

A Year of Menus Del Día in Madrid

Tapas get all the fame in Spain. Drinking wine, nibbling chorizo, sharing little bites late into the night—the tapa is romantic. Never mind that the definition is slippery and the quality unpredictable, or that an evening of tapa-hopping can cost you more in the end than sitting down for a proper meal.

But I'd like to take a moment to celebrate a lesser-known Spanish food tradition, one that's equally praiseworthy but seldom mentioned: the *menu del día*. These three magic words will get you a three-course meal, with bread and wine included, at an incredible fixed price.

Beginning as a government-mandated measure during the Franco years, this practical lunch tradition was designed to provide affordable meals to day laborers during the workweek. While no longer required by law, restaurants have carried the tradition full-force into the 21st Century, with even high-end establishments kneeling down to offer those of us on tighter budgets delicious lunches at bargain prices. **It's not as sexy or unique as the tapa, but the *menu del día* forms an integral part of the Spanish food culture and is perhaps one of Spain's best-kept secrets.**



The Club.

Over the last year some friends and I decided to take advantage of the *menus* around Madrid. I wouldn't call us a club (ignore that I just did) but rather a shifting group of buddies hanging out over a different meal every Friday. We would fluctuate between two and ten people, though it was always anchored by a couple die-hard members, myself included.

I recommend that anyone with the opportunity start their own tradition as well. It's a great way to try new food, see new corners of the city, and hang out with all the other no-goodnik three-day weekenders over something other than a bar stool.

We had only four rules. All menus had to be:

1. In one of the central barrios.
2. Less than 15 euros per person.
3. Good quality food.
4. Good quality people.

The Rankings.

This list is limited to our *menu del día* meet-ups over the past calendar year. I included both food and atmosphere in my decisions, though the process was by no means meticulous; I'm going off little more than my general impressions of each place. I also recognize this list skews toward trendy restaurants, which is partly because we liked to use the meet-up as an opportunity to get into otherwise busy spots (Friday lunch was normally little hassle), but also as a much-needed break from the every-day Spanish fare. It's worth noting that sometimes little Spanish joints in the outer barrios do the

best *menus* of all!

1. [Bacira](#) (Chamberí, 14 euros)



It's pretty astounding that a restaurant with a waitlist of more than a month offers a 14-euro fixed-price meal. If that's not a testament to the spirit of the *menú del día*, I don't know what is. Make a reservation, wait it out, and go here. The food is a fresh take on the Mediterranean-Asian fusion that's the rage in Spain these days (thanks, David Muñoz) and the dining room is bright and welcoming with all the touchstones of modern aesthetics (dangling bulbs, faded wood, dark blues and whites) without feeling hackneyed. The food is fresh, creative and delicious. We felt like sexy young business people at English teacher prices.

2. Gabriel. (Conde Duque, 14 euros)



You know you've chosen your restaurant well when you find yourself eating next to Javier Bardem. The rich and famous have good taste, much better than Joe Nobodies like us, but this place stands on its own. The cuisine consists of modern takes on Spanish classics though there are the occasional Asian influences (again, all the rage), and the desserts are incredible. It also has the nicest bathroom in Madrid—shit's straight out of a William Sonoma catalog. Atmosphere is cozy, intimate, and occasionally Bardem-ridden.

3. Momo (Chueca, 11.50 euros)

Unlike other restaurants that include maybe two or three options for a first and second course, Momo offers the entire

menu for the *menu del día*. The food is delicious and varied (again, some Mediterranean-Asian fusion going on—I'm spotting a trend). The dishes can sometimes be a bit sauce-heavy (or maybe my tastes are becoming more Spanish) but choose wisely and you'll love your meal. This is one of my go-to *menus del día* when I have visitors because of the wide selection. They also have a menu de noche for a reasonable 18 euros (same as the day menu), but if you're going to be in the area for a reasonably-priced dinner, I'd suggest **Baco y Beto**.

4. [Badila](#) (Lavapiés, 13.50 euros)



This restaurant is intimate and classic (the chef himself sometimes takes the orders) with faded white wood walls and a chalkboard listing the daily specials. The food is classic Spanish with a touch of 'lo moderno,' and everything is fresh

and seasonal. It's still the best *crema de verduras* I've had in Madrid (had seasonal squash with a couple slices of intense chorizo), which says a lot in a city obsessed with creaming vegetables. Here's a [previous post on Badila](#).

5. [La casa dei Pazzi](#) (chueca, 11.50 euros)



Casa dei Pazzi

Just to switch things up here, let's focus on quantity. Casa dei Pazzi offers a substantial salad as a starter and then a whole Italian-style pizza for your main course. There's also wine, bread and dessert. You'll wonder how you got away with paying only 11 euros, half-expecting to look over your shoulder as you leave and see an angry Italian chef charging after you with a pizza paddle.

6. Los Chuchis (Lavapiés, 11 euros)



Maybe the most charming atmosphere in the list, it feels a bit like an old diner, with a few tables around a large bar and counter in the middle, the hustle and bustle of the waiters running around and the steady chatter of regulars. The food's great too. We showed up at 1:30 and it was fine, but it filled up quickly. Check out our [previous post on Los Chuchis](#).

