



Madrid's Best Casual Dining

Our favorite "Foodie" Gastro Bars in the Retiro

For a more authentic, non-touristy tapas crawl, or gourmet sit-down meal, we highly recommend visitors to the city find their way to the upmarket residential area just east of Retiro Park. This neighborhood has by far the best taverns per square meter in the entire city, it's "golden mile" so to speak, for small plates style casual dining. This is where we always do our tapas or casual small plates dining in the evening as the cuisine and ambience are more sophisticated and less kinetic than that found in the La Latina quarter's more traditional bars, often tourist-filled, that line the Cava Baja. The gastro bars, neo tascas here, in the area bordered by Calle de O'Donnell on the north and Ibiza to the south, cater to a well-heeled, food-savvy local crowd, professional food bloggers and critics, and chefs on their nights out, with several being included in Carlos Maribona's *Salsa de chiles* selection of the [best bars in Madrid in 2017](#).

If you have a chance, then head to Calles Doctor Castelo, Menorca, Avenida Menéndez Pelayo and Ibiza for an outstanding selection of haute cuisine, fair prices, and with each glass of wine, a complimentary small tapa.

Starting across the street from Retiro Park

Arzábal Retiro

On the corner of Menéndez Pelayo, 13, at Calle Doctor Castelo, in the upscale Retiro district, facing the park, and run by Álvaro Castellanos and Iván Morales, the Arzábal boys, is one of our first stops on a busy Friday or Saturday night, and often the last stop on a Sunday evening. Among the gourmet critics, it's one of the most popular wine bars/small plates restaurants in town, so one must reserve in advance for one of the tables in the small dining room or just dine on small plates at the bar area, or come early to grab a table when it opens. Try the delicious wild mushroom and ham croquettes, fried artichokes, skillet of eggs with truffles, *fideuá* (a catalán paella made with pasta rather than rice) and a large selection of wines by the glass. It's open daily from 12:30 pm to 1:30 am, but the kitchen doesn't open for lunch until 2:00 pm, closing at 4:30, and for dinner at 8:30, closing at 11:45 pm. One can reserve online.

Tel: (+34) 914 095 661

They have opened a second successful branch, the Arzábal Museo Reina Sofía.

Take a short detour to Calle Lope de Rueda

Between Calle Doctor Castelo and parallel Calle Menorca

La Montería

At Calle de Lope de Rueda, 35, was founded in 1963 by the Román family and is one of the "classics" of the neighborhood, a *Taberna ilustrada*, receiving it's first Bibi Gourmand in 2015. At the bar, try their *tigres* (breaded stuffed mussels) and the small dining room is a perfect place to frequent during the fall to feast on their game dishes: scallops of wild boar, venison with plums and Port sauce, warm partridge salad plus wild mushroom creations. Closed Sunday nights.

Tel: (+34) 915 741 812

Now back to Doctor Castelo

La Raquetista

This popular bar-restaurant located at Doctor Castelo, 19, left side, going up, was opened by the Aparicio brothers, Francisco and Javier, and named in homage to the women who played the traditional Basque game of *pelota* with a racquet. Here you'll find a small bar and a dining space with only five tables. Choose from a small menu of around 10 starters and 10

mains, along with daily specials. Critics rave about the chef's oxtail curry. Reservations are a must for lunch or dinner in the dining room, or you can dine at the bar. Closed Sunday nights and all day Monday. The brothers have another popular small plates restaurant, run by Javier, which they opened in 2013, [Taberna Cachivache](#), located at the north end of Serrano at No.221, where Príncipe De Vergara and Serrano meet.

Tel: (+34) 918 311 842

[La Castela](#)

Doctor Castelo, 22, is one of Madrid's most beloved classic taverns, dating from 1929, with a tin topped bar, stucco columns, mirrors, marble and fine draught beer and vermouth on tap. Its super traditional dining room receives a Bibi Gourmand designation again for 2018 for good value from the Michelin guide and is justly famous for its bull's tail stew. This is where the Queen to Michelle Obama when she visited Madrid. Closed Sunday nights.

Tel: (+34) 915 740 015 / 915 735 590

[Taberna Laredo](#)

Calle Doctor Castelo, 30, three blocks up from Arzábal, on the right, home of the Laredo brothers, is what most natives proclaim is Madrid's best, and very popular, wine & crustaceans bar, where diners can feast on fin fish and (pricey) shell fish straight from the Cantabrian sea and choose from a fine selection of wines, with prices slightly more expensive than Arzábal. You can have small plates or tapas/wine at the bar (delicious *ensaladilla rusa*) or reserve a table in advance in the upstairs dining room. Stand out dishes include tuna belly salad, their risotto of squid and ewe's cheese, skillet with eggs and truffles, black rice with baby squid and clams, their razor clams (*navajas*) and steamed baby clams, mussels, red and white shrimp and *salmorejo*, the Cordoban style, thick and smooth gazpacho. Laredo is said to be a favorite of (former) King Juan Carlos. Kitchen opens at 1:30 pm for lunch, 8:30 pm for dinner, closed Sundays.

Tel: (+34) 915 733 061

[Taberna Marcano](#)

Directly across the street from Taberna Laredo, at Doctor Castelo 31, you'll find another gastro bar/small restaurant getting rave reviews from Spain's gourmet press and becoming our other favorite in this area. Super talented chef David Marcano, a protégé of Arzak, and former chef of Goizeko Wellington, serves a terrific *arroz meloso con carabineros*, or a soupy rice dish with giant prawns, yummy Idiazábal cheese or spider crab & shrimp croquettes, vegetable *gyozas* (fritters), steak tartar with fried quail's egg, tuna tartar and an interesting cheese tray. The gastro space is divided into two areas: the bar where one can dine on tapas and a fine selection of wines by the glass and the small formal dining room

with around six tables. His creations deserve to be experienced as a full meal, rather than tapas, as most plates are meant to be served as main courses and can be ordered as half portions. It's more of a "come-to-gourmet dine-casual style" type of place, with seating for 30 diners. Open for lunch Monday-Saturday from 12:30 pm to 4:00 pm and for dinner from 8:00 until midnight, Sundays from noon to 4:00 pm only. Reservations are highly recommended.

