

Trolling for Tapas in Madrid

BY JOHN THOMSON

The guidebook said 45. According to Fodor's, there are 45 museums or museo in Madrid, and from the look of things outside our rental apartment on Calle Mayor, it appeared we were kitty corner to one of them, the Museo de Jamon. What? A Ham Museum? How novel. Wrong. It turned out that Museo de Jamon is not a museum, at all, but a chain of eateries that serve ham, ham and more ham. Madrid sure loves its ham.

Full disclosure: My wife and I are not foodies. We'd be hard pressed to tell you the difference between a truffle and a turnip, but we are adventurous and we love sampling dishes from around the world. Spain is famous for its tapas so, naturally, we devoted our first night to searching out the best. Plus we were looking forward to the time-honoured tradition of getting free snacks with our drinks. Or so we were told. Unfortunately, complimentary tapas often meant a plate of potato chips. Trolling for tapas was a bust, but we did discover another specialty: churros, a deep-fried pastry served with cups of thick, dark, hot chocolate.

Los Artenos Chocolateria is a tile and arborite café on Calle de San Martin. Great-grandfather Don Florencio established the business in 1902 and his descendants, one of whom greeted us at the door I'm sure, continue his legacy. It was 9 p.m., time for dessert. The rest of Madrid, of course, was about to start its evening meal. Our server returned with a plate of eight doughy fingers and two cups of hot chocolate. I could feel my arteries harden. A group of locals at the next table were wolfing down their order and it was hard to keep up. Eventually, we had to throw down the towel. "Sorry, it's really good but we just can't eat anymore," we offered meekly. Our server looked more hurt than offended.

"What? You had churros for dessert?" our tour guide Andres Jarabo exclaimed the following day. We had signed up for a Madrid wine and tapas tour before leaving Canada and here we were, two days in, meeting fellow tourists for the first time in midtown Madrid and being berated by our tour guide. "We eat churros for breakfast," he sniffed. Tony from Birmingham revealed he started his day with churros and a bloody Mary. We all laughed. "Never, never as a dessert,"



Photos: John Thomson

continued Andres, as he started us off on a walking tour of La Latina, a nearby barrio.

Our first stop was a charming watering hole off the Costanilla de San Pedro. "Tapas means cover and we think this is how tapas started because there were a lot of flies," said Andres, holding his hand over the mouth of a wine glass as if to protect its contents from the pesky critters.

Our tapas consisted of olives, a simple but appropriate accompaniment to the featured beverage, a fortified wine called Miro. "It's very popular in Madrid," said Andres. "All the bars carry it."

Our next stop was a larger establishment, its walls covered in pork hocks. Once seated, we were



each presented with a small plate of sausage and pork belly, accompanied by a selection of riojas, intensely-flavoured, complex Spanish reds.

Our third stop, also, in La Latina, introduced us to the Spanish tortilla, a much different snack than its Mexican counterpart. The Spanish tortilla is a potato omelette finessed with butter, spinach and nutmeg. It has a very subtle flavour. Andres chose to match our tortillas with a selection of crisp, clean, whites.

Diving even deeper into the neighbourhood, we finished our tour at a very long, communal table. Servers brought out six wooden platters each heaped with meats.

“We have the ham, we have the tenderloin and we have the chorizo, which is sausage,” said Andreas, paying special attention to the sliced tenderloin that was marinated in garlic, paprika and cumin. It was melt-in-your-mouth delicious. The Muscatel flowed freely.

“The Iberian pig is unique,” Andres said proudly. “It’s free-range and lives in an oak tree forest and eats acorns and grass. And then you cure it for almost five years. Ham becomes more tender the longer you age it.”

I told Andres about our first night trolling for tapas and that potato chips seemed to be the norm.

“It depends upon the region,” he replied. “In Madrid, you don’t have a lot of that but if you go to Granada they have a big tapas with drinks culture.”

“Should have gone to Granada,” I murmured.

The rest of Madrid? We momentarily ditched cuisine for culture and hit Madrid’s three premiere art galleries, all conveniently clustered along the Paseo del Prado, a short walk from Atoche, the central train station.

Museo del Prado, with its emphasis on the Old Masters was magnificent, but exhausting. It’s so vast. Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza featured both classical and modern painting while Centro de Arte Reina Sophia, which features modern Spanish artists Dali, Miro and Picasso,

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was packed with tourists, ourselves included, anxious to see Guernica. The mural has a majesty to it that simply can’t be appreciated in a reproduction.

We couldn’t escape the lure of tapas, however, and several days later, stumbled into the Mercado San Anton in Chueca. Ostensibly a high-end super-market, the second floor was a foodie’s paradise, an emporium of exotic foods – sushi, Dutch pastries and lots and lots of tapas bars. It was a perfect ending

to our tapas hunt – delicately battered calamari, thinly-sliced salted cod, slices of chorizo served with a fried quail egg and very small new potatoes roasted and delivered in a spicy bread crumb coating. All delicious and all available at one euro each. The secret to finding mouth-watering Madrid tapas, we discovered, was to pay for them.

Paella? That too necessitated much travel and much delicious sampling. But that, I’m afraid, is another story.

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