

A weekend in Barcelona

The Catalan capital woos visitors with an irresistible mix of traditional and cutting-edge cuisine, from old-school tapas bars to full-on gastro-theatre. Roving food lover Kathryn Tomasetti is up for trying the lot



Sexy, sunny and with a ringside view of the Med, Barcelona has a reputation for year-round fun.

A mention of the Catalan capital evokes fantastic architectural façades, sprawling pavement cafés and late-night cocktails. For many visitors – me included – the city's main draw is its delectable and varied culinary scene.

A decade ago, Barcelona was moving beyond its foodie foundations of tapas and beer – still solid traditions today. But now the city is home to a generous dollop of 21st-century flavours, too, from locally led insider foodie tours to superstar brothers Ferran and Albert Adrià's *elBarri*, a playful mix of restaurants dishing up classic dishes and mind-boggling molecular gastronomy. I could hardly wait to dig in.

TOTALLY TAPAS

I used to be dismissive of *patatas bravas*, which is too often served as a banal dish of potatoes in a spicy slick of tomato gloop. Yet there I was on my first evening in Barcelona, deep into a plate of chunky chips smothered in garlicky sauce with just a hint of chilli. I'd been waiting a while to snag a table at **Bar Tomás** (Carrer Major de Sarrà 49), squeezed into the entryway along with dozens of Barcelonians. This authentic local tapas bar is in the unassuming neighbourhood of Sarrà, northwest of the city centre, and renowned for its interpretation of *patatas bravas*. Soon I'd piled up six other mini-plates of anchovies, preserved tuna and olives. There's no doubt that local is the way to go.

My tapas trick is to ask the bar owner for his or her favourite tapas joint. And so my evening continued. Next up, I *tapear*-ed northeast for grilled *padrón* peppers near Park Güell at **Delicias** (barrestaurantedelicias.com), followed by cocktails and Catalan *esqueixada de bacallà*, »

SUCH A BEAUTIFUL HORIZON... A view of the city from Park Güell



a salt cod and tomato salad, at **La Bodegueta** (rambla.labodegueta.cat), on the hip Rambla de Catalunya. It was a long but fruitful evening.

MORNING MARKETS

Despite the excesses of the night before, I began the following day early, with a wander through Barcelona's food markets. Tourist-heavy **La Boqueria** (boqueria.info) is the best known and the biggest of the city's 40-odd offerings, claiming 70 million annual visitors, but I was keen to see the local side of Barcelonians' daily shop. I went instead to the once medieval, now artsy El Born district's **Santa Caterina** (mercatsantacaterina.com, Mon-Sat), where the market's seasonal stalls – stocked with everything from live prawns to the fabled Ibérico ham from the Andalusian town of Jabugo – are topped with a rippling roof of rainbowed ceramic tiles. Locals sip thimblefuls of white wine for pennies per glass. In the working-class Gràcia district, a half-hour stroll to the northwest, an amble through **Mercat Abacería** (mercatabaceria.com, Mon-Sat) took me past stacks of *bacallà* (that dried salt cod again) and tens of thousands of preserved anchovies as I nibbled on a sack of fat green olives.

TRADITIONAL RULES

All those ingredients piqued my lunchtime appetite. The choices were many: total pork immersion at **Casa Alfonso** (casaalfonso.com), near the central Plaça de Catalunya and going strong since 1934; standing-room only **Quimet i Quimet** (Carrer del Poeta Cabanyes 2) for montaditos (open-faced sandwiches); or **El Nacional** (elnacionalbcn.com), a one-time textile factory, then theatre, which was transformed into a pan-Iberian bar and restaurant in 2014.

Instead, I plumped for age-old Catalan restaurant **Taverna El Glop** (tavernaelglop.com), in the heart of Barcelona's bohemian

Gràcia district. A single elderly woman sat elbow-to-elbow with a family birthday party, everyone devouring the rustic restaurant's three-course *menú del día* (£7). Strictly seasonal, it may feature sautéed artichokes in summer, the classic Catalan dish *xatonada* in spring (a salt cod salad – they do like their salt cod salads) and the local pork sausage, *butifarra*, with beans year round. As I rounded out my meal with citrus-spiked crema catalana, my waiter described El Glop's winter speciality, *calçots*: a giant spring onion, barbecued and served with a spiky, nutty romesco sauce. In my head I was already scheduling my next visit.