7. Bar Galleta (Malasaña, 11.50 euros)



This trendy restaurant in Malasaña has a similar feel to Maricastaña (see below), with both doing modern takes on classic Spanish food, though Galleta's menu skews a bit more French. They're also on the same street, so if you don't like the look of one *menu*, try the other. I prefer the atmosphere here though—the warm gold lighting, the wide French doors to the street, the wood and brick interior with wild flowers in vases around the restaurant. When we went the food was classic Spanish but good (crema starter, *entrecot*, a fruit desert) but *the menu del día* seems to change frequently and dramatically, so you can probably catch it on a great day.

8. Maricastaña (Malasaña, 11.50 euros)



The food is classic *menu del día* –your typical *crema de*

verduras starter (or hummus or a salad) with a protein-focused second (*lomo, entrecot, meluza*)—but what they do, they do well. It has a bit of that same late-2000s trendy look to it—exposed brick, sanded wood shelves, dangling lightbulbs and fading white paint—but they manage to pull it off. Galleta wins by a hair, but they’re both nice dining experiences.

9. La Candelita (Alonso Martinez, 12 euros)



We all enjoyed this place. They describe their cuisine as “Latin Criollo” (though it leaned more Spanish than Latin American) with a warm Latin-inspired atmosphere. They publish examples of their *menú del día* right on the website <http://lacandelita.es/carta/menu-del-dia/> so you don’t have to take my word for it!

10. TukTuk (Chamberí or Chueca, 10.50 euros)



TukTuk doesn't even need mentioning on an English-language Madrid blog. They do a nice variety of Southeast Asian dishes and have great quantity and quality menu for the price, so it's always a popular suggestion in the expat community. If you've lived here for over a year, you've definitely heard the typical "let's all go TuckTak! Takatuk! TACKATACKATUKKA!" They're pronouncing it wrong, though—it's "tuktuk." Read our [full post on Tuk Tuk](#).

11. La Tragantúa (Huertas, 12 euros)



(photo credit Carlos Olmo Minube.com)

This place was consistently called the best menú del día in Madrid on TripAdvisor last year, and it might still have that reputation, but the second time I went, the quality and presentation seemed to have slipped. Who knows, it may have been an off day. I don't know how you would characterize their food—it's a bit of a Spanish-and-everything fusion. I would sum it up as "rich." Be careful to mix up the starter and second course, otherwise you'll be like "why'd I order fried cheese in blueberry sauce as an appetizer for pesto-smothered pork?"

12. My Veg (Malasaña, 15 euros)



I bumped My Veg down a couple notches because they didn't include a drink with the *menu del día*, which is an insult to the very tradition! The final cost was closer to 18 euros, making it the most expensive *menu* we had all year. In terms of quality, it would be closer to the top. All the food was market fresh (they pride themselves on "tomatoes that taste like tomatoes") and the presentation modern and meticulous. It's a much fancier place than the outside suggests. Just ignore the terrible name.

13. El Apartamento (Huertas, 12 euros)



I came here after a particularly intense bike ride and without showering, so my memory is one of me hunching over my plate apologetically avoiding eye contact with all the well-dressed businessmen eating around us. The food was delicious though, Spanish food with a modern twist. I managed to take this blurry photo before losing all control and smashing my face into my plate in a black-out feeding frenzy.

14. [Siam](#) (Conde Duque, 11.61 euros)

I'm a sucker for Thai food and this place does a decent job for the (oddly specific) price. They include tom yum soup or pad thai as a starter, then a stirfry or curry as a second. The atmosphere is a bit odd, it feels a bit like a theme restaurant. While we're on the topic of thai food, I actually prefer the menú del día at **Maia Thai (Plaza de España)**, though it doesn't rotate much, and sometimes the new **BambuBox (Chueca)** has Tom Kha as a starter, which is nice. I

haven't included either of those on the list because they weren't done as a menu with the group. Also: **Krachai (Alonso Martinez)** has very high quality food and some Michelin nods, though the menu is expensive, doesn't include soup, and doesn't rotate much.

15. Taberna DNorte (Sol, 10 euros)



So this place has a surprisingly nice interior and the food wasn't bad (a decent-sized burger, a pisto starter for me, someone got a salad) but it's located in an exceptionally ugly plaza between Sol and Gran Via and attached to a drab little hotel. It's the kind of place you'd expect to see a man in a disheveled suit drinking a mid-morning cocktail and nervously waiting to meet his mistress.

16. Vietnam 24 (Chueca, 11 euros)



The menu food isn't bad, but it's not particularly noteworthy. We all had some type of chicken or beef stir-fry but they seemed to lack those bright fundamental vietnamese tastes (mint, lime, basil). I also would've liked to see pho as a menu option, but that's wishful thinking. I prefer **La Petit Hanoi** in malasaña.

17. EL b_US (Sol, 10 euros)



Everyone else loved this place (including TripAdvisor, where it has some pretty outstanding rankings). It has a unique design concept I guess, but I was not blown away by the food. I also have no idea how we're supposed to pronounce it. "El bus?" "El beh- OOS?" I end up saying it like I'm hesitant to recommend it, which I guess I am: "El b'us."

