

Context Tavernas and Tapas, a culinary tour through the bars of Huertas

If you've done any traveling lately, you might have noticed that **food tours are rapidly becoming a global trend**. Companies around the world now offer guided visits to restaurants, bars, and markets, promising to let you in on culinary secrets or show you how to eat like a local. Madrid is no exception. In fact, this city has more than its share of options, thanks to its vibrant dining scene and world-famous cuisine.

I recently had the chance to participate in a food tour for the very first time, thanks to [Context Travel](#). The company offers “**tours for the intellectually curious**” in cities across the world, including several in the Spanish capital. Many are focused on history or art, but this one was especially intriguing: [Savoring Madrid: Tavernas and Tapas](#).

According to the Context website, the goal of this culinary tour is to define the concept of tapas through tastings at *tavernas* in the city center. Like all of their [Madrid tours](#), it's meant to offer an in-depth look at local culture, customs, and in this case, cuisine. But considering the dozens of bars, restaurants, and specialty dishes that are scattered throughout the city, how could it be possible to cover such a broad topic in just 3 hours? That's what I intended to find out.



Intricate mosaics decorate the exterior of one of the many historic bars in Huertas.

Hungry for history

The tour began at 7pm outside the Westin Palace hotel, close to many of Madrid's main tourist attractions. Context limits the size of their tours to create a personalized experience—this one consisted only of me and a couple who were on vacation.

Our guide was Tessy Carrada, a culinary journalist of Mexican origin who moved to Madrid a few years ago. She started off by explaining the basics, with the help of maps and diagrams: **what are tapas, where did they come from, and how are they eaten?** What makes Spain's cuisine unique? What can you expect when you go out for tapas in Madrid?

Next she told us how the tour would work. We'd visit three or

four places, all in the Huertas neighborhood (also known as [Barrio de las Letras](#)). The idea was to show us non-touristy spots, the kinds of places locals go, where we'd get a **true taste of the local culture**. At each place, she would order a few tapas to share, taking into account our preferences, interests, and appetites. With the ground rules laid out, we set off into the city.

Cervecería Cervantes



First up was a true classic, a place that was packed with customers even at the early hour of 7:30pm. We ordered drinks, and Tessy explained the particularities of Spanish brewing as we admired the collection of beer cans displayed on the restaurant's walls. The waiter brought out a plate of giant olives and mussels, exemplifying the tradition of providing something to snack on along with every drink.





Tessy then ordered several *raciones* to share: **ham croquetas with padrón peppers, manchego cheese, and jamón ibérico.** As we ate, she offered insight on each and every item: how to make *croquetas*, what makes Spanish ham so special, and how to distinguish true *manchego* from imitations.



I've lived in Spain for a while, and I've eaten (more than) my share of all of these classic tapas, but I'm not exaggerating when I say this might've been the best ham and cheese of my life. It took a lot of self-discipline to restrain myself and save room for the next destination...

La Fábrica



As soon as we entered this colorful, crowded locale we were welcomed with the sights and smells of seafood. We gathered around an old barrel-turned-table and ordered **albariño** wine to accompany the **salpicón** (a kind of seafood salad) and **boquerones** (marinated anchovies) that Tessy suggested. I was quickly reminded of one of the most pleasant discoveries I've made in Madrid: despite my preconceived notions about slimy, stinky seafood, here it's a true delicacy.



The *salpicón* consisted of shrimp, mussels, and octopus swimming in olive oil with tomatoes, peppers, and onions. It was fresh, light, and incredibly delicious. A loaf of crusty bread was brought to the table, and Tessy encouraged us to break off pieces and soak them in the flavorful oil.



The *boquerones* were perfectly seasoned and accompanied by olives and crispy potato chips. We were also served a small plate of cheese and chorizo—but it couldn't compete with the perfection we'd already experienced at Cervantes. The star here was most certainly the seafood.

La Vinoteca

Although we attempted to find a spot at the renowned Casa Alberto, at 9pm on a Saturday night it proved difficult. Instead we went to La Vinoteca, which had a much more **modern and upscale atmosphere** than the previous bars. We ordered wine and cava from an impressively long and detailed list.



To round out the night, Tessy ordered **patatas bravas** (fried potatoes smothered in slightly spicy sauce) and two **pinchos** (small toasts): one topped with spinach, goat cheese, and caramelized onions, and another with potato cake and duck magret.