VERMOUTH-O-CLOCK

Mid-afternoon is the best time to explore Barcelona's hip vermouth (vermut) scene. This fortified aromatised wine, infused with herbs and spices, was once considered a drink for old men. Now it's seeing a resurgence (as it is in London), with young regional producers and bars popping up across the city. In Eixample (a central neighbourhood scattered with architectural gems designed by Antoni Gaudí), petite **Bar Mut** (barmut.com), with its vintage décor, is a case in point. Here homemade vermouth is served with elegant tapas, such as razor clams drizzled in olive oil with crushed garlic and parsley. Other top spots to sip the house vermouth include **La Cova Fumada**, a family-run bar dating from 1944 in the beachside Barceloneta district (Carrer del Baluard 56), and popular **Morro Fi** (morrofi.cat) in Eixample.

I made my way back north to Gràcia, where **La Vermuteria del Tano** (Carrer de Joan Blanques 17) is low-key and classic. Vermouths on offer range from Girona's famous Peruchi to a selection of spicy homemade concoctions. The venue is unintentionally cool... You're even given your own retro soda water siphon to dilute your drink. Pickled tapas, such as olives wrapped

in anchovies or marinated mussels, provide the ideal complement to the sweetness of the vermouth.

BANG-UP-TO-DATE CUISINE

It's clear that locals adore their traditional food. Yet an evening wandering through the city streets reveals Barcelona is revelling in an explosion of modern flavours, too. A prime example is renovated **Bar 68** (Carrer de Sant Pau 68) in the once edgy, now gentrified neighbourhood of El Raval. Bar 68 is a superb cocktail bar and restaurant, where chef Kaya Jacobs dishes up a fusion of Asian and Mediterranean tapas, such as seared octopus with homemade kimchi.

In Eixample, **Disfrutar** (en.disfrutarbarcelona.com), whose name translates as 'enjoy', is new and funky. It was opened by chefs Mateu Casañas, Oriol Castro and Eduard Xatruch, who used to work at El Bulli, the groundbreaking restaurant outside Barcelona run by Ferran Adrià, which closed its doors in 2011. The experimental eatery is refreshingly informal. Two tasting menus (£50 or £72) serve up dramatically presented, bite-sized courses, which might feature tempura truffled egg, or tangerines stuffed with a creamy mix of green mandarin granita and rosewater.

To get the lowdown on this new wave of contemporary Catalan cuisine, I checked in with **Enoteca Barcelona's** (hotelartsbarcelona.com) two-Michelin-starred head chef, Paco Pérez. "I was born and raised on the Costa Brava," he explained, "so I have the Mediterranean in my veins." He credits the environment, "from a morning walk along the beach, to a beautiful product growing in your garden", as the inspiration for his dishes, such as sole topped with prawn ravioli and wild asparagus.

Any other spots to try Barcelona's cutting-edge concoctions? Paco reckoned **Tickets** (ticketsbar.es) is a "must go". It's a tapas bar run by the Adrià brothers. "The influence

of these two is undeniable... They create unique concepts."

Tickets is part of the culinary extravaganza that is the six-venue **elBarri** (elbarriadria.com) project, created by Ferran and Albert Adrià and local restaurateurs the Iglesias brothers. The restaurants cluster near the central Plaça d'Espanya. The Willy Wonka-esque Tickets experience includes such flights of fancy as an 'airbaguette', a skinny puff of crusty bread wrapped in rubia gallega cured beef, or their legendary 'molecular' olives, which appear to be standard green olives but are really a bubble-like explosion of mouthwatering purée. Coming in 2016 is the top-secret **Enigma**, which Albert Adrià describes as "the last piece" of the ambitious project. ElBarri also consists of traditional **Bodega 1900** (en.bodega1900.com) and Japanese-Peruvian fusion and Mexican places that most foodie tourists might prefer to skip (let's face it, you don't really go to Barcelona for >>

