

Rocking Around the Clock

Don't expect to go to bed early in Madrid; in Spain's capital city, dinner hour starts at around 9:30 p.m. and the streets remain lively well into the night

By Margaret Swaine

I was in Madrid when the vote for Catalan independence and the subsequent demonstrations began last fall. However, as is often the case with turmoil in a country, no matter how big or consequential, the only danger to tourists like myself and my group was getting to our reservations late due to road blocks. In this energetic city, sleepless nights were our main risk. While our heads never hit the pillows until after midnight, it was worth it. The city boasts many art masterpieces from the greats of Europe housed in world-class galleries. There's an endless list of eateries, wine bars and tapas bars, including 14 restaurants bearing Michelin stars, to try. And the nightlife is legendary. To top it off, the architecture, from medieval mansions and royal palaces, to cool, contemporary spaces, is beautiful. Here are some highlights worth checking out.



see

You mustn't miss popping into at least one of Madrid's famous art galleries, where you'll see Spanish talents, such as Picasso, Goya, Dalí, Miró and Velázquez, along with Flemish and Italian greats. The Museo Nacional del Prado (museodelprado.es/en) is the city's crown jewel, housing one of the world's finest collections (over 8,600 paintings) of European art dating from the 12th century. However, it's the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza (museothyssen.org) that really captured my heart. It's set in the Villahermosa Palace, the former home of an aristocratic family and the headquarters of a bank, which was converted into a museum by architect Rafael Moneo. This lends a special intimacy to the once private collection of almost 1,000 paintings, spanning the history of art from the 13th right up until the 20th century.



La Terraza at The Principal Madrid

stay

We started our stay at The Principal Madrid (theprincipalmadridhotel.com), a hotel in the centre of the action overlooking Gran Vía, probably the city's most famous street for its huge array of entertainment, dining and shopping options. The hotel's rooftop bar and lounge area have stunning 360-degree panoramic vistas of the city. Day and night, the rooftop is open for lounging about, drinking and snacking, while enjoying the views and fresh air. The hotel's main restaurant, Ático, features a more casual version of the avant-garde cuisine of two-star Michelin chef Ramón Freixa. The smoked green salad and the octopus with hot potato were winning dishes on the menu.



It takes maybe 10 minutes by taxi or half an hour on foot to go from The Principal to the Hotel Único Madrid (unicohotelmadrid.com), yet it feels like you've entered another world. While The Principal is in the action-filled, somewhat frenzied heart of the city, the latter, housed in a former 19th century palace in the upscale Salamanca district, is all about elegance and serenity. My room overlooked the private garden and outdoor lounge area, which was countryside quiet. On the streets of the Barrio de Salamanca, surrounding the Único, were the poshest shops in Madrid.



Ramón Freixa Madrid



Mercado San Miguel

eat

Dining times in Madrid have resisted the march of time. What we Canadians call lunch (and they call *la comida*) normally happens around 2:30 to 3:30 p.m. and is often the main meal, while dinner (*la cena*) starts around 10 p.m. (Don't even try for a reservation before 9 p.m. in many top restaurants.) Between breakfast (generally a coffee and something light) is *el almuerzo*, a mid-morning snack around 11 a.m., and as the sun sets, Spaniards head to the tapas bars for aperitifs, often served with complimentary small snacks, such

as chorizo or manchego cheese. If hungry, heartier-sized sharing dishes can be ordered, such as *pimientos de padrón* (fried green padrón peppers from Galicia) and *gambas al ajillo* (garlic shrimp).

From The Principal, it was a 15-minute walk to the Mercado de San Miguel, a lively covered market full of food and wine stalls, as well as a place to buy fresh produce. You can easily get a tasty, cheap meal here, which you can eat at communal tables—if you can find an open seat. In the nearby Plaza Mayor, many restaurants offer outdoor seating and typical Spanish tapas-style

cuisine.

The Único also had multiple dining options just around the corner. When we visited the ultra-trendy Ten Con Ten (restaurantetenconten.com), it was jam packed with beautiful people. Past the long bar near the entrance, are the more intimate and elegant rooms—perfect for a date night. The menu is contemporary and quite extensive with dishes, such as butterfish with truffle butter, red tuna tacos, squid in its ink with Filipino rice, suckling pig with roasted apples and *rabo de toro* (oxtail) hamburgers.

La Trainera (latrainera.es), open since 1966, is a local Salamanca district favourite for seafood. It's old-school traditional, with a large display of fresh fish and crustaceans in the front room, which also houses the bar. The back is a rabbit warren of small, tucked-away rooms. There, we dined on artichokes, asparagus, sea bass and sole. It was a simple, but comforting meal of familiar, well-loved flavours.

