

Ostras! Spanish food phrases for aspiring natives

Want to sound like a true *madrileño/a*? Then you'd better learn about food. When foreigners first arrive in Madrid, eavesdropping can confuse. Why is everyone talking about milk? What do politicians have to do with cured sausages? Why do my students shout "oysters!"?

The answers lie somewhere in Madrid's food culture.

All things Madrid revolve around food. Work, school, family, and free time all have their feet firmly planted in gastronomy. Veteran Auxiliares not-so-fondly remember that first day home from school. Bewildered that Spaniards go 8 hours between *desayuno* and *comida*, you greedily shove muesli, bread, and ham into your starving jaws—a cruel introduction into how Spaniards think of food.



Other mealtime nuances scream “welcome to Madrid!” No, you can’t find a good lunch before 1PM, or any food except cold *tapas* and coffee between the hours of 4PM and 7PM. Half of the reason for eating *cocido* is for the next day’s *ropa vieja*—always made best by someone’s *abuelita*, who fusses over you and asks why you don’t want another glass of wine at 3PM during your *sobremesa*. Sharing *churros con chocolate* with your friends at dawn after a night of *discotecas* is a rite of passage into *la vida castiza*.

Madrileños have always loved food, and their language is no

exception. Madrid's people garnish, pepper, and marinate their speech with **food phrases**. From idioms to exclamations, residents of Madrid use food and food words to discuss politics, time, emotion, death, and much more.

So, here's my guide for the aspiring hispanophone to some of Madrid's best food phrases.

You'll see the usual (I'm convinced that oblong vegetables in any language are *always* sexual) and the not-so-usual (playground bullies "give you milk" while they take your milk money). And all will help you spout the foodie Spanish of a proper Madrid resident.

We'll stick to a typical Madrid diet: a mountain of bread, a hunk of meat and seafood, good eggs, milk & dairy, a glug of booze, and a small side of greenery and citrus.

Bread

Al pan, pan, y al vino, vino



Quick-marts have plenty of idioms for the curious linguist.

Let's start with two of Madrid's favorites: bread and wine.

For these two cornerstones of Spanish food, *madrileños* would appreciate you to be direct—the meaning of this particular phrase. “Al pan, pan, y al vino, vino” (“To bread, bread, and to wine, wine”) is a request to be direct. Using this phrase means you want someone else to call it like it is. Don’t beat around the bush and talk in circles—call your bread “bread!”

Hostia

Speaking of bread and wine, Madrid’s food phrase dictionary deserves an entire page to Communion bread (*la hostia*). The supposed body of Christ can mean anything from a grave insult to a killer descriptor. Simply shouting “hostia!” (if you’re surprised, or you just smashed your toe on a sofa, or Sunday’s *El Clásico* is not going your way) is kosher between friends or younger people, but many *madrileños* may take offense. To describe something as great or large, try *de la hostia*. After a night of a few too many, you may hear “***Hostia! Tengo un melocotón de la hostia!***” (see “Fruit & Vegetables” to know why).

Con las manos en la masa

Even the beginnings of bread are not sacred from Spanish turns of phrase. To see someone “con las manos en la masa” (“with their hands in the dough”) is to catch them red-handed. Did you just see Jesús cheating on his exam for the hundredth time? His hands were in the dough!

Estar empanado/a



This one is a great image. To describe the time when someone's brain isn't operating at full capacity, a *madrileño* will say "estoy empanado" ("I am breaded"). Whether that person needs a coffee, is distracted, or simply doesn't want to focus, their brain is battered.

Un churro



While these [fried chunks of bread and sugar are usually excellent](#), using “churro” to describe something else means that it lacks quality. For example, you may hear one of your students complaining “he hecho un churro en ese examen” (“I made a churro on that exam”), meaning he or she utterly failed.

Esto es pan comido

Is something incredibly easy? Then you may hear a Madrid resident exclaim “esto es pan comido” (“this is eaten bread”). English speakers aren’t too far off from their [“piece of cake”](#) or “easy as pie” with this one. Practice these phrases enough, and they’ll be like eaten bread.

Meat



Beautiful people and corrupt politicians.

Estirar la pata

Are there things you want to do before you go into the great beyond? Is someone going to croak? Kicking the bucket? Well, in Madrid, death is like a slaughtered animal—they lie you down, do the job, and then you “estirar la pata” (“stretch out the hoof”).

Jamón

Madrid and pork go together, and so do Madrid Spanish and pork products. After seeing someone attractive across the room, you may hear them described as “el/ella está jamon” (“he/she is ham”). If you refuse to do something, shout “Y un jamón con chorreras” (“Ham with frills!”) to show your disgust.