Although the ambience here was lovely and the wine exceptional, I have to admit that the tapas weren't quite as impressive as their successors. That being said, they were still delicious, and certainly provided a well-rounded sampling of some of Spain's most famous specialties.



For the last course of the evening, Tessy chose a **layered trifle of chocolate and cream**, as well as a sort of **mini apple pie** topped with vanilla ice cream. Although these were pretty standard sweets that didn't exactly scream "Spain," it's hard to complain when there's chocolate involved. After devouring dessert, we parted ways for the night with full bellies, satisfied palates, and a whole lot of newfound knowledge.

An interesting aftertaste

For me the best part of this tour, surprisingly, was not the food itself (although of course it was incredible). As a resident of Madrid, I can get authentic tapas whenever I want, on nearly every street corner. What this experience offered me was the chance to engage with the food I was eating on an intellectual level: to learn why tapas are called tapas, what distinguishes *jamón ibérico* from *jamón serrano*, and so much

more. It was a lesson in being conscious of what I eat and the history and culture it reflects.

For travelers who only have a few days to sample the best of local cuisine, who don't speak Spanish, or who simply don't know where to begin, Context provides an ideal solution. Tessy's insider knowledge and impeccable taste made for an interesting, entertaining, and thoroughly authentic journey through the taverns of Huertas.

Whether you're a tourist who wants to experience the tapas culture firsthand, or a seasoned local who wants to learn more about the city you love, you'll find what you're looking for in the Context Tavernas and Tapas tour.

To learn more about Context or book a tour, click [here](#).

Tapapiés: a guide to everyone's favorite food and culture festival in Lavapiés

It's that time of year again. The air is turning chilly, the leaves are starting to change, and the millennial obsession with all things autumn is taking over social media. But here in Madrid, there's a whole different reason to be excited. With October comes [Tapapiés](#), the annual festival that inundates the streets of the [Lavapiés neighborhood](#) with delicious food, cheap drinks, and live music.

For 11 days at the end of October (this year's 7th edition lasts from October 19–29), dozens of restaurants and bars in

Lavapiés offer a very special deal. Each one develops their own **signature tapa**, and offers it to the public for just **€1.50**. For an extra euro, you can also get a *botellín* (a 250 ml bottle of beer) to wash it down. The [event](#) is sponsored by Barcelona's Estrella Damm, and at most places you can choose between a regular beer or Damm Lemon (beer and lemon soda).



A bar advertises its participation in Tapapiés with the festival's official poster.

Lavapiés is known for its incredible cultural diversity, with large immigrant populations from all over Africa, South America, the Middle East, and Central Asia. As a result, it's full of [international eateries](#) offering everything from [Senegalese thieboudienne](#) to Syrian sweets. A good number of these establishments participate in [Tapapiés](#), which means that in one night you can practically eat your way around the

world, just by exploring the neighborhood's sloping streets.



The delicious “Crepioca” tapa from Saboor Tapioca

In other words, **this [festival](#) is every adventurous foodie's dream come true.** There are various strategies for tackling the overwhelming amount of options (**122 tapas in total**) and chaotic crowds. You can simply wander around, dropping into whatever bars you come across and trying your luck. Each one usually advertises a photograph of their tapa with a huge poster out front, so you'll know more or less what to expect. Don't forget to stop by [Mercado de San Fernando](#) and Mercado Antón Martín, where several vendors also participate.



A tray of tapas at Toscanaccio Italian bakery: marinated eggplant, walnuts, goat cheese, and sun-dried tomato pesto on spelt bread

If you're (A) a picky/allergy-prone eater or (B) determined to try as many different tapas as possible, you might want to consider a more organized strategy. Ask for a brochure at any of the participating places—you'll get **a pocket-sized booklet that contains a list of every single tapa being offered**, as well as a color photograph and a detailed ingredients list for each. They're all plotted on a numbered map, so you can plan out your ideal route. Be warned, though: it's hard to stick to a set plan when there are so many tempting options around every corner.



Dishing out the special tapa at Maloka Bar Brasileiro: yuca in a coconut milk sauce with peanut pesto

My advice? Grab a group of friends who aren't afraid to elbow their way through some crowds and try as many new things as possible. This is not an activity for those who would rather settle in at a cozy restaurant for a relaxed dinner.