18. [Vivares](#) (chueca, 9.90 euro / 12 euros veg option)



This restaurant is popular for lunch in Chueca, but I can't figure out why, exactly. We experienced so-so food in a chaotic environment, nothing extraordinary, and the menu felt a bit too long for them to focus on any type of seasonal speciality. My strongest memory is that it was too loud. "Alright, gramps" you're probably thinking, but the sensation was like being in an adult Chuck-E-Cheese without any of the cool robot puppets.

19. [La Mucca](#) (Malasaña, 10 euros)



I enjoy La Mucca for dinner. They have a good boletus pizza and some quality appetizers, and it's lively and fun in the evening. For lunch, this place disappointed. It was the first *menu del día* where someone had to set aside a dish—a greasy open-faced sandwich with an odd flavor. We were also sitting on the slanting terraza with the harsh mid-afternoon February sunlight blinding our eyes and giving the greasy *Tosta* an even more washed-out, dreary look. The highlight was this salad, but even that can be made easily at home for much cheaper. We sat there dreaming of all the better places on this list, knowing that next week was a fresh start.

Final Thoughts:

You might have noticed almost none of these get awful reviews, but that's simply because none of these places were awful. Maybe it's a testament to our rigorous selection process, or maybe we just enjoyed ourselves everywhere. If a place were awful, I would have said so.

I think of Homer the food critic: "I'm giving this my worst review ever: seven thumbs up."

I have more recommendations for *menús* around Madrid that were not included in this list because we did not go there in our Friday group. I had to set a limit for the list somewhere. **Please add your suggestions below or on Facebook and we can compile another post.**

Gallery

(all photos were snapped on scene with an iPhone, unless otherwise indicated)



Asian-fusion ceviche at Bacira



Duck confit at Gabriel



Bacira dessert



Stew as the main course at Bacira



Bacira appetizer



Vivares Salad



Vietnam 24



Del Norte



Casa dei Pazza



Badila



Badila crema de calabacín



TukTuk



El Apartamento



La Candelita



Bar Galleta



Bar Galleta



Bar Galleta crema



Bar Galleta



Greek salad starter at La Mucca, Malasaña



Gabriel



Gabriel crema



Gabriel Menú

trufa y espinacas escalfadas

- Ensalada de carbón con pollo confitado
- Humus de lentejas con pan sarda

Solomillo ibérico con salsa de mostaza & crujiente de plátano

- Atún a la plancha con reducción de Pedro Ximénez y verduras



Maricastaña



Gabriel dessert



Gabriel dessert



Maricastaña

Festival of San Isidro: All You Need to Know

What is the Festival of San Isidro?

San Isidro is a citywide festival, pure and simple, but unlike San Fermín in Pamplona or Las Fallas in Valencia, it isn't really a great source of local pride or identity for the city of Madrid. Many residents take advantage of the three-day weekend to travel elsewhere—often back to their hometowns—or

to get a bit of Spring cleaning done in the spare time off work. This should come as little surprise. Madrid is the great Spanish melting pot, a cultural and economic center that pulls people in from across the country but never fully instills in them the type of local identity that underpins the more famous Spanish festivals.

If anything, Gay Pride is the better candidate for Madrid's primary festival. It certainly draws more visitors and press to the capital, and seems to adequately reflect the anarchic, welcoming nature of the city—one that shrugs off regional Spanish identity to embrace anyone who's down to party.

But San Isidro does have its supporters. They're mostly residents with deep family roots in Madrid, proud Madrileños who dress up in traditional garb to eat the classic food and dance the chotis in parties scattered throughout the central barrios. The festival has some of the cultural posturing of the "castecismo madrileño," the Madrid castizo identity that's proudly Spanish, built on the rejection of the bourgeois French affectations of the elite, and the feeling still stands.

I have a special affinity for San Isidro myself, partly because of the contradictions in it—a festival that both represents the soul of Madrid and couldn't be further from it. The strong passion and utter indifference toward the holiday reflect the multiple layers of Madrid's identity, at once a city and a collection of barrios, provincially Spanish and globally connected.

Or maybe we all just like beers in the park.

Great. Who the hell is San Isidro?

Good question. Legend has it that one day, in the Moorish town

of *Mayrit* (present-day Madrid), a day laborer named Isidro was ploughing his lord's field when he miraculously caused a spring to gush forth from the earth, like a teenager hitting a sprinkler head with the lawnmower.

In another instance, Isidro saved his son from a deep well by praying to raise the water level, thus bringing the child floating back to the top.

These are several of his many miracles that would end up lifting this humble and devout Madrileño to prominence and eventual sainthood—a move spearheaded by the Spanish monarchs who had a particular interest in the miracle worker. King Phillip II himself was supposedly cured of a grave ailment by drinking the water that flowed from a spring that San Isidro found. San Isidro's most famous miracles took place in Madrid and had to do with water, making this diviner, well-digger, and rainmaker the patron saint of both Spanish farmers and the city of Madrid.