Chorizo

Pork sausage gets a special mention. While usually a spicy, smoky treat, the word *chorizo* also means “thief.” A *carterista* (“pickpocket”) may be described with “qué chorizo!” (“what a sausage!”). Sausage also extends to politics—protestors love the phrase “no hay pan para tanto chorizo” (“there isn’t bread for all this sausage”) to describe corrupt politicians.

Poner toda la carne en el asador

If you’re taking a huge risk, then you’re putting all your meat on the grill (“poner toda la carne en el asador”). Best used at gambling halls, or literally when at a barbeque.

Seafood



Sure it's on sale, but who's cutting it?

Ostras!

The quintessential exclamation of Madrid, outside of *joder!* My guess is that “oysters!” (“ostras!”) is a tamed-down version of “hostia.” Akin to the English “darn” and “damn,” just more nautical.

¿Quién corta el bacalao?

A phrase asked of mafia bosses is “who cuts the cod?” (“¿quién corta el bacalao?”). While seemingly random, the phrase has its origins in industrial traditions; in the *comidas* of old Madrid, guild masters and supervisors were the ones who served fish to their underlings. Whoever was at the head of the table carving the filet was the big boss.

Me siento como un pulpo en un garaje

Feeling out of place? Like a fish out of water? Then say that you “feel like an octopus in a garage” (“te sientes como un

pulpo en un garaje”) for the authentic Madrid vibe.

Eggs



You're worth a lot!

Tener huevos

Aside from the obvious connection between eggs and rounded male genitalia, *madrileños* will also shout “la cosa tiene huevos” (“the thing has eggs”) if something doesn’t work properly. Did your blender just start to spark and smoke? It has eggs.

Pisando huevos

Like any big city, Madrid’s day-to-day life can be pretty fast-paced. And, like any big city, you’ll come across people on the sidewalk who are simply walking too slow. While you dodge tourists to get around them, you can mutter that they’re “pisando huevos” (walking [on] eggs).

Te quiero un huevo

Are you crazy about your significant other? Then you “love them an egg” (“querer un huevo”). It’s because “un huevo” can mean “a lot.” Don’t ask. Just say it.

Hasta luego, cara huevo

If you want to sound cutesy, try the Spanish version of “see you later, alligator”: “until later, egg face” (“hasta luego, cara huevo”). It makes about as much sense.

Milk and Cheese



Bags have this stuff printed on them.

Ser la leche

If “hostia” deserves its own page in Madrid’s food dictionary, milk merits its own chapter. As an opaque white liquid, milk has its sexual euphemisms. But, if something “is the milk,” it’s quite awesome. If everything’s going your way, try “hoy ha sido la leche” (“today has been the milk”).

Estar de mala leche

Milk is good, but all milk will go bad. In this case, Madrid speakers say someone “está de mala leche” (“is of bad milk”) when they’re grumpy. Chronic/permanent sufferers of bad milk “tienen mala leche” (“have bad milk”) in their systems.

Me cago en la leche

By itself, “I crap in the milk” (“me cago en la leche”) can be a general exclamation of disappointment or anger. But, in conversation, it can hold all the hatred and disgust that a bowl of milky waste can possess. Save this one for when you mean it: “me cago en la leche de la puta que te date la luz/la puta madre que te parió” (“I crap in the milk of the whore mother that birthed you”).

Ir a toda leche

When someone is “going full milk” (“ir a toda leche”), they’re running full out. Full milk’s opposite would be “pisando huevos” (see “Eggs”).

Dar una leche

When someone smacks or hits you, they “give you milk” (“te da una leche”).

Que no me lo des con queso

A bit of gastronomy trivia: very high-quality wine is enjoyed by itself. For the snobby, consuming cheese with wine ruins the experience of both. The fats from the cheese coat the

inside of your mouth, limiting how much you can taste the wine.

As such, *madrileños* shrewdly ask “que no me lo des con queso” (“don’t give it to me with cheese”) to tell someone to stop ripping them off. It’s to help avoid life’s various glasses of *tintorro* (see “Alcohol”).

Blanco y en botella? Leche

Do you want to say that something’s obvious? As obvious as something that’s white and in a bottle (“blanco y en botella”)? Then try this phrase. Duh.

Alcohol



Botellón

Stay in Madrid for more than an afternoon with the younger crowd, and you’ll have learned *botellón*. Part hang-out, part

pre-game, part illegal, Madrid's party crowd gather in public spaces to drink "a big bottle" ("botellón"), usually of *tinto de verano* (red wine and fruit soda), *calimocho* (red wine and Coca-Cola), beer, or something harder. Controversial yet characteristic.

