



# Catalonian to the **core**

**Jack Southan** roams Barcelona's culinary landscape, mapping the fusion of the city's cuisine and culture

**F**ood is central to Spanish life, and has evolved over the centuries to become the foundation of the country's culture and identity. Yet there is no part of Spain more fiercely proud of its cultural heritage and traditional cuisine than Catalonia and its heartland: Barcelona.

Dining is a way of life here, and this is recognised almost every day. The city grinds to a halt between the hours of 2pm and 4pm as locals gather to eat and drink in the city's famed restaurants, eateries and tapas bars.

Perhaps it is this laid-back perspective on life that has allowed such an exciting cultural history to develop. From the architectural genius of Antoni Gaudi and Ricardo

Bofill to the world-renowned artistry of Salvador Dali and Pablo Picasso, Barcelona has a reputation for playing host to legends. And if we're talking legends, this list wouldn't be complete without adding the names Ferran Adrià and Carme Ruscalleda – two of the finest chefs in the world, who have put Barcelona on the culinary map.

Adrià was born and raised in Barcelona and was responsible for putting Catalonia in the gastronomic spotlight as head chef of former "best restaurant in the world" elBulli (it closed in 2011). Then there's Ruscalleda, the first and only woman in the world to hold five Michelin stars, and current head chef of Moments restaurant at the Mandarin Oriental hotel in the centre of the city.

Barcelona is one of Spain's primary tourist destinations – over the past couple of years visitors have numbered more than 7.5 million annually – and a big part of this appeal is down to its food and culture. The beautiful



**Above:** Food preparation in Disfrutar

district of Ciutat Vella (the Old City) is renowned for having some of the best spots for food, drink and culture, and that's where many head after the working day is done. It incorporates the buzzing Gothic Quarter, hip Las Ramblas and the sunny La Barceloneta beachside quarter.

From Mediterranean fusion cooking and high-end tapas to heaving underground *xampanyeries* and exclusive cocktail bars, Barcelona has it all – as the following roundup of some of the Catalan capital's greatest culinary delights shows.

#### **HEDONISTIC DRINKING – CAN PAIXANO**

One of the best places in Barcelona to grab some quick and easy tapas, and enjoy a couple of hours of drinking and talking, has to be the magnificent Can Paixano *xampanyeria* (champagne bar) on Carrer de la Reina Cristina in the Barceloneta quarter. It is crowded, wildly popular and noisy, but this is central to its charm. Tucked away on a residential street, its glass-fronted entranceway does little to advertise what lies inside. But head in and you will be treated to one of the best experiences Barcelona has to offer.

Meats hang from the ceiling, an open kitchen

lines one side of the space, chefs shout and hustle between the endless wall of patrons, and Cava flows freely. Several bottles of pink fizz, incredible tapas and finger food and a long afternoon spent soaking up the conversation will cost you little more than €20 (US\$22). Try the cheese croquettes, the chorizo chunks and a selection of light bocadillo sandwiches and you can't go wrong. Prepare for a long lunch break and work on Spanish time so you can really appreciate it.

■ Carrer de la Reina Cristina, 7; tel +34 933 100 839; [canpaixano.com](http://canpaixano.com)

#### **CATALAN TAPAS – CAL PEP**

If you're looking for a hit of traditional Catalan fare, there is probably no better place in the city than the famed little eatery of Cal Pep. Nestled on the corner of Plaça de les Olles, in the heart of Barcelona's Gothic Quarter, this fast-paced restaurant is a gem for local cuisine. It's crowded every day during lunch hours and people will start to queue at 12pm to guarantee themselves a seat at the long bar. The food here is classic Catalan – hearty, solid and rich. Think



**Clockwise from above:** Ceviche at Via Veneto; Disfrutar's crispy bow with Iberian bacon; the world's best chocolate cake from Bubó; and Escalivada – it's a non-meat dish made up primarily of peppers and aubergines – from El Quim

foie-gras sausage in sweet port served with creamy *mongetes* (white beans), spicy clams in chilli and lemon sauce, or decadent duck tartare with crispy croutons. It's an all-encompassing experience.