Tel: (+34) 914 093 642

A personal favorite

Taberna La Catapa

Selected by *Salsa de chiles* as the [No. 1 best bar in Madrid](#) for the 3rd year in a row, every dish here is terrific, especially the *salmorejo*, a Córdoba-style thick gazpacho, the tomato carpaccio salad, the *tortilla española*, *ensaladilla rusa*, truffle croquettes and the wagyu beef hamburger. This Taberna, at Calle Menorca, 14, attracts a very loyal neighborhood crowd, including a smattering of Americans who live and work nearby. Standout dishes here include carpaccio of Raf tomatoes, baked baby clams, potato and truffle croquettes and a delicious salmorejo, plus seasonal dishes, including wild mushrooms. The engaging owner-chef Miguel Angel Jiménez is very hands on and pays personal attention to his customers well, as does his staff. The *taberna* also has a small dining room with a half-dozen tables that must be reserved in advance. It's open 11:30 am to 4:30 pm and 7:30 until midnight, closed on Sundays. You have to arrive early if you don't have reservations and want a place at the bar. Very busy on Fridays and Saturdays.

Tel: (+34) 686 143 823

Moving Onto Calle Ibiza

KultO

At the beginning of Calle de Ibiza, at No. 4, is an excellent smart small plates delight that we found a couple of years ago when it first opened where we have always enjoyed their creative dishes. Their slogan "In Cook we Trust" is on the wall of the open kitchen. The atmosphere is somewhat different than La Catapa, La Raquetista and a few of the others in the neighborhood, but it never fails to deliver with it's fusion and more traditional cuisine. There is a dining room upstairs, above the kitchen, but we normally sit at the bar, and we've always found the service excellent. Open until midnight on Sundays and Wednesdays and until 2:00 in the morning Thursday-Saturday, they close annually from August 14-23.

Tel: (+34) 911 733 053

Mercado de Ibiza

At Calle de Ibiza, 8, in the first block from the avenue, sits next to the newly renovated market, in a renovated bank building and is conveniently open continuously from noon until 2:00 am (until 2:30 am on weekends) except Sundays, when it closes at 5:00 pm. Divided into three sections, it offers the bar on the main floor with open kitchen and high top tables, a basement “clandestine” cocktail bar in the former bank vault and an upstairs stylishly decorated dining room with vertical garden upstairs. Come here for their burrata salad, their individually prepared rice dishes and a scrumptious Brioche French Toast for dessert.

Tel: (+34) 917 524 490

Restaurante Rafa

On the corner of Ibiza de and Calle de Narváez, at No. 68, is one of the top seafood restaurants, a *marisquería*, in Madrid. Now in its 60th year, it has gone from a small winery which served “raciones”, small plates, to accompany their wine, to a first-class seafood restaurant run by the founder's sons, Rafael and Miguel Ángel. Open daily, you can dine at the small bar on Joselito Jamón, *ensaladilla rusa con ventresca de bonito*, their classic Russian salad (since 1958), *gamba roja*, red shrimp from Helluva, *Tarta de atún*, delicious red tuna, or *percebes*, goose barnacles from Galicia (only available twice each year), or reserve a table in the restaurant for lunch at 1:30 or dinner at 8:00 pm.

Tel: (+34) 915 731 087 / 915 738 298

Taberna Pedraza

Further down Ibiza, at No. 38, also receives excellent reviews from gourmet critics, including Carlos Maribona proclaiming it one of the best bars in Madrid in 2017. The owners, husband and wife, Santiago Pedraza and Carmen Carro, spent two years traveling all over the country searching out the very best purveyors before opening their new, petite bistro. Standout dishes here include their famous potato omelet Betanzos style, their tuna salad, patatas bravas, *chistorra* (Basque sausage) from Lasarte, Iberian ham croquettes and hamburgers made of the finest Galician beef. This *neo tasca* had only been open only for a year before being lauded in all the leading gastronomic blogs. For summer dining, it offers a terrace. And best of all, it won't break the bank. Perfect for lunch or dinner on a Sunday. Closed Mondays.

Tel: (+34) 910 327 200

Heading back down Menéndez Pelayo to Calle de Antonio Acuna

Castelados

Often one of our final stops on a Friday or Saturday evening, this highly popular younger brother of [La Castela](#), at Calle de Antonio Acuna, 18, which shares its Bibi Gourmand rating for 2018. It's always packed, with *Madrileños* often standing four and five-deep at the bar, and one evening, a group of friends using a bar stool as a table because there was no room left at the crowded tin topped bar, which is always covered with fresh flowers and a display of seasonal vegetables. Service here is top notch despite the seeming chaos. Closed Sunday evening.

Tel: (+34) 910 515 625

A different type of tapas crawl in Madrid

One doesn't do the typical tapas crawl in this neighborhood as you would at the bars along the Cava Baja. While you do receive a small tapa, one with each order of wine or beer, and can move on, the idea here is to experience the haute cuisine offered by some of Madrid's best chefs. As a result, you will typically spend an hour or more enjoying the food and ambiance. There is a natural ebb and flow to this routine. There will be times when you will be able to find a seat at the bar in the middle of the evening, if not, then join the crowd and do what the locals do. just don't be discouraged if the place is packed. That only tells you how good they are.