Expect to eat standing up while balancing a beer in one hand a a tapa in the other, and shouting at each other just to be heard. **It's messy, it's crazy, it's loud—and it's totally worth it.** The frenetic and colorful spirit of the neighborhood is never more alive than on a night of [Tapapiés](#).



“Carrillada melosa” from Maldito Querer: braised beef cheeks in a sauce of caramelized onion, garlic, herbs, and Pedro Ximénez reduction

To complete the experience, it’s essential to attend one of the [various outdoor performances](#) by local musicians, dancers, and entertainers that take place throughout the event. On Friday, Saturday, and Sunday afternoons and evenings, you can catch live music and shows at nine different designated spots (a full schedule is included in the brochure). There’s also the simultaneous **Chollopiés** festival, which **spotlights the neighborhood’s local businesses** by offering [special discounts](#) on certain products.



Maybe you live in Lavapiés and want to get to know your *barrio* better. Maybe you've never been and want to see what all the hype is about. Or maybe you're just hungry, thirsty, and low on cash. Whatever the case, [Tapapiés](#) is bound to become one of your favorite events in Madrid. If you go into it with **the right mindset, a healthy appetite, and a handful of coins**, I guarantee that come next October, there'll only be one thing on your mind. Who needs pumpkin spice lattes, anyway?

Info

- [Facebook](#)
- [Website](#)
- [Instagram](#)

Check out our roundup of [Tapapiés' offerings last year!](#)

Sweet Treat MADREAT – Street Food Festival

Travel the world through food at this unique mobile market open one weekend a month. With a variety of countries represented and blended by cuisine, [Madreat](#) is an inspiring mix of chefs and customers sharing the spices of life. They even take gastronomic suggestions through their website to keep the melting pot bubbling. Stop by their temporarily new location in Casa de Campo on **March 19th and 20th** for an exciting edible experience. If you miss Saturday (from 12pm-12am), remember it closes early on Sunday at 6 pm!



Picture from [Facebook](#)

Gastrofestival all over Madrid

With locations scattered throughout the city, over two weeks of tantalizing cuisine will tempt you during the Madrid

Gastrofestival January 23rd – February 7th. A fairly young festival, it represents the collaborative effort of more than 400 local wining and dining establishments. Designed to engage all five senses, the Gastrofestival goes beyond food into fashion, culture and art. Check out more [@Gastrofestival](#) or on [Facebook](#).



Photo from [Facebook](#)

Tapas Route around Pacífico – Try something new!

Head over to a different neighborhood this weekend, near metros Pacífico, Menéndez Pelayo and Conde de Casal, where

you'll find old-school bars presenting their finest and most abundant tapas. And they'll cost you just 2€ with a caña or botellín. This is the first tapas route of the area and the perfect chance to try something new!

[#RutaDeTapasPacífico](#)

Little Bites of Tapapies 2015

[Tapapies](#), the multicultural tapas route in barrio Lavapies, is my favorite Madrid festivity. The winding streets are even more lively than usual, filled with musical performances and happy crowds of people drinking and eating. **Local businesses within the barrio can thrive** by making themselves approachable to outsiders while simultaneously deconstructing the rampant misconception that Lavapies is unsafe.

From October 15th -25th the participating bars in Lavapies are serving a **botellín** of Estrella Damm and a unique tapa representing the cuisines of various countries & the regions of Spain. The abundance of tapa options in the pamphlet can be overwhelming, making it difficult to decide which locations to select. **Readers be warned, the portions are quite small and the bars can get incredibly crowded** so it is advised that you navigate this path strategically.

After two nights of field research, **I have compiled a list of noteworthy samples worthy for your barhopping endeavors.** This is an ongoing investigation and any leads from readers would be appreciated!

1. #37 La Amparito – C/ Amparo 88



The **Berenjena Ay! Amparo**, a tapa consisting of mozzarella cheese wrapped in thinly sliced aubergine with a pesto sauce. As the first tapa that I managed to sample, it set the expectations for the bars to follow very high. This cozy bar is one that I would return to under regular circumstances because I enjoyed their selection of swing music.

2. #44 La Fantastica de Lavapies C/Embajadores 42



Tartar con Helado de Wasabi is exactly what it translates to in English, an ambitious combination of little bits of smoked salmon and wasabi ice cream.

