



SITTING PRETTY
La Terraza del Casino's elegant dining room inside the historic Casino de Madrid

SPANISH ACCENTS

Spain's capital, Madrid, has emerged as one of Europe's most exciting new culinary hubs. Traditional approaches, superb ingredients and leading-edge chefs converge, attracting not only visiting global culinary talents but international visitors in search of the latest in fine dining.

By Lisa Shames

When Chicago's innovative three-Michelin-starred Alinea was closed for renovations earlier this year, star chef Grant Achatz took his restaurant and its staff on the road. Their first stop? Madrid, where for six weeks those lucky enough to nab a reservation at his pop-up in the NH Collection Madrid Eurobuilding hotel enjoyed a progressive take on Spanish cuisine from one of the world's most decorated chefs.

It's not by chance that Achatz chose Madrid. While past discussions on the best places to eat in Spain were dominated by Ferran Adrià's El Bulli (not far from Barcelona on the country's northeast coast) and restaurants in the northern coastal city of San Sebastián (close to France), these days, it's the country's centrally located capital that's having a major culinary moment.

Of course, Madrid has always had great restaurants. Its prime location has provided chefs access to the best ingredients—*jamón*

ibérico from the southwest, say, or pristine razor clams from Galicia in the north—Spain has to offer. But cutting-edge techniques and culinary influences from elsewhere were never trendy in this ubertraditional city. After all, the oldest continuously operating restaurant in the world, Sobrino de Botín, founded in 1725, is located in Madrid.

But over the past 10 years, the local restaurant scene has started to loosen and liven up, with an influx of immigrants helping introduce new flavors and ingredients to Madrileños. It hasn't hurt that a prestigious professional culinary conference, Madrid Fusión, has been held in the city each year since 2003, bringing with it top chefs from around the world.

On a recent visit to the **CONTINUED...**



FOOD PLAY
A beautiful foie gras dish from DiverXO's David Muñoz



French wife introduced it, regulars started asking for it first thing, my server told me. Some traditions were made to be broken. *Entrees from \$21, arzabal.com*

Coque

A 20-minute drive from Madrid proper, you'll find the two-Michelin-starred brainchild of the Sandoval brothers: Mario handles the kitchen; Diego is the front-of-the-house manager; and Rafael looks after a 1,500-bottle wine list. Dining here is a journey in itself. It begins in the wine cellar with a sampling of snacks such as Pedro Ximénez sherry ice cream sandwiched between two savory wafers. Appetizers made from vegetables grown in the restaurant's organic garden are served in the kitchen. There's a quick stop at the wood-burning oven, which cooks the suckling pig—a special breed raised on the restaurant's own farm—that you'll soon eat in the upstairs dining room, where about 10 more courses are served. Dessert, perhaps sour yogurt with smoked milk foam, is presented in the sexy lounge on the ground floor. In other words: It's a trip totally worth taking. *Tasting menus from \$89, restaurantcoque.com*

DiverXO

Dinner at DiverXO, the only three-Michelin-starred restaurant in Madrid, is an experience not easily forgotten. Innovative chef David Muñoz presents a multicourse meal, often eschewing plates. Instead, edgy dishes like duck tongue with grapefruit foam and suckling pig-stuffed dumplings are served on large ceramic slabs. And don't be surprised if, between bites, a server uses a spray can to add an ingredient or inserts a spoonful of something directly into your mouth. Located inside **CONTINUED...**

...CONTINUED city, I had some truly memorable meals. Here are five not-to-be-missed spots.

Arzábal

Chef Iván Morales' cooking style shows respect for techniques he learned from his grandmother, but gives recipes a contemporary twist. "I'm a traditionalist first," he says, "and then a revolutionary." Those two mindsets work together wonderfully at this lovely restaurant just steps from the Reina Sofia Museum—if the weather's nice, opt to sit on the plant-filled patio—and at the original location near El Retiro Park. For his *croquetas de jamón* (cured ham croquettes), the chef uses sheep's milk, rather than cow's milk, adding a rich, lingering flavor to the deep-fried goodness, while his *albondigas* (meatballs) are crispy on the outside, nearly raw, almost tartare-like, at their center. And that incredibly creamy butter brought to the table in a wooden tub, served instead of the more conventional olive oil? Once the owner's

