been a Mexican called Punto MX ([puntomx.es](http://puntomx.es)). It's one of several new restaurants, including what many say are Spain's best Thai (Sudestada, [sudestada.eu](http://sudestada.eu)) and Japanese (Kabuki, [restaurantekabuki.com](http://restaurantekabuki.com)), which have convinced the sceptical Spanish that foreign food can be as good as their own revered cuisine.

"When we were designing it, people asked: 'Where are the sombreros?'" says Punto's owner and head chef Roberto Ruiz. "But restaurants in Mexico aren't like that. We wanted something that mixed the best of Spanish with the best of Mexican."

The restaurant's neutral decor is designed to help diners concentrate on the food. Dishes that include tacos of meltingly soft and flavoursome Wagyu beef, and a dish of bone marrow, charred in the oven and served in the bone, ready to scoop out and mix in a taco with chillies.

"I was scared that Spanish people wouldn't like it, but it's become one of our most popular dishes," beams Rodrigo. So popular has the restaurant become in fact, they're opening a bar atop the Corte Inglés department store on the Calle de Serrano. It's a statement of confidence in Mexican style and Madrileño acceptance of the new and exciting.



## 5 / It's the centre of the gastromarket boom

A FEW YEARS AGO, if you'd said you were heading to a market at 10 o'clock at night, people would have thought you crazy. Spain's markets opened in the mornings and you had to get there early, before sharp-elbowed grandmothers bagged the best produce.

In 2009, though, the almost 100-year-old Mercado San Miguel ([mercadosanmiguel.es](http://mercadosanmiguel.es)), near Plaza Mayor, changed all that. After a spectacular restoration - all polished wrought iron and huge plate-glass windows - it reopened with a new swagger. Now operating until 2am at weekends, it's become a place where you tuck your grocery bag under the table and sit down to an aperitif at the *hora del vermut* (vermouth hour), before moving on to tapas or perhaps a glass of Champagne.

Since then, other markets, such as the Mercado San Antón

([mercadosananton.com](http://mercadosananton.com)), have got in on the action, too, with tapas or cupcakes as popular as as fruit and veg.

For those who prefer their olives by the kilo, there are still markets, such as the Mercado de Maravillas ([mercadoamaravillas.eu](http://mercadoamaravillas.eu)), where you can do a weekly shop free of distraction.



## 6 / It's attracting the best Spanish chefs

RAMON FREIXA (pictured right) may have grown up in and worked at his first restaurant in Barcelona, where his father had a Michelin star, but he's one of the many big names who are changing the face of the capital.

"The cooking in Madrid is now at the same level as the best cities in the world," he says. "Since the economic crisis, restaurants have been forced to be more imaginative, to attract clients who are concerned about the relation between price and quality." Like many top chefs, Freixa has an eponymous flagship restaurant

([ramonfretxamadrid.com](http://ramonfretxamadrid.com)) - which has two Michelin stars - and also the more affordable, bistro version at Platea ([plateamadrid.com](http://plateamadrid.com)).

Regional chefs are arriving all the time, such as Andalusian Paco Morales, a culinary giant whose Al Trapo ([altraporestaurante.com](http://altraporestaurante.com)) is a more informal take on the haute cuisine that made his name.

So now you don't need to worry if you can only visit one part of Spain. In Madrid it's possible to sample all the many flavours of the whole peninsula.







## 7 / It's Spain's coolest new gastrohub destination

FROM THE TOP BALCONY at Platea ([plateamadrid.com](http://plateamadrid.com)), looking down on the diners and musicians below, you feel like you're on the bridge of some kind of leisure spaceship. This was once a cinema and, although it still retains a stage in front of where the screen would have been – along with smooth wooden pillars reminiscent of old-style organ pipes – it's gleamingly modern and startlingly adventurous. Within the same space, on different levels, there's everything from a live band playing to stalls selling tapas, and bistros from some of the city's biggest-name chefs.

At the very top, on the level called El Palco ('the box'), Madrid's coolest

barman, Diego Cabrera, rules the roost. "Madrid is waking up," he says. "We've had the economic crisis, but in 2014, people decided, 'I'm tired of grey – I want to put on the colours'."

His attitude to cocktails is that, although the drink is crucial (he's famous for his effervescent, fun take on a gin fizz), the ambience is just as important.

"A cocktail tastes different depending on where you drink it," he says. "A piña colada tastes better on the beach in the Dominican Republic than in Moscow. It's all about providing an environment where people can enjoy the experience to the full. Making cocktails is a hundred per cent theatre."



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