3. #91 Tribuexete – C/ Tribulete 23



I've written about Tribuexete in a [previous post](#), the location that served the winning tapa during last year's festivities. I applaud their gastronomic sponge-like tapa ***Maite*** this year for it's presentation, texture and combination of flavors. The

origin of this tapa is Donostia, San Sebastian. I frequent this establishment and it fuels my longing to visit the Basque Country myself some day.

4. #74 Portomarin- C/Valencia 4 (Next to the Carrefour)



This location's tapa, *Vini-Cola*, was a sizeable portion of bull's tail with bordelaise sauce.

5. #12 Bierzo Alto-C/Sombrerereria, 6



A small cup of shrimp and crab chowder was served at this location.

Inside Mercado de San Fernando

The noteworthy samples below can be found at the unnumbered locations in [Mercado San Fernando](#), also written about in a [previous post](#). The Mercado is an excellent location to enjoy [Tapapies](#) due to the numerous stalls serving tapas within close proximity.

6. Exargia

Exargia



Bekri Meze, representing Greek cuisine, consisted of little bits of pork loin with rice, feta cheese and a white wine tomato sauce.

7. El Saja

El Saja



Agasaja – two small crackers with **homemade jams** & Picón Bejes-Tresviso, a blue cheese typical of Cantabria.

8. Washoku



Cerviche Nikkei – the Japanese stall in the Mercado served a Ceviche of salmon & whitefish.

Which Tapapies tapa is your favorite?

Mercado de las Ranas (the Frogs' Market) in Barrio de las Letras

All the shops in this charming Madrileño neighborhood – [El Barrio de las Letras](#) – come together to celebrate [The Frogs' Market](#) on the first Saturday of every month. Amongst the neighborhood's sweet streets, local stores offer all types of

events and activities, from tapas and vermouth tastings, to art exhibitions and story-telling sessions for the little ones.

If you find yourself in the center of Madrid on Saturday, don't miss out on this lovely neighborhood market and find, amongst its nooks and crannies, the array of treats that the Frogs' Market has to offer.

Also check out the hashtag **#mercadodelasranas** for more info

Cosy Wine Bars in La Latina (with gluten free options!)

If you're looking for some dark and cosy wine bars to enjoy a glass of fantastic Spanish wine and some delicious tapas, then head to La Latina. Known as Madrid's tapas district, this neighbourhood is famous for its lazy Sunday afternoon tradition of tapas-bar-hopping, up and down the winding streets of Cava Baja and Cava Alta.

But first, the history of Cava Baja has more to do with foreigners in Madrid than you might think.

Originally a deep trench that ran along the outside of the medieval city walls, Cava Baja protected the city from bandits and scoundrels, and allowed the people of Madrid to come and go freely without using the city gates. Soon the city boundaries spread, and local taverns sprung up along this stretch to lodge (and feed) travellers and farmers, who came to Madrid to sell their wares at market; You can still see the

street sloping downhill and curving to follow the path of the old city wall.

This means that, for expats and visitors to the city, enjoying a glass of local wine and food amongst the higgledy piggledy bars and old taverns of Cava Baja is to not only enjoy La Latina, but also repeat the history of many a travelling peddler visiting Madrid.

[El Tempranillo](#)

For people that like Spanish wine: El Tempranillo. From the moment that you see the entire wall of wine bottle racks behind the bar, you know that you are in the right place.

Chic and modern from the outside but small and traditional on the inside, El Tempranillo has the perfect mix of low lighting, muted conversation and good Spanish wine- and a table to sit at if you order some tapas.



Compared with other wine and tapas bars in Cava Baja, El Tempranillo has something unique that is difficult to put your finger on.

Right in the heart of the hustle and bustle of Cava Baja, it is comparatively understated- but quietly confident. It has a real buzz of people under the dimmed lighting, but is surprisingly quiet. This muted conversation gives a sense of privacy in which you can enjoy your glass of wine, share a few tapas and have a meaningful conversation with good friends- without having to raise your voice.

The tapas at El Tempranillo are addictive. Try the 'revuelto de champiñones salvajes' (mushroom omelette), or the tostas. You might have to wait a little to order at peak times during the weekend or evenings, but the dishes come out quickly once ordered and are worth the wait.