Garrafón

Some people swear that some bars will "give it to you with cheese" by filling their empty bottles of fancy liquor with trashy, bottom-shelf spirits. These liquors, the ones that melt your brain and lead to the worst *resacas* you've ever had, are called "gas cans" ("garrafondes").

Tintorro

There is [the good stuff](#), and then the not-so-good stuff. The wine equivalent of a *garrafón*. Usually used to make *calimocho* during a *botellón*.

Fruits & Vegetables



Ajo y Agua

The Hispanic world likes optimistic phrases. Some choose “no pasa nada” (“nothing happens”). Others choose “resolver” (“determine”). Some *madrileños* go for the vulgar: “garlic and water” (“ajo y agua”), a shortening of *ajoderse* (“to f*ck yourself”) and *aguantarse* (to suck it up). A nice message wrapped in a bitter casing.

Campo de nabos

What did I say about oblong vegetables? A “turnip field” (“campo de nabos”) is a “sausage fest”—a party with only men. You understand the image.

Melocotón

If you “have a peach” (“tienes un melocotón”), you have a hangover. An alternative is *cebollón* (“big onion”), meaning

the same thing. Who knew having produce meant you had one too many last night?

De uvas a peras

There's someone you get along with really well, but you only see him/her once a year or so. What we'd call "once in a blue moon" in English changes to "from grapes to pears" ("de uvas a peras") in Madrid Spanish. The expression comes from the agriculture—vintners harvest grapes in September, and farmers pick their pear orchards in August. If counting from grapes to pears, there's nearly a full year before you'll see that person again.

Also check out Madrid Food Tour's post – [5 Spanish Food Idioms and How to Use Them!](#)

Jewish Culture in Madrid & An Interview with 'Easy Latkes', a Pop-up Potato Pancake Delivery Service!

As an American Jew living in Spain, a country with a seemingly ominous absence of Jewish activity and culture, myself and my contemporaries often yearn for the taste and comfort of Bubbe's cooking. When I was a cultural ambassador, responsible for teaching the English language and United States culture in Spanish schools, I was often questioned about the typical foods of my home, New York. Describing a bagel—and explaining

its distinction from a donut or the Spanish *roscon*—has been surprisingly difficult.

A dash of insight and a dollop of news regarding Spain's Jewish population



A street sign in Segovia's old Jewish Quarter

During my time abroad I've investigated **Madrid's tightly knit Jewish population**. I received my first window into their world when I was invited to celebrate Rosh Hashanah with a lovely Sephardic family in their Arturo Soria residence. From them I learned that there are **3,000 Jews living in Madrid, 3,000 in Barcelona, and 12,000 scattered all over the rest of the country**—concentrated in locations such as Toledo, Cordoba, and Ceuta y Melilla.

This number is expected to increase dramatically now that **Spain has opened its doors to the descendants of those exiled during the Spanish inquisition**. I am following this process

closely because it directly affects my paternal family who are all Jews hailing from Mexico. The Spanish consulate of Tel Aviv has been flooded with inquiries by young Israelis who hope to move to Spain for its pristine weather and low cost of living. Their impending migration here will have unprecedented anthropological effects for all parties involved—ideally in the form of fusions between their cuisine and Spanish cuisine.

Some helpful info for Jews and Jewish culture enthusiasts in Madrid

For now, the Jews among the current American English teaching expatriates are slowly creating a sub-community amongst ourselves.

- We recently created a **Facebook Group**, [Jews in Madrid](#), which welcomes any Jew or Jewish culture enthusiast to join.
- You can also join [Marom España](#), a **Jewish organization** associated with Congregation Bet-El. This “young adult” group organizes holiday activities in Madrid.
- I’ve discovered a **Jewish product store** called [Judaica Los Olivos](#) located on Calle General Ricardos 190 by metro Oporto, which imports **Kosher products, texts and art from Israel**.
- Madrid also has a **Synagogue and Jewish Community Center** called [La Sinagoga de Madrid](#), located at *Calle Balmes 3*, ironically by metro Iglesia. Officially inaugurated in 1968 though holding ceremonies since 1907, it was the first synagogue in Spain to be constructed since the inquisition. My friend Paige and I took our cameras there in the hopes of snapping a few photos for this article. Unfortunately, the security guards politely requested that we delete the photos we had taken, but extended a warm invitation for us to return for the **open**

services on Friday evenings—as long as we bring our passports and NIEs.