San Isidro doing his thing.

Today, in what we now know as the Pradera de San Isidro (a park in the Carabanchel neighborhood south of the center—metro Marqués de Vadillo) his miraculous springs still flow. A

hermitage dedicated to the saint was erected in the area during the 14th century, then rebuilt in 1725 near one of Isidro's famed springs, and believers still pay their respects and collect the healing water during the May festival thrown in his honor.

Uh-huh. So how should we celebrate it?

While the festival historically takes place in the Pradera de San Isidro (a meadow in Carabanchel), it has since spread throughout the entire city. Activities sputter to a start during the week but officially kick off with the commencement speech (pregón) on Friday at 8pm in the Plaza de la Villa, attended by city officials and an invited celebrity—2016's is the musician Santiago Auserón, a staple of the Movida Madrileña. The celebrations will last until Monday evening.

Top 10 things to do (2016):

- 1. Grab a guide and find what you like:** [The official San Isidro guide](#) is the one true resource, praise be upon it.
- 2. Go to a free open-air concert:** *(Everywhere throughout the long weekend)* There are many free open-air concerts throughout Madrid during San Isidro, including in the Plaza Mayor, Las Vistillas and Plaza de la Villa. On several nights at 9pm, for example, live classical music is played next to Templo De Dubod as the sun goes down. It's worth seeing. Again, [the official guide](#) is your best source here.
- 3. Have yourself a class picnic in the Pradera** *(Sunday 15th is the big day – Pradera de San Isidro, though there are also events on Saturday and Monday)* This is the most emblematic part of the festival. In fact, the picnicking tradition here has purportedly been around since the 1600s, and by the time Goya used it as the subject of some paintings in the late

1700s the tradition was already widely referenced. The pradera area has many stands with food and drink of all sorts, so you can bring your own or buy food down there. It's an all-around good time.



Picnicking in the Pradera. I took this with a scratched-up iPhone 3GS!

Warning: last year there were about 12 toilets stationed for the thousands of people at the Pradera, so be prepared to do the festival's traditional holding-it-in dance.

4. Party on the street "Paseo de 15 de Mayo" (Primarily

Sunday, the 15th, to a lesser extent Saturday and Monday / next to metro stop Marqués de Vadillo) The San Isidro Festival has a very prominent “barrio” feel to it, and the neighborhood next to the Pradera de San Isidro (Marqués de Vadillo Metro) reigns supreme. They even named the major street that cuts through it after the date of the celebration, May 15th. Go here to drink wine and beer from the bars that set up stands along the street, then head onward to the Pradera for your picnic.

5. Check out the tacky/amazing carnival (*Saturday, Sunday, Monday / Pradera de San Isidro*): Like all carnivals, it has rides of questionable safety and hordes of roaming teenagers, but it’s a good time nonetheless. Last year I enjoyed playing the childhood favorite, “shoot the single-serving alcohol bottle off a shelf with a cork gun.” There’s also a ferris wheel that offers a good view of the city.



Everyone's favorite childhood fair game, "shoot the single-shot liquor bottles with a cork gun!" This was San Isidro a few years back. I won!

6. Party in Las Vistillas (*Friday, Sat, Sunday, Monday near Puerta de Toledo, Jardin de Las Vistillas*) This little park in La Latina plays annual host to another of the city's "verbenas" (local parties), together with the Plaza Mayor and the Plaza de La Villa. The scenic gardens fill up with food stands, music, and people dancing the chotis. It's usually one of the first things that comes to locals' minds if you ask them about the holiday. (For acts taking place here, check the guide).

7. Drink Wine Under Fireworks/ Music in Retiro (*Saturday and Sunday, 8:30pm/dusk*): Bring a bottle of wine and a blanket, lay back and enjoy.



Fireworks in Retiro, a photo I stole from the internet because cell camera is incapable of this.

8. Check out the bullfights: (*Afternoons in Las Ventas*) San Isidro is traditionally the beginning of bullfighting season in Madrid, and it's actually the biggest bullfighting festival in the world. There are 24 afternoons of bullfights, including one specific day in which they all don Goyesco costumes, an event reasonably called La corrida goyesca. You can [find schedules online and tickets](#) for as low as 8 euros to some events. Others are quite popular and pricy, so get on those tickets ASAP if you're into the bloodsport.

9. Watch the little Parade of Big-heads and Giants (*Friday 13th at 6pm* –**Route:** Plaza de Santo Domingo – Plaza de Callao – Puerta del Sol – Mercado de San Miguel – Plaza de la

Villa): This strange little parade has origins in the 16th century but was rediscovered in the 1800s—it marches larger-than-life figures down the main streets of the center of Madrid. The giants are four pairs of monarchs who represent Europe, Asia, Africa and America. (Author's note: I've never actually been to this, but it looks moderately interesting, very grammable.)



the parade (source: www.madrid.es)

10. Hit Up the Castizo Swing Festival in the Matadero (*Saturday, May 14th, all day, The Matadero*) The endlessly hip Matadero can do no wrong. There will be dancing, singing and general rabble-rousing throughout the day and into the night on Friday, with live musical acts. [Check their website](#) for more details about the event.