Then, the wine. Order from the chalk board, which has an impressive selection of wine that comes from almost all the wine regions of Spain. Most exciting, though, is their larger than average selection of good Spanish wines available by the glass, with prices starting as low as 2,50€ and 2,70€. Arrive a little early, set up your company at a table, and enjoy some good wine.



Calle Cava Baja, 38

Juana La Loca

Juana La Loca makes a nod towards Juana, the 'mad queen of Castile', who although was probably just another misunderstood female royal, still makes for a good story and name for a wine bar.



Small, dark, cosy and kinetic, Juana La Loca is perfect for a glass of Spanish wine and some delicious tapas.

Tightly packed inside, with small tables edging around the long bar, Juana La Loca mixes the worlds of both restaurant and wine bar into one dynamic space. With both bar and table enjoying tapas and wine, just with each enjoying more of one than the other, the two functions blend harmoniously into one shared space.

To start with a glass of wine, choose from the wine board behind the bar. Although the choices are slightly restricted and slightly pricier by the glass, the quality of the wine makes up for the lack of selection. If you like deep, complex red wines, try a Ribera del Duero *Crianza* or *Reserva*.

Without a doubt, the most famous dish served at Juana La Loca is the *tortilla de patatas*: a buttery, melt-in-the-mouth tortilla, finished with a crispy outer layer and served on top of a slice of bread. If you are being visited by friends or

family in Madrid who have not yet tried *tortilla de patatas*, this is the one to debut.

The '*huevos rotos*' are also to-die-for, either to share or as a *ración* for yourself: crispy, chewy, buttery fries topped with melting fried egg, small salty strips of *jamón*, salted *pimientos de padrón* and a shake of paprika, all served on a long plate.

Very well accompanied by a glass of fresh wine to clean your palate and a bowl of Juana La Loca's moreish olives, these delicious options can also be served gluten free if you ask the waiter. The prices may be a little higher, but the quality of the wine and food are a step above the rest.

A little tip is to bring cash with you, as they do not accept cards. The small wine bar-restaurant also fills up quickly in the evenings; after 20:30 tables are only for a meal of tapas (plus wine) and bar spots are only for wine (plus a tapa). Arrive early enough to enjoy some good wine and conversation amongst the relaxed atmosphere, and feel the bar fill up with the buzz of evening service.



Plaza Puerta de Los Moros, 4

www.juanalalocamadrid.com

La Concha

If you like sherry, cava or vermouth, then you are in luck. This tiny mismatched bar with painted wood panels and creative details offers a great selection of Spanish fortified wines and sparkling cava from Cataluña. A refreshing take on the usual full-bodied red wine offered in La Latina, come to La Concha for something a little different.



La Concha has a nomadic feel, keeping in tune with the street's history of travelling visitors, and offers both the upstairs bar for drinks and downstairs seating area for tapas.

If you have yet to try vermouth, a fortified wine infused with various roots, barks, flowers, seeds, herbs and spices, La Concha has 'Vermut Miró', a Spanish vermouth from the northern Spanish city of Reús.

La Concha also has a selection of Spanish Sherries, or 'Jerez' in Spanish. Hailing from the D.O. wine region with the same name, Jerez de la Frontera, Jerez is unique in its elaboration; you cannot find a fortified wine like Sherry anywhere else in the world.



If you like bubbles: Cava. Spain's answer to champagne, this bubbly sparkling wine can come in 4 different kinds: Cava, Cava Reserva (minimum 15 months ageing), Cava Gran Reserva (over 30 months ageing) and Rosé. La Concha has more than one of each kind, from different wineries, to try. Order a glass with one of their tapas. Although Cava traditionally matches well with fish or sweet fruity flavours, this is not necessarily the case; a Brut Nature Gran Reserva would go well with meat dishes, roasts or spicier foods.

On a week night you will easily find a spot here. Just head down the kooky stairs and order from their small tapas menu, which is also available completely gluten free.



Calle Cava Baja, 7
www.laonchataberna.com

Extra notes

If you would like to know what to look for in these wine and tapas bars, or are not sure what kinds of wines you like yet, you can also do some [wine tasting in Madrid](#).

Wine word

Maridaje – food and wine pairing

Here are a few more articles you might like:

[Madrid's 3 Best Wine Shops](#)

[Taberna Lamiak, another wonderful bar in La Latina](#)

[Madrid's Best Cafe-Bookshops](#)