Where to stay

• **Hotel Arts Barcelona**
Towering over Port Olímpic, this high-end hotel offers vistas over Barcelona's sandy coastline. Seafood lovers may join chef Antonio Saez for a private tour of La Lonja fish market (normally closed to the public), followed by a cocktail masterclass and a gourmet tasting menu (£110pp). Next course is 15 December. Doubles from £165 room only, hotelartsbarcelona.com

• **Hotel Praktik Bakery**
This hotel in Barceloneta, near the beach, has an irresistible attraction: on the ground floor it has a cosy café and fabulous bakery that's sister to Forn Baluard, one of the city's best bakeries. Upstairs, rooms are petite but bright, making for a stylish bolthole. Doubles from £80 room only, hotelpraktikbakery.com

THE CITY ON A PLATE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Bean dish at the porky Casa Alfonso; colourful sweets at Çukor; a rustic treat at El Nacional; Bodega 1900, where the brothers Adrià put a spin on the classics



MAIN PHOTOGRAPH: GETTY

WELL STOCKED, FROM TOP La Boqueria is the most famous food market in Barcelona but it's only one of 40; the Hotel Praktik Bakery describes itself as the world's first hotel-bakery

Getting there

Numerous airlines offer direct flights from various UK cities to Barcelona's El Prat airport, including British Airways, easyJet and Norwegian, with return weekend flights booked via momondo.com in October costing around £150.

Since last year, you've been able to let the train take the strain. A new high-speed TGV Duplex rail service now links London and Barcelona, via Paris, in just over eight hours. **GRJ Independent** (0800 140 4444; greatrail.com/grj-independent) has tailor-made rail packages from London St Pancras to Barcelona, which include three nights in Barcelona, with breakfast, from £625pp, with the add-on option of a BA flight home. Breakfast in London, Parisian entrecôte at midday, evening tapas in Barcelona? Yes please...

hungry traveller.

Peruvian fusion food, wonderful though I'm sure it is...).

INSIDER TREATS

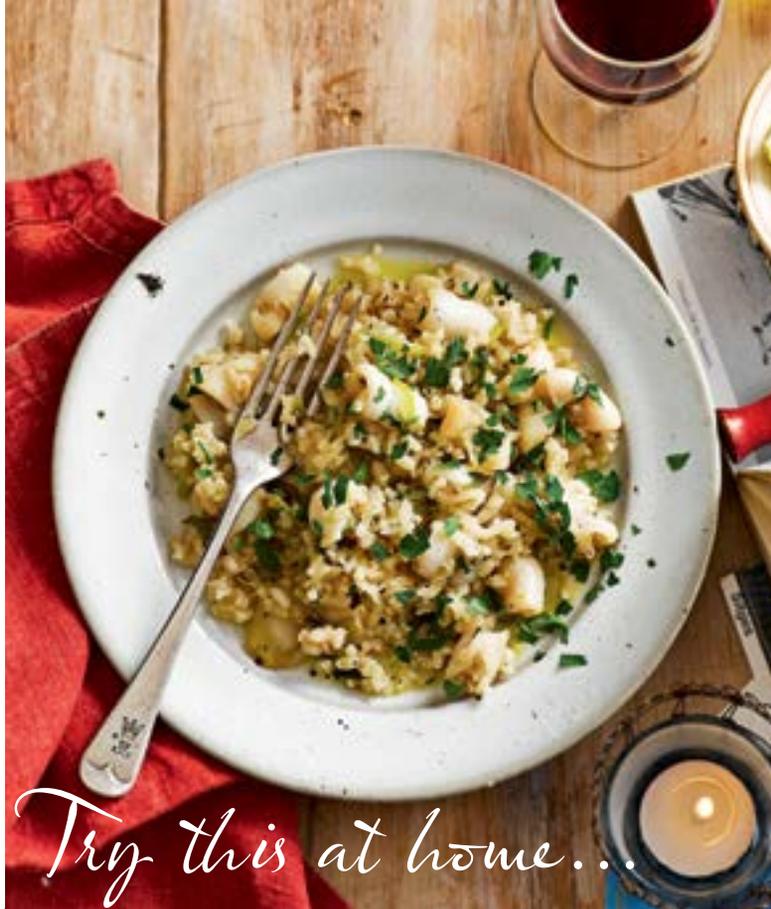
The following day, a bit of exercise was required, so I set off to meet local resident Mayya for her **Gràcia Sweets Extravaganza** tour (£40pp, two hours). Promising to reveal a side of the city often missed by tourists, it's one of more than 1,000 city tours offered through **Trip4real** (trip4real.com). The company puts visitors in touch with residents who offer guided experiences, including a behind-the-scenes peek at the Sagrada Família and more than 200 food and drink tours.