10.1. Stroll by the Feria de Cacharrerías (*Sunday Afternoon, Plaza Comendadoras in Conde Duque / Malasaña*) Go get yourself a nice clay pot or something. You deserve it. [Here's a good](#)

[Lowdown.](#)

Thanks for the tips! So what's typical of the festival?

Traditional Dance: El Chotis

The history of the chotis dance is surprisingly recent, arriving to the Spanish capital only around 1850 from Vienna, but it's now considered a cultural hallmark of Madrid. You'll see people dancing it on stages or in groups, particularly in The Pradera, the Plaza Mayor, or in Las Vistillas park. The men traditionally don't move much at all, and it's said you can dance it on a single tile.

In terms of music, my person favorite chotis song, and perhaps the best known, is [Madrid! Madrid! Madrid!](#) I once saw an old man singing this passionately at a now-defunct karaoke bar off the Plaza Mayor. It was pure magic.

Traditional Clothing: El Chulapo

The spirit of Goya's Madrid is alive and well in San Isidro with some revelers dressing up like the 18th-century subjects of the famous Madrileño painter's artwork, in a style fittingly known as "Goyesco."

You've probably seen little children running around these days in their traditional chulapo/ chulapa outfits. Kids and adults alike dress up in this 19th-century outfit and go to the major festival grounds around they city. They're all adorable. If you're anyone, you might consider buying yourself the traditional *palpusa* hat. I certainly might.



Chulapos y Chulapas (source: www.barullo.com)

Traditional Food:

Rosquillas: Little doughnuts, sold mainly during the festival, usually made with olive oil and a slight anise flavor. There are different names for each type.

Las Listas: rosquillas with powdered sugar on top.

Las Tontas: rosquillas without powdered sugar on top.

Las de Santa Clara: rosquillas with glazed sugar on top.

Las Francesas: rosquillas with glazed sugar and almonds on top.



Traditional food is sold throughout the pradera. Here are some olives I spotted.

Fritura de gallinejas y entresijos: fried hen innards (A festival favorite of tons of people!)

Barquillos: little cylindrical wafers, similar to an ice cream cone. The seller, known as a barquillero, dresses up in a chulapo outfit and plays a type of roulette on something that looks like a portable oxygen tank. If you win, you get two barquillos!

Cocido Madrileño: the typical dish that comes out any time Madrid is feeling local pride.

Encurtidos: skewers of peppers, olives, cocktail onions, etc.

Vino en bota: a sac of wine. Like normal wine, but in a sack.

Clara con limón: Beer mixed with a carbonated lemon beverage.

Traditional Pilgrimage: Hermita de San Isidro

This isn't much of a "pilgrimage" considering it's right next to the Pradera where you'll be hanging out, but if you're of a religious inclination and fancy stumbling over to pay homage to Madrid's patron saint, be prepared to wait in an excruciatingly long line of mainly elderly Madrileños and devout Catholics at the Hermita de San Isidro. Bring a botijo to collect some of the healing water and memorize this traditional prayer to say when kissing the box containing his relics:

*"San Isidro hermoso,
patrón de Madrid,
que el agua del risco
hiciste salir"*



Hermita de San Isidro, the time of Goya and the time of Google Street View screenshots.

I want to whip out some interesting San Isidro facts while I sip a beer!

You do? Are you sure that's wise?

You can start by listing all the *rosquilla* varieties, that's fun. Make sure to not stop, even as people begin wandering away from you. You could also half-heartedly suggest a visit to the San Isidro museum, which occupies—in what seems to be a bit of a historical 6-degrees-from-Kevin-Bacon—a 17th-century house built on the spot of an even older house that once pertained to the Vargas family, who were the lords of the miraculous day-laborer.

If anyone accepts your offer to go, feign appendicitis and stumble away.

I need even more fun facts, I plan on partying the whole day!

Alright, settle down.

- The actual remains of San Isidro are kept in a prominent position behind the alter in the Almudena Cathedral, just in front of the Royal Palace in Madrid.

“Cool!”

- One of San Isidro's miracles involves feeding pigeons from a bag of grain that miraculously replenished itself.

“Say whaaaa?”

- One of his miracles was getting an angel to plow the field for him while he just sat around praying.

“Clever!”

His wife is known as Maria La Cabeza (the head) because her head was kept as a relic after her death, paraded around by believers to bring rain to the dry countryside.

“Quaint!”

- Someone in Queen Isabel’s court bit off one of his mummified toes in a religious fervor.

“Understandable!”

- Francisco Goya has painted several wildly different takes on the San Isidro pilgrimage and festival, including one in the grotesque style of his “Black Paintings” collection.

“Educational!”



See? Look how much fun they’re having!

- The “Puente de Toledo” bridge (also known as the “Puente de Praga” due to its resemblance to the Charles bridge in Prague) has a statue of San Isidro performing the miracle of saving

his son from the well. His son later died of other, non well-related causes.

“huh.”

That church visible from the Plaza Mayor as you walk down toward La Latina is called San Isidro church.