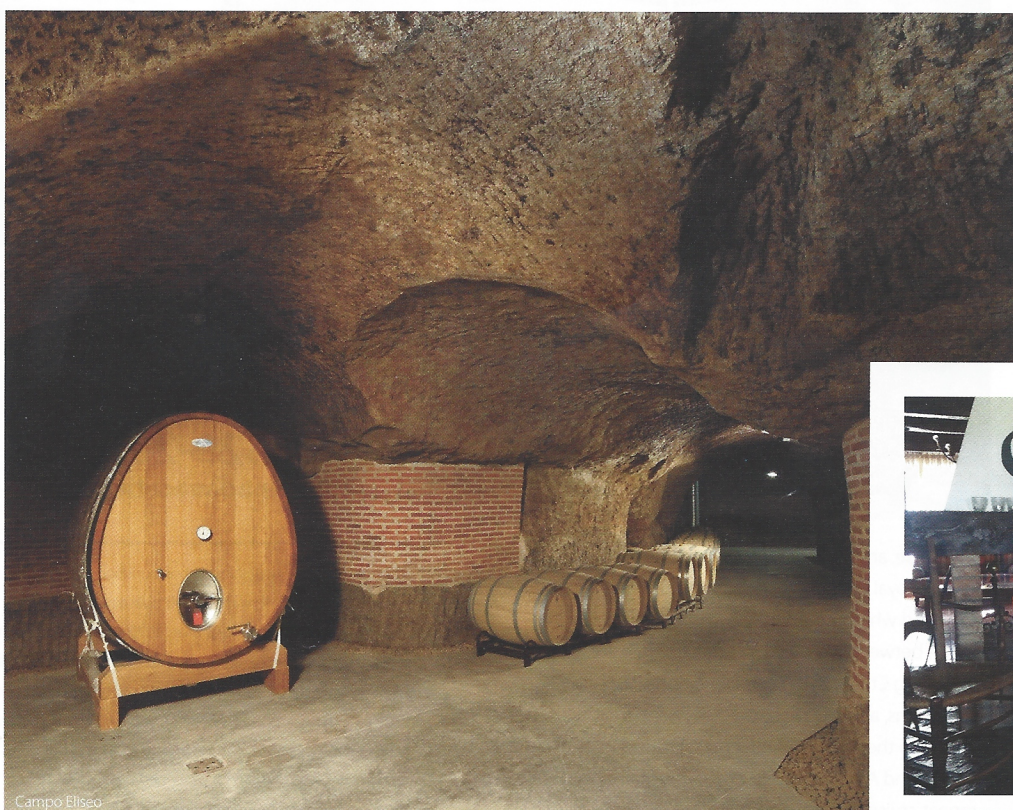
For fine dining, Ramón Freixa Madrid (ramonfreixamadrid.com) in the Único is one of only five restaurants that achieved the heights of two stars in the Michelin 2017 guide to the city. Catalan chef Freixa works from a base of tradition, but experiments with new ideas to create recipes that surprise and astonish. Our symphony of 20 moments with each course telling a "story" took from 9:30 p.m. until 1 a.m. to reach its glorious finale, every dish inventive and beautiful to behold.

drink

Behind The Principal is the barrio Chueca, which is one of the best-known gay neighbourhoods in the city. It's chock-a-block with bars strung out on narrow, cobblestone streets. We walked into one called El Ángel Azul (elangelazul.es) and ordered what might as well be Spain's national drink, a gin and tonic. (Spain is the world's biggest gin consumer per capita.) We picked a Spanish Nordés Gin from Galicia from the 62 brands available, which the bartender matched with a green tea Schweppes tonic before adding fresh rosemary, juniper berry and a bay leaf.

shop

The Salamanca district is the city's "golden mile," featuring iconic luxury brands, such as Etro, Chanel, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Armani, Miu Miu and Manolo Blahnik. It's also home to Lavinia, a wine shop featuring over 4,000 wine and spirit selections.



Campo Eliseo

explore

Spain is serious wine country, vying every year for the accolade of the most land under vine in the world. With over 4,000 wineries and some 60,000 brands and sub brands of wines, it should be no surprise that wineries are within easy reach of Madrid. A high-speed train will take you from the city centre to the country's famous white wine region Rueda in an hour. If you take this train to Valladolid, it's just a half hour taxi ride to La Seca, the cradle of the region. There are 25 bodegas open to visitors on the Rueda Wine Route. One not to miss is Campo

Eliseo (campoeliseo.es), built in the 1700s with a centuries-old cellar below ground. The winery works with travel agents to provide specialized tours of the grounds and will bring in a cook to prepare a meal or arrange for dishes from the nearby one-star Michelin restaurant, La Botica. We found our day trip to Rueda was fun, tasty and so easy that we were back in Madrid before dinner.

