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# Mealtimes in Madrid

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IT'S MY LAST NIGHT IN MADRID, and my Spanish friend Alberto is taking a few of us to dinner at a unique family-owned bistro called Casa Benigna. Armed with only an address, we approach a large wooden door with wrought-iron accents. There's no sign. No indication we've arrived at a restaurant. There isn't even a gentle hum of guests dining on tapas. The place is deserted.

Then I realize it's only 9 on a Friday night—far too early for most Madrilenos to decide where they're going for dinner. No wonder Alberto was able to secure a reservation for us.

The door is slightly ajar, and it beckons us inside. Scandinavian plates adorn the walls, gigantic paella pans dangle from the ceiling, and dozens of books sit atop white shelves. The owners lived in Norway for 16 years, and at Casa Benigna, they blend the cuisine of northern Europe with that of the Mediterranean. So you can order everything from Norwegian herring in tasty marinades to arroz abanda, a variation of traditional paella.

Carmen Garcia Lillo, matriarch of the family and mother of the chef, pours cava as we chat about the best way to experience Madrid. She wears a loose-fitting silk blouse and sensible glasses; her white hair molds perfectly around her head. Her charming presence far exceeds her stature of less than 5 feet tall.

My friend Deb is an art-history professor, so no one is surprised when she proclaims that exploring Madrid's world-renowned art collection at the Museo del Prado is a perfect introduction to the city. With more than 7,000 works by famed artists including Goya, El Greco, Velázquez and Tintoretto, the Prado offers the opportunity to follow the life of a painter through his works. A favorite for many is Diego Velázquez, whose Prado masterpieces range from traditional madonnas to more conceptual paintings like *Las Meninas*. The huge canvas is one of the Prado's most-talked-about pieces.

"As you view the painting, you feel almost as though you're in a room with Velázquez while he creates a portrait of the royal family," says Deb. I agree. On a previous trip to Spain, I spent many hours in the Prado. *Las Meninas* is so large, and the figures so detailed, it pulls you into the scene and makes you feel you're part of the painting.

Spending an afternoon admiring *Las Meninas* was a little too intense for our tablemate Janet, who decided to blow off culture in favor of Madrid's unparalleled retail therapy.

"I got an adrenaline rush as the cab pulled up to Gran Vía," she says. At Madrid's version of Rodeo Drive, store windows lure you inside with bargain prices on shoes, bags and belts, and signs that say "EL MEJOR EN MADRID" (the best in Madrid). You won't find many American designer labels here, but you will find high-quality leather goods.

Instead of shopping or museum-hopping, I decide to sip café con leche and nibble on galletas in a café near Puerto del Sol, where Hemingway reportedly wrote many of his tales. The plaza is bustling. Women chat outside the stores, elderly men play chess, and children stand transfixed as street performers entertain passers by. As a quiet observer, I imagine what their lives are like, where their families live, what they do for work. I finally understand the inspiration behind Hemingway's brilliant stories. He was captivated by the people of Madrid—their food, their spirit, their culture, their wine.

EARLIER IN THE WEEK, we toured Osborne's Malpica winery. Just 60 miles southwest of Madrid, Malpica is one of the largest vineyard projects in Europe, with more than 2,500 acres of planted Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah, Petit Verdot and Merlot. And now we're sipping on fruits from that vineyard.

As if tapping into our thoughts, Señora Carmen astonishes our senses with course after course of decadent Spanish fare. White-bean stew with jamón ibérico in a thick tomato purée. Red tuna over a salad of potatoes diced the size of sugar cubes, sweet peas that pop in your mouth, shredded carrots for a bit of texture and capers to accent the flavors. Tortilla Espanola with wild mushrooms, jamón ibérico and a fire-engine-red tomato sauce. And homemade pasta with olive oil, tomato and slivers of Kobe beef so tender they almost melt on your tongue.

I realize pasta isn't a Spanish dish. And pasta with Kobe beef is even less so. But Señora Carmen's interpretation of this fabulous recipe represents the heart of Spain, where people commune around a table. "Come, relax, eat," she says.

I feel we're participating in a sort of family-style Spanish teppanyaki, where chefs prepare the food before your eyes. Soon I find myself searching through the pasta for the perfect combination of sauce, spa ghatti and beef.

It's 10 p.m. now, and the bistro is starting to fill, but Señora Carmen knows precisely when every party is seated, what the guests order and approximately when they will toddle off. She pours us a bottle of Tempranillo while the waiter presents Casa Benigna's flagship dish: paella.

This is no traditional paella. The pan is so large we have to nudge our plates closer to our bodies to make space on the table. Unlike traditional paella, which is made in a deep pan, Casa Benigna's paella is very thin. With a wooden spatula, I loosen the crispy golden-brown grains at the bottom of the pan and carefully create a serving of flavorful rice, tender meat and aromatic vegetables.

"The secret is the rice," says Alberto. "It absorbs the flavors the main ingredients provide, like fish, vegetables or meat, depending on the type of paella you order."

As the night flows into morning, I realize there's one more Spanish delicacy I have yet to try: a cup of pure chocolate and churros.

In Madrid, the locals party in cafés, discos and nightclubs until 6 a.m., when they head to chocolaterias for their cups of pure chocolate and churros before tucking into bed. It's only 11:30 p.m., and I wonder how much longer I can stay up so I won't miss out on Madrid's signature late-night indulgence.

Somehow Señora Carmen's intuition kicks in again. The final course is a perfectly sized portion of steamy, rich, molten chocolate set beside a bite-size churro—just enough for a single taste that makes you long for more. If I could do the entire meal again, I might sample each course that way, with just one savory bite.

Nah. That's not the Madrid way.

## If You Go

[Spaininfo.com](http://Spaininfo.com) and [esmadrid.com](http://esmadrid.com) both provide information about Madrid's many accommodations and attractions . . . The Madrid Vision bus links sites across the city, including museums, plazas and tourist hot spots ([madridvision.es](http://madridvision.es)) . . . Buy a madridcard for 24, 48 or 72 hours and you'll get free entry to several

attractions, including the Madrid Vision bus, along with discounts at listed restaurants and shops ([madridcard.com](http://madridcard.com)) . . . Osborne's Mal pica is open every day for visits from 10:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. For visits in English, reservations are recommended. The tour is 45 minutes, costs 3 euro and includes a video presentation, guided tour of the winery, wine tasting and tapas ([osborne.es](http://osborne.es)).