San Isidro church

“How about we talk about something–”

“Rosquillas” is how they translate “donuts” in the Castilian version of the Simpsons, and, Dunkin’ Donuts is known as Dunkin’ Coffee in Spain, all because “Donut” was already a registered trademark in the country.

“Listen, I gotta go...”

I want some key vocabulary.

Verbena: a festival for a patron saint, usually with traditional dress and dancing. *"This verbena rocks!"*

Romería: a Catholic festival based on a pilgrimage to a hermitage or sanctuary. *"This Romeria rocks!"*

Botijo: clay jug-like thing to collect water from the sacred springs. *"Whoa, sick botijo. Botijos rock!"*

Chulapo/a: the name of both the people and the traditional costumes for San Isidro. *"Hey, those chulapos rock!"*

Chotis: The traditional dance. *"Chotis rocks!"*

Goyesco: Goya-esque. *"This all feels very goyesco, which rocks!"*

Rosquillas (la tonta, la lista, etc...): typical doughnuts. *"These rosquillas are fine, I guess."*

Bota de vino: a wine recipient. *"I shouldn't have drunk that rockin' bota de vino all by myself. How goyesco of me."*

Where to find it on a map – "Pradera de San Isidro"

<M> Marqués de Vadillo (line 5)

[googlemaps

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/embed?mid=zGCIXzIDPGqs.kBmVv5oWRpGg&w=640&h=480>]

Cycling in Madrid: A Beginner's Guide

Madrid was, for quite some time, a cyclist's nightmare. While other cities around Spain and Europe were busy laying down networks of bike lanes for the growing number of urban cyclists, Madrileños dug in their heels and dismissed their city as an unbikeable exception—too many hills, they said, too many cars, and nobody's accustomed to those two-wheeled bastards in this kind of traffic.

But over the past two years, the culture has started to change. The ayuntamiento spearheaded a series of projects designed to embrace commuter cyclists, encouraging them to take to the streets that were once considered unnavigable death traps by the locals. The crown jewel of their push was [BiciMad](#), the public bike-share program modeled on similar ones in Paris, London and New York, which was unveiled last Spring in a shaky but ultimately successful launch. This was accompanied by a network of shared-use bike lanes slapped together throughout the city center, distinguished by a speed limit of 30 kilometers per hour and bike symbol painted on the asphalt, serving as both a safety measure and awareness campaign for honk-happy drivers not used to sharing the streets.



A recently-painted street last Fall, heading South through Malasaña. Priority bike lanes were part of the Ayuntamiento's push to make Madrid a bike-friendly city.

While not without its problems, the program has played a fundamental role in legitimizing and normalizing cycling in the capital. It's now safe to say that Madrid is a bike-friendly city. The cycling infrastructure is growing by the month, the mindset of the public has changed, and there now seems to be broad support for this healthy, fun, and sustainable means of transport.

I would also argue that there's a more subtle benefit to cycling here. Riding through the narrow streets of the central barrios offers a deeper sense of the layout of this city, a richer understanding of the space and distance that get warped behind car windows and destroyed in the tunnels of the metro. It's as if there were a rhythm behind the chaos of Madrid and cycling sets it all to the proper RPM, revealing a song too slow to be heard walking and too muddled at anything faster.

I hope you hear it too.

Every time I see an adult on a bicycle, I no longer despair for the future of the human race.”
– H. G. Wells

1. Learning (or re-learning) to ride a bike



Bici-Critica, a once-a-month protest to reclaim the streets for all types of alternative transport, features bikes and riders of all types.

Maybe you haven't ridden a bike in a couple years. Maybe you haven't done much of anything in years, and your physical activity has dwindled down to drunken dancing and raising toasts. That's no problem at all. You can learn to mount a bike again in no time, I promise. As they say, it's just like riding a bike: your motor memory is still intact, all you have to do is reactivate it. I'd suggest renting a bike or taking out a BiciMad and going for a lazy spin in a calm area, like Retiro or the Madrid Rio. You'll fall back into the groove of things almost immediately, and then it's simply a matter of building up your confidence.

As for those who have never learned to ride a bike, there's a [bike program run at the Matadero](#), the community and art space that can do no wrong. This program teaches adults of all ages to balance and ride using a safe, practical method. Even if you end up throwing your practice bike in the river in a fit of rage, you still get to hang out at the Matadero. There's nothing to lose. I ask that you consider this clichéd but ever pertinent proverb: "The best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago; the second best time is now." Cycling is the sports equivalent of literacy, something most of us take for granted but which some just didn't learn in their youth. If you've never managed to get your feet off the ground and wobble into a steady balance on two wheels, that's fine. I've never eaten poutine. Let's not let these become deathbed regrets.

2. Choosing a type of bike

The type of bike you ride is a matter of lifestyle and personal preference, but keep the following in mind:

Madrid has hills. Calle Segovia, which climbs from the river into La Latina, is the perfect example of the plateaued nature of this city, but it's far from the one. These "cuestas" pretty much rule out anything as heavy as a cruiser (though

you do see some people rocking them, whom we all salute.) This could also make a Fixie a bit less appealing to some, though they are by no means uncommon here. My neighborhood is awash in them with more showing up every week, proving once again that, along with Edison bulbs and burritos, Madrid catches on to transatlantic trends a decade after they explode.