■ Plaça de les Olles, 8; tel +34 933 107 961; [calpep.com](http://calpep.com)

**FINE DINING – VIA VENETO**

Stepping through the front doors of Via Veneto will transport you straight back to 1960s Barcelona. Dark woods and plush leathers set the scene in the lobby as you wait to be seated by one of the career waiters. The restaurant itself is elegant and luxurious, decorated with subtle pinks and low, intimate lighting. The history of this restaurant is ingrained in every aspect of the establishment. Over the 50 or so years it has been open, it's played host to heads of state such as Richard



Nixon, and celebrities like Woody Allen. Salvador Dali was a regular patron, dining here for many years, and supposedly loving to put on surrealistic "performances" when he came.

Everything has a very traditional feel, and the food reflects this. Probably the highlight is the ordering and ceremonial serving of the duck *à la presse*. A whole roast duck is prepared at the table, and the carcass pressed in a silver crusher over a low flame to create a rich and extraordinary gravy – the very essence of showmanship and extravagance for which this restaurant is known. There's also a cigar lounge upstairs



for meetings or simply to finish off the evening in reclined luxury. Book in advance.

■ Carrer de Ganduxer, 10; tel +34 932 007 244;  
[viaveneto.es/en](http://viaveneto.es/en)

### FUSION FEASTS – DISFRUTAR

Only a year old, Disfrutar is already making a name for itself as one of the best restaurants in Barcelona. Created by Eduard Xatruch, Oriol Castro and Mateu Casañas – the former head chefs at elBulli – this restaurant is a culinary experience that will surprise and delight with every mouthful. Based on the principles of Mediterranean cooking, this trio have created a menu with traditional roots but which is fused seamlessly with space-age molecular gastronomy.

Order either the 19- or 25-course taster menu and you'll be treated to some of the most exquisite dishes out there. Designed to fool the senses, each plate has something unique and surprising about it, which makes this restaurant very special. One of the best courses on offer has to be the Tarta al Whisky – you first wash your hands with single malt Highland whisky before sampling two beautifully engineered portions of golden whisky gel and a light ball of dessert.

■ Carrer de Villarroel, 163; tel +34 933 486 896;  
[en.disfrutarbarcelona.com](http://en.disfrutarbarcelona.com)

### MARKET DINING – EL QUIM DE LA BOQUERIA

Barcelona's premier food market is a veritable feast for the senses. The thronging Mercado de La Boqueria is the hub for food in a city that revolves around it. It is vibrant, colourful and captivating; the market stalls vary from fresh meats and seafood to juices and coffee, but the *pièce de résistance* has to be El Quim. Small and always busy, this little restaurant serves up some superb local cuisine. The baby squid with runny fried eggs is a classic favourite, as are the fried mushrooms with crisp foie gras. If you're not sure what to choose, just ask and see what the chefs

recommend. People drink Cava here from breakfast onwards, so get in a few glasses and be adventurous with the dishes you choose... it'll be worth it.

■ Mercado de La Boqueria, Las Ramblas;  
tel +34 933 019 810; [elquimdelaboqueria.com](http://elquimdelaboqueria.com)

### DEATH BY CHOCOLATE – BUBÓ

After you're finished sampling the tasty fish and meat dishes that make this city famous, dessert is in order. The unassuming Bubó café, found in the heart of the Gothic Quarter, caters for those with a sweet tooth. It is small, well designed and very modern. Although it isn't spectacular to look at, the food – and especially the desserts – more than make up for this. Order the Xabina chocolate cake and accompany it with a large glass of house sangria. The cake was voted one of the best in the world and is as much a piece of artwork as it is a luxurious after-dinner delight. The sangria is filled with chopped peaches and apricots, and hides a heavy dose of Cointreau. The café does many other beautiful desserts and tapas dishes, so select a few and try each one at your leisure.

■ Carrer de les Caputxes, 6; tel +34 932 687 224;  
[bubo.es/en](http://bubo.es/en)

### SPEAKEASY COCKTAILS – MUTIS

Hidden above eatery Bar Mut on Calle Pau Claris is the exclusive jazz-cocktail bar Mutis. Unmarked and incognito, it has a secrecy to it that makes it unique. Book ahead, make your way upstairs via the residential entrance around the corner from the restaurant, and so long as they are expecting you, you'll be led through to a small but beautifully designed bar which has hosted the likes of Robert De Niro (or so I'm enthusiastically told). The cocktails are some of the best you'll find in the city, and the atmosphere of the venue is excellent. It's open until late but doesn't really get going until midnight, as is the Spanish way. Order a Martini, relax by the bar and enjoy the music well into the night.

■ Calle Pau Claris, 192; tel +34 932 174 338 ■