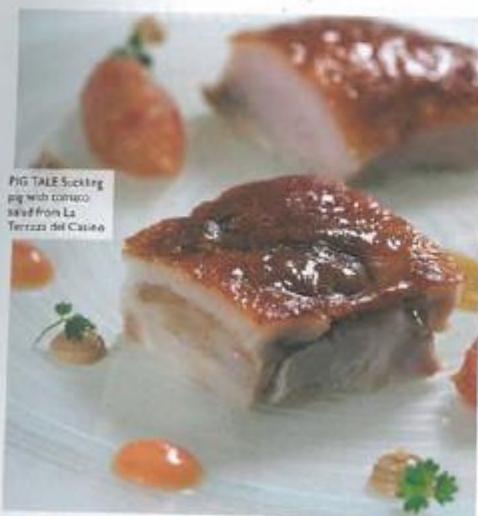


GARDEN PARTY Clockwise from top left: The lush garden patio at Arzábal next door to the Reina Sofia Museum; the modern all-white dining room at DiverXO, Madrid's only three-Michelin-starred restaurant; pristine vegetables and microherbs take center stage in this stunning dish from Coque.

jet set



PERFECT PALATE
Whole fish with
piece of yam and
fried-garlic powder
from Santceloni



PIG TALE Seeking
pig with concho
sauce from La
Terraza del Casino

...CONTINUED the NH Collection Madrid Eurobuilding hotel, the restaurant's white interior design, offset by pink flying pig sculptures on the walls, is the perfect backdrop for Muñoz's unique culinary vision, which doesn't take itself too seriously but is seriously delicious. *Tasting menus from \$184, diversxo.com*

Santceloni

Creating a perfect balance between tradition and modernity, chef Óscar Velasco isn't afraid to reach outside Spain for inspiration for his elegant cuisine at this restaurant located in the Hotel Hesperia Madrid. "I enjoy bringing my travels to the plate," he says, regarding one of his latest tasting menus that included dishes influenced by his recent trip to Asia, such as grilled crayfish in lettuce leaves. This is definitely contemporary cuisine—crispy pig's ear with barbecue sauce—but Spain and its seasonal offerings are always front and center at this two-Michelin-starred restaurant. *Entrees from \$48, restaurantsantceloni.com*

La Terraza del Casino

I knew it wasn't going to be business as usual when the white-jacket-clad server added liquid nitrogen to the pisco sour he was making tableside, sending up billows of smoke. Set inside the historic Casino de Madrid, La Terraza offers the best in experimental dining from avant-garde chef Paco Roncero. If you want a glimpse of what made El Bulli so great, this is the place for you. The *Alice in Wonderland*-like blue and white dining room offers a hint of the whimsical—and delicious—plates you'll soon find in front of you, which might include olive oil frozen toast and mushrooms with marrow and pine essence. The fun at this two-Michelin-starred restaurant continues with a dessert cart bearing homemade candies, chocolate bonbons and pastries. *Entrees from \$40, casinodemadrid.es*

WHERE TO STAY



HOTEL SWEET The
entrance of Only You
Boutique Hotel Madrid

Only You Boutique Hotel Madrid

From the outside,
this 125-room
hotel located in the

city's trendiest area looks like one of the many historic buildings you'd find in Madrid. But step inside this former palace and it's a different story with its chic mix of modern design and abundant natural light. Only You Secret suites include an expansive terrace. *Room rates from \$203, suite rates from \$338, onlyyouhotels.com*

ME Madrid Reina Victoria

Its setting alone in the iconic Plaza Santa Ana, with a bevy of tapas bars just steps away, would rate this hotel high on any visiting food fan's list. But add in its oh-so-cool vibe from its ground-level restaurant and hip rooms to its stunning rooftop lounge, which recently underwent an extensive renovation, and it's no wonder this hotel's 180 rooms and 12 suites are in constant demand. *Room rates from \$205, suite rates from \$267, meho.com*



**WINDOW
DRESSING** A room
with a view at ME
Madrid Reina Victoria

NH Collection Madrid Eurobuilding

With DiverXO, Madrid's only three-Michelin-starred restaurant, under its roof, this high-end

hotel attracts plenty of food-loving visitors. But savvy business travelers also appreciate its state-of-the-art facilities, including access to 3-D holographic telepresence. Soccer fans take note: It's

SEEING THE LIGHT
The modern lobby of
NH Collection Madrid
Eurobuilding hotel



located a short walk from Santiago Bernabéu Stadium, home of Real Madrid. *Room rates from \$166, suite rates from \$630, nh-collection.com*