A trail weaving through Casa de Campo, just outside the city center. These types of trails are only really accessible on mountain bike.

Madrid has dirt trails. Some of the best biking available in Madrid is around Casa de Campo and the foothills outside the city. There are beautiful, secluded routes that weave through those shrubby Spanish oak trees, but the rocks and dirt pretty much limit them to mountain bikes. It's worth considering how important this is to you, and to balance it with drawbacks that might come with a mountain bike. If you have the money or space to afford more than one type, make this one of them.

Madrid has long-distance rides outside the city. There are some great bike routes that spread out from the center which might be more difficult without a traditional geared setup. Again, this is personal preference. I'm partial to my classic road bike with the suicide shifters and a good derailleur (price, flexibility, quality) though again, you have options. Fixies are sexy, good in the city, and their riders are avid defenders of the intimate handling they provide, but they might prove more difficult on these longer stretches.

Madrid has thieves. If you want to get a nice bike, or nice bike parts, be prepared to buy the security measures for them. Your Brooks saddle won't last a week if not properly secured. It's best to buy mid-range or lower if you plan on leaving your bike intact on the street, and if not you should have a plan to secure your things. It's not uncommon to see cyclists taking off their seats and carrying them into bars and shops with them.

Madrid has a bike-share program: If you only see yourself using your bike from time to time and mostly in the center, this could be your best option. Joining the program is covered [in another post](#), but be aware of their many drawbacks, from understocked stations to the limited range across the city.

3. Buying a bike

Once you know what you're looking for, you should decided if you'd like to buy a new or used bike, though realistically a used one is your best option. It just makes more sense in this theft-heavy city, particularly for the low-paid, transient English teachers that read this blog. I wouldn't pay more than 400 euros for one, though it's possible to pay much less. My early '90s Peugeot, for example, is in perfect shape and cost around 200 euros. You can go even cheaper.

The most common sources for used bikes are these Spanish equivalents to Craigslist:

1. [segundamano](#)
2. [milanuncios](#)



Mountain bikes are a good option in Madrid. This photo was taken in El Pardo on a Sunday ride, while I struggled behind the dirt trail on my road bike.

When searching online, pay attention to the style of bike you want and the rough frame size that fits you, which can be easily [calculated here](#). It's probably best to search with the bike type (tipo), frame size (talla), and possibly the brand (marca) as the main keywords. For example, search: "Bici carretera, talla 60." Here's some useful vocabulary when searching for a bike:

size – *talla*

brand – *marca*

type – *tipo de bici*

Fixed gear – *piñon fijo / fixie*

Road bike – *Bici carretera*

Racing bike – *Bici carrera*

Mountain bike – *Bici de montaña*

Be sure to ask about any potential problems or peculiarities the bike may have. It's best to go out and check the bike yourself, ride around a bit, and talk to the owner. It's not nearly as intimidating as it might sound. Be sure to haggle.

If you're looking to buy new, there are bike shops all over this city, so you have some options. This guide probably isn't your best resource, but I guess I'd recommend a few places in the center, like FixedLand (bikes as low as 400 euros), Bicis Noviciados, and La Calmera, but there are also some specialty shops with fancier bikes and bigger price tags peppered throughout Madrid. Do some research and look around.

4. Notes on Law, Safety, and

General Advice

- **Buy a lock:** This is so important that it could be a category by itself. If you plan on locking your bike up on the street at any point, a solid U-lock or something equally strong is your only safe option. Securing your frame with a cable lock is like putting “do not eat” on your tupperware chicken salad in the office fridge. It’s also smart to lock up your wheels with a cable and to unclip your lights. People will steal anything they can.
- **Helmet:** They’re not required by law yet but they’re a damn good idea.



Things to never leave your house without: U-lock, helmet,

cable lock, rear light, front light and bike tool.

- **Lights:** You are required to have a red back light and a white front light after dark according to Spanish law. It's also just smart. when I first started riding my bike through Madrid, I was given advice by a seasoned professional to wear "*más luces que un puticlub.*" You might also consider a reflective vest if you are doing longer commutes in poorly-lit areas (they're cheap, most shops have them), though as far as I've researched they aren't required by law.
- **Bells:** Bells are actually required by law according to most sources I've come across, but they're a good idea regardless. Shouting doesn't seem to disperse pedestrians, but bells have a way of parting crowds like the Red Sea.
- **Hand signals:** Learn "right turn," "left turn" and "stop." These are particularly useful in heavier traffic or if a car is riding your ass.



Wine and biking can be a dangerous mix without moderation. Cuidate.

- **Cars, cabs and scooters:** Drivers have gotten much better in

the past couple of years, but there will always be jerks on the road. Don't let them intimidate you and know that you have the right to occupy the entire right lane of a road if you so choose. Let them bitch.

- **Pedestrians:** These are worse than cabs and scooters combined when it comes to bike awareness, so be very careful when they're roaming about. They cross the street by sound instead of sight in Madrid, so if they don't hear you coming, they won't even look up before stepping out in front of you. And, inevitably, it will be your fault.