Interview with Easy Latkes, a Pop-Up Potato Pancake Delivery Service in Madrid



2014 saw my third consecutive *Januca* spent abroad and it has been the most bountiful. I caught word on the *Auxiliares en Madrid* Facebook page, that one of my English teaching contemporaries, Casey, with the help of her Spanish boyfriend, Jose, had begun selling latkes and delivering them fresh to the homes of Madrid's Jewish expatriates and Jewish culture enthusiasts. I purchased a portion of latkes and apple sauce with every intention of sharing with my friends and private lesson students, but once I smelled them, immediately devoured them all without hesitation or *verguenza*. I applaud Casey and Jose for recognizing that there was a niche to be filled and that the Jews of Madrid would have *ganas* to support their operation. Casey has so generously allowed me to interview her

about her operation and future culinary endeavors.

DC: How did this latke delivery service idea occur to you in the first place?

Casey: Latkes have always been a true wintertime staple for me back at home in New York. This year, away from home during the holidays for the first time, I broke out the potatoes, onions, and oil, and whipped up a couple batches of them for my housemates—none of whom had ever heard the word “latke” before. Needless to say, they were a hit! In between scrumptious bites, we joked around about the idea of opening a Jewish deli, we realized that that wouldn’t be feasible, and then decided on the next best thing. Easy Latkes was our attempt at filling that same void of crispy deliciousness for the rest of the Jewish community in Madrid.

DC: How many orders did you serve in total? Which barrios of Madrid have the largest population of Chosen People?

Casey: Our latkes operation was active for a total of 72 hours and, in that time, we made and delivered over 200 latkes! The truth is that Madrid’s latke enthusiasts were not concentrated in any particular barrio, but rather all over the *centro*, namely in *Sol*, *Malasaña*, *La Latina*, and *Lavapies*!



DC: Did you meet any elusive Sephardic Jews? Have you had any previous experiences with Madrid's Jewish community during your time here?

Casey: I was hoping I might encounter some Spanish latke lovers during this project, but the clientele turned out to be American Jews and more American Jews, mostly English language teaching assistants, who missed holiday tastes of home. This might be attributed to the fact that I simply did not know how to best reach out to the Spanish Jewish community in spreading the word about my service, so tended mostly to advertise to an *extranjero* Jewish demographic.

DC: What are your comfort foods? What do you like to cook at home?

Casey: Latkes have always been one of my greatest and most beloved comfort foods, with a warm oniony deliciousness that takes me right back to many Hanukkahs in my Grandmother's dining room on eastern Long Island. Besides that, I am a huge

fan of macaroni and cheese, anything with avocado, and egg sandwiches.

DC: Is there a cute story about the circumstances under which you met in 2013?

Casey: Jose was my “language exchange partner” in Sevilla during my semester abroad. “Intercambio” quickly turned into something more, and the rest is history! We maintained the relationship across the Atlantic for a whole year and reunited last summer in Madrid. Even though our relationship has surely evolved, we still enjoy the perks of our intercambio/cultural exchange: This Hanukkah was the first we’ve spent together; I taught him what a latke was, and a couple days later he was making hundreds of them for Jews all over Madrid.



DC: Can we expect your service to be seasonal now that you’ve asserted your brand and established a client base? Do you imagine that you will prepare the typical food of the other

Jewish holidays? I'm imagining Matzoh balls, challah, hamanstachen, gefiltefish etc.

Casey: Yum, yum, and yum. I've been thinking about future food projects in Madrid, but it's too early to announce anything for sure. Before we can do anything too large-scale, though, we may have to supplement our 2-person team and bust out of our tiny Malasaña kitchen! Check back on our Easy Latkes Facebook page for updates!

DC: Now that I think about it, small *raciones* of typical Jewish foods would make excellent tapas. Do you have any ideas in regards to fusion with Spanish cuisine? (latkes bravas for example)

Casey: The possibilities are endless: Tortilla-latke, croqueta-latke, gefiltefish montadito, matzoh ball salmorejo (not sure how I feel about that one). As amazing of an idea as this may be, I'm gonna focus on finishing my first year as an English teacher, then I'll see about revolutionizing Spanish cuisine! Regardless, we are thrilled with all of the positive feedback and support this first project has yielded! Stay tuned!

Want to get some homemade latkes delivered fresh to your door during the holidays?

Contact: Send a message to **Easy Latkes** via [Facebook](#) to place your order (currently only available during the holidays)

Products & Prices: Batch of 13 homemade potato pancakes (8€). Homemade cinnamon-sugar applesauce (4€) Sour cream sauce (2€)

Have any other tips on Jewish culture in

Madrid? Leave us a comment!

By Dan Catalan

You can find more articles from Dan on his personal blog, [The Expatriate Adventures](#)

All photos of potato latkes and the 'making of' are from [Easy Latkes's Facebook Page](#)