Mayya is a dedicated food lover with Greek-Palestinian roots, who settled in Barcelona in 2009. As she led me through Gràcia's labyrinthine backstreets, we chatted about everything from the healthy snack bar she stocks at a neighbourhood co-working space to her passion – the quest to eliminate global food waste. I had free rein to ask as many questions about Barcelona as I liked, and Mayya's responses were rich with detail about the city's food. En route, we stopped off at **Çukor** (cukor.es), a confectionery shop where a trio of Catalan/Hungarian/French owners create fruit-infused marshmallows (try the lemon-ginger) and handmade chocolates. They also offer regular multi-lingual sweet-making workshops. Nearby, cake-maker **Nanà Yoti** (nanayoti.com) whips up Greek-Catalan fusion pastries, such as the delectable layered orange mousse or strawberry cakes served in individual pots.

As we rounded out our tour with *xurros* (churros) doughnuts and mugs of pudding-like hot chocolate at **La Nena** (chocolateralanena.com), I realised my afternoon with Mayya had given me a level of intimacy with Barcelona that would be rare to experience solo. The temptation to return to explore more of this delicious city was suddenly all the more irresistible... [a](#)

NEXT MONTH

Where to food-shop, stay and eat in London



Try this at home...

Catalan rice with squid

SERVES 6-8. HANDS-ON TIME 1 HOUR,
SIMMERING TIME 40 MIN



Stocks can vary, so taste and season if you need to, and check the seasoning of the rice before serving.

FOOD TEAM'S TIP If the rice isn't quite cooked after 40 minutes, add a splash of water from the kettle, stir well, then cook until the rice is just tender.

- 250g spring onions, finely sliced
- 600g prepared squid, cut into pieces
- 1 tbsp olive oil, plus extra to coat
- Pinch fresh thyme leaves
- 500g risotto rice
- 100ml dry white wine
- 1 litre fresh chicken stock (see Know-how)
- Juice 1 lemon, extra-virgin olive oil and chopped parsley to serve

1. Put the spring onions, 100g of the squid, the 1 tbsp olive oil and the thyme in a large sauté pan. Season, cover and cook gently for about 50 minutes, stirring

occasionally, until soft and sticky.
2. Add the rice and stir to coat. Add the wine, turn up the heat and bubble until nearly evaporated. Turn the heat to low-medium, add half the stock, stir, then bring to a gentle simmer and cook for about 40 minutes, stirring often, adding the rest of the stock after 20 minutes. Cook until the stock has all been absorbed and you have creamy, soft rice with a little bite.
3. About 10 minutes before the rice is cooked, heat a griddle pan over a high heat until it smokes. In 2-3 batches, toss the squid in a little olive oil and season. Griddle for 1-2 minutes, turning once, then keep warm.
4. To serve, spoon the rice onto plates, then top with the squid. Squeeze over some lemon juice, add a drizzle of extra-virgin oil, then scatter with chopped parsley.
PER SERVING (FOR 8) 363kcal, 4.3g fat (0.8g saturated), 23.9g protein, 54.1g carbs (3.3g sugars), 1.6g salt, 1.7g fibre
WINE EDITOR'S CHOICE Pick a youthful, refreshing Spanish white – one made with the albariño or godello grape.