- **Priority Bike lanes:** Frequently the priority bike lanes (30km with a bike logo) just end in the middle of nowhere, or suddenly jump over to a different lane with no warning, or let you out into a four-lane roundabout. Some cars pretty much ignore them. When you're in them you have the right of way, but if it's possible and safe, hang to the right so cars can pass with more room. You don't have to, but it's polite.

- **Streets without designated bike lanes:** It's best to stick to the far right lane (without going into the taxi-bus lane) and to occupy the entire lane so that cars don't try to split the lane with you. Occasionally they'll honk, but you have every right to be there. If you're feeling polite you can pull further right and let them pass, but this is not an obligation.

- **Bus-Taxi lanes:** It currently is not permitted to use these lanes on a bike.

- **One-way streets:** Try to ride with traffic at all times, or else dismount and walk your bike. This city has some very inconvenient one-way streets to discourage cars from going through the center, and unfortunately the rest of us get caught in the mess. The police have started to fine cyclists going the wrong way recently, so be very careful, particularly in on Corredera Baja right next the Plaza San Ildefonso (right

in front of La Bicicleta). It's a trap!

- **Traffic lights:** If you have time and feel safe, you should weave to the front of the cars for both a better position when the light turns green and for visibility reasons. (Be careful though—watch out for pedestrians and cab doors that might swing open.) This move is perfectly legal and sometimes there is even a designated space for bikes and scooters in front of the traffic. Aside from this, remember that you're considered "un vehículo más" on your bike, which means you have to obey all the same traffic laws as a car. The fine is 200 euros if you get caught running a light, 120 euros for running a stop sign.

- **Sidewalks and pedestrian areas:** It's illegal to ride on the sidewalks, so do it sparingly or not at all. I've heard rumors of a law excepting sidewalks wider than five meters, but enbicipormadrid.com offered a reward for anyone who could find the law and as far as I know, nothing turned up. Do not ride down Montera, the mall-like part of Fuencarral, or any other pedestrian walkway unless you are going very slowly or walking your bike. It's illegal and you can get ticketed (though I've never seen cops care too much here.) Usually there's a good parallel route, try to find that.

- **Roundabouts:** Unlike the rest of this city's bike and car infrastructure, I find these dangerous and try to avoid them at all costs. Some are five lanes wide and nobody seems to follow the rules. If you feel unsafe approaching a roundabout, abandon ship and walk your bike on the sidewalk. Remember, be a cyclist or a pedestrian, but try not to be both; it confuses drivers.



This new bike lane, cutting through Casa de Campo, is part of a growing push by the ayuntamiento to normalize cycling in the city and expand the existing infrastructure.

- **headphones:** Illegal while riding, even in one ear. (91 euro fine)
- **Cell phones:** Illegal while riding. (91 euro fine)
- **Cabs and car doors.** Watch out for these. If you want to ride to the front of cars waiting at a red light (which most do), ride slowly and carefully between the cars, and make sure they see you. If not, just hang back and wait for the light to change. Both are legal. Use your judgement.
- **Rain:** Rain makes this city slick. Very slick. Cobblestones, smooth white paint, big metal grates, pretty much everything is out to hurt you in the rain. For example, I fell this last weekend after a street cleaner hosed down the plaza to a squeaky-clean perfection, and my tire slipped out like socks on a linolium floor.
- **Drinking and riding:** Drinking and riding is a dangerous game. Know your limits and try not to do it at all. If you get caught weaving around drunkenly, you can get charged up to 500 euros.
- **Choosing a route:** Some bigger avenues have priority bike lanes but they're not always the fastest or safest route. Usually there's a parallel road that's calm and just as fast. Learn your routes.



The Royal Palace at Sunset, after a long bike ride through the city

- **Crossing Gran Via:** This one is oddly specific, but it took me ages to figure it out so I thought I would share: the best way to cross Gran Via from anywhere to the North is San Bernardo. Even if it seems out of the way, it'll save you time navigating through people or one-way streets going North. There is really no other way to cross that street without dismounting or riding on the sidewalk. The other direction (toward Malasaña) has many possible routes.

- **finest in Madrid:** Cops aren't everywhere and most of us have broken these rules from time to time, but these are the fines you can expect if you get caught doing any of the following:

- *Riding on the sidewalk: 60€*
- *Riding at night without lights: 60€*
- *Riding with headphones in: 91€*
- *Riding while on a cell phone: 91€*
- *Riding through a stop sign: 120€*

- *Riding the wrong way: 150€*
- *Running a red light: 200€*
- *Blowing positive when drunk: 500€*

(source: enbicipormadrid.es)

While you should take all of the above into account, it's really not as complicated as all that. Thousands of people of all types go riding through this city every day, and the numbers continue to grow. Get out there and join them!

Want to know more about cycling in Madrid? Check out these articles:

[Electric city-bikes in Madrid, a city that's turning biker friendly](#)

[4 Best Biking Routs in Madrid for tourists](#)

[Where to break a sweat in Madrid](#)