

Aiό: Sardinia, pizza, and bike haven in Malasaña

[Aiό](#) in Sardinian means “let’s go” (or “venga vamos” in Spanish). Most likely, Andrea and Marcelo were thinking of this very expression when they decided to open a restaurant in Madrid three years ago. These two friends have brought their hometown of **Sardinia** with them to **Malasaña**, where they’ve created a magnificent combination of **Italian food** and **true *madrileño* ambiance**. It is basically an extraordinary place.



It was love at first sight when I came here with my friend, Nina, from Austria. We had a **menú del día** for **9,50€** (11.50€ on weekends and holidays) that includes two dishes, a drink and dessert. They also have a **pizza menu** that comes with a salad, large pizza, drink and coffee for **10,50€**; and a Sardinian menu with different regional dishes for **14€**. On the weekends, it's better to make a reservation.

We ordered fresh pasta with fresh tomato and basil; a salad and a burger with caramelized onions and homemade fries. Only if the pictures could tell you how good they tasted.



When I travel outside Spain, I always like to look for local spots, and the best indication of that is always by seeing locals themselves. Similarly, when I'm in Madrid and I go to an Italian restaurant, I like to see Italian patrons—to me that's a sign of authenticity. At **Aiό** , you'll find people from all over the world, yet the clientele's dominant nationality is Italian, by far.



You'll also find a large **biking community** here. Users and lovers can find bikes hanging on the walls. Although they're nice decoration, the real reason they're on display is because they're **for sale**. However, if you're already happy with the bike you own, you can also park it here, as **Aío's downstairs area** is a **free bike drop-off point**.



Malasaña is my favorite neighbourhood to get a drink at after work. Thanks to Aío, the neighbourhood has just gotten even better. On Thursdays at 9pm (officially at 8:30pm), they offer **an all-you-can-eat Italian buffet**, called **Aperaió**. It only costs **4.50€**, including the drink of your choice. Last night, I went with my wife, Daphne, to check out the buffet. The first thing we noticed was that almost everyone was drinking the **Aperol Spritz**, the popular Italian aperitif that combines seltzer, champagne, Aperol, a slice of orange and plenty of ice. The drink is strong and stringent, but a feel-good hit for **summer**.

For this modest price, I thought the food wasn't going to blow my socks off. But I couldn't have been more wrong. We were lucky enough to grab a seat right by the counter. As the waiters brought out dish after dish of mouth-watering Italian

goodness, the patrons swarmed around the food and served themselves heaps of rice, pasta, salad and pizza. Although it was all good, the **pasta** was the star dish; it was creamy mushroom mini-shell pasta that the crowd just couldn't get enough of.



The salad was far from your average *ensalada mixta*, as it came with all types of greens, onions, green bell peppers,

cucumbers, apples, raisins and topped with a deliciously sweet vinaigrette dressing. This is officially the best deal you can find in Madrid on food and drinks.



We barely missed the pizza because it flew off the counter in a matter of seconds (that's why there's no picture, so you'll have to go see for yourself!).



[Facebook](#)

Address: [Calle Corredera Baja de San Pablo 25](#)

Tlfn: 910 09 64 69

Hours: M-F 9.00-1.30 /S-S 10.00-2.00

Breakfast: M-F 9.00-13.00 /S-S 10.00-13.00

Lunch: M-F 13.00-16.00

Aperaió (buffet): Thursdays at 20:30

Pepe Botella, a coffee place where you can think

Growing up at my father's coffee shop in New York – [the Hungarian Pastry Shop](#) – I remember there was a poster on the wall that featured *50 coffee shops around the world where you can think.*

Since I arrived in Madrid seven years ago, I've always thought that [Pepe Botella](#) should be on that poster, photographed alongside the other perfect cafés from Tel Aviv to Reykjavik.



Peer through the bay window at passersby in Plaza de Dos de Mayo in Malasaña

In my mind, cafés aren't about who has the prettiest foam;

cafés should make you feel at home. I first fell in love with **Pepe Botella** when I was a student. I used to bring my laptop there on Saturdays and Sundays during lunchtime when it was empty, and let the afternoon go by. Ever since, **Pepe Botella** has been the café I most enjoy going to with friends, family, or alone.

It just fits, whether I want to peer through the window with a coffee or a glass of wine, or disappear onto the red velvet benches in the back with a conversation or the newspaper. It's the kind of place that invites you to stay for hours. And whenever my sister, Amanda, visits me, this is our spot. She likes to linger there as much as I do.



Pepe Botella is situated in the infamous Plaza del Dos de Mayo, named in honor of the Madrileños who rose against Napoleon on May 2nd in 1802, as well as home to Madrid's

breaking experimental movement in the eighties called *La Movida Madrileña*.



The café is named after Napoleon's brother, **José I Bonaparte**, who was dubbed **Pepe Botella** in Spain for his exorbitant drinking habits (Pepe is the Spanish nickname for Jose).

And **Plaza del Dos de Mayo** is nestled between the streets of **Malasaña**, Madrid's trendiest neighborhood that boasts endless cafés and bars. But for me, **Pepe** is the best.



Also, their coffees come with delicious cookies (called *pastas*). Every time I ask the waiters for the chocolate ones, they give me two! And their wine comes with blue chips.

I've never had cocktails there, but I can say that the tables around me usually move on to the **gin & tonics** by 7pm.



Café Pepe Botella

- [Facebook](#) & [Instagram](#)
 - **Address:** c/ San Andrés, 12
 - **Metro:** Tribunal, Noviciado, Bilbao
-

La Paca, the perfect Malasaña café and bar with art exhibits, movie nights and Chema...

As you walk through [La Paca](#)'s door, you feel like you're in the right place. This **funky café in Malasaña** is always a good choice when you're in the mood for a coffee, a beer, or something stronger.



La Paca's facade on calle Valverde in Malasaña (image from [Facebook](#))

La Paca is divided into two areas: the ground bears a worn-out floor from a different time period, when the place used to be a family's house. **Vintage furniture** from every single corner

of Spain fills the room: old sofas, lamps, Galician mirrors, and bird-cages. **La Paca**'s owner is an antique collector who travels across Spain in pursuit of treasure troves. You can find his finest pieces either sold at his **vintage store [La Republicana](#)**, or displayed at La Paca.



funky furniture at La Paca

One step up and you'll find **Chema**, the star bartender and the man who runs the show. As I say in Spanish, he's "***un terremoto de felicidad***" (an earthquake of happiness). Working alongside Chema is his sister, **Vero**, who's also the perfect host. Feel free to ask them both about the place and their drinks.

La Paca's menu has different types of tea and coffee served with cakes (carrot, cheese or *couland* which is an oozy chocolate muffin-type cake), and *bizcocho* (pound or sponge cake). If you're looking for a drink, they also have a wide

collection of **craft beers** (made from Madrid breweries) on tap, **wines** and **cocktails**.

In this quintessential **Malasaña café**, you've also got to try their **tortilla de patatas** (homemade Spanish omelet), it is my favourite!



my favorite tapa at La Paca

Another feature that makes **La Paca** so special is its **events**. On Wednesdays at 9pm, they have **free movie night downstairs**. They prepare the room in a way that reminds me of a **movie night** at a friend's house; sofas and people scattered about with no order whatsoever (plus the popcorn is also free!). I went last Wednesday and saw **Kill Bill I**, and the week before they had shown **Taxi Driver** (in Spanish with no subtitles).



free movie nights on Wednesdays at La Paca in Malasaña (image from [Facebook](#))

On Thursdays, **La Paca** holds **acoustic music performances**, making room for **up and coming Spanish artists**. Although Wednesday movie nights and Thursday concerts are held regularly, La Paca showcases several other events such as theater performances, **independent markets**, English classes, clown shows, and **art exhibitions**. In fact, when it comes to **art exhibits**, they're booked until 2016!



Theater performance at La Paca (image from [Facebook](#))

What I like most about **La Paca's** events is the way they're set up. Last time I was there, I ended up sharing a few beers with **Chema** and **Vero**, and I asked them how they make money from their events. Their answer was as simple as it was nice: **they just want to help people from the neighborhood**. If you have a **creative project** and you need a place to start, you shouldn't think twice about getting in touch with them.

Shhh..... today is Wednesday night and **the movie** is about to start!

La Paca

[Facebook](#)

Address: c/ Valverde 36

Metro: Gran Vía or Tribunal