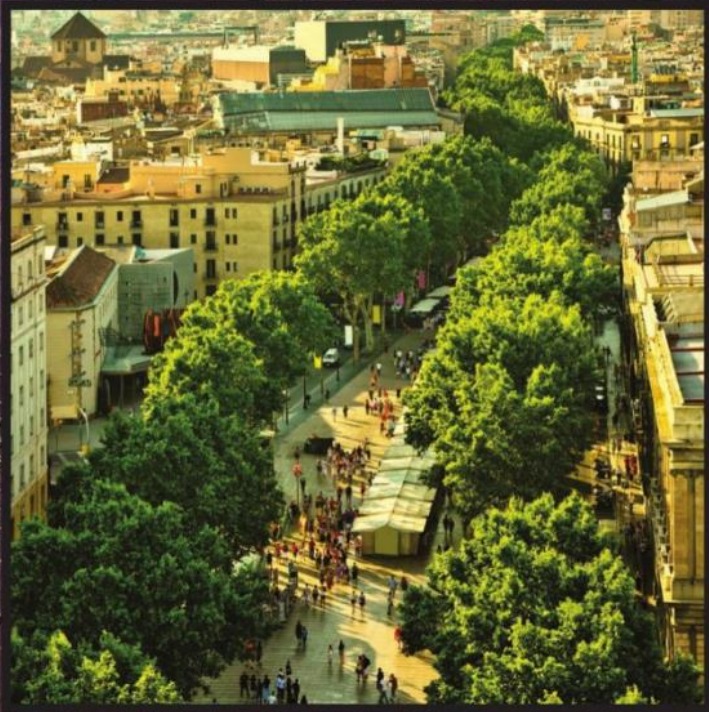




IMAGES: Carlo Bagnato/Getty Images



D E V O U R I N G
B A R C E L O N A

Contrary to popular belief, Barcelona is not all about tapas. There's much to be savoured when you book a foodie tour to learn more about Catalonia's culinary delights.

WORDS | FRANCESCA LYNAGH

WHO KNEW

there was
more to devour in Barcelona
than crispy chorizo sizzling in a red-wine sauce,
flash-fried prawns simmering away in garlic-infused chilli
oil, and chunks of salt sprinkled over blistered Padrón peppers? My
foodie tour with Devour Tours enlightened me.

A gentle aroma of coffee swept through the courtyard as I stood waiting for our guide. Just a smattering of people observed the sleepy square waking up around them, as they sat shaded under leafy trees. Barcelona is made up of 23 districts, but I could sense that this was a particularly special one, and I couldn't wait to sink my teeth into it. First, though, a brief but comprehensive Spanish geography lesson, delivered by our enthusiastic guide, Norah.

We passed a handful of locals as we strolled through the neighbourhood; some of them old and stooped, carrying fresh loaves of bread, others, young and trendy, swooshed past us on single-gear bikes. There was barely a fellow tourist in sight. The first stop was a small and unassuming chocolate café.

In Spain, we learnt, it's common for locals to have two breakfasts – a simple one early in the morning, and then a second, often more elaborate one between 10:00 and 11:00. When we were presented with a soft, sugary bun, otherwise known as a *suizo*, as well as *melindros* cookies and a rich, creamy hot chocolate – made with ultra-fresh milk, it was clear that this tour would not be for the faint-hearted.

Spaniards wouldn't normally have their lunch until hours later, but there was no respite for us. We powered on to the next tasting, being careful to say "Merci" – the Catalan way of saying "Gracias" – to the owner on the way out. Norah told us that using even the tiniest bit of Catalan during our time in Barcelona would make us instantly popular.

The entire wall at the next location was decorated with Iberico ham legs, ranging in maturity. We marvelled at the hunks of meat while the owner carefully sliced up samples for tasting. A thick and tangy nibble to start, followed by a slightly less salty and tender sample. The star of the show, though, was a delicate, nutty sliver of ham from a specimen that had been aged for five and a half years.

Norah had to drag us away towards one of Gràcia's 43 fresh-produce markets, *Mercat de la Llibertat*. All of the counters were immaculate, and it was noticeably less overcrowded than the famous *La Boqueria* market in the centre of town. As the olive-counter owner proudly told us that Spain produces almost half of the world's olive oil, more than three times as much as Italy, Greece or Tunisia, he handed us a selection of green, black, spicy and garlic-doused varieties to sample; all of them satisfyingly piquant.

We observed the adjacent vendor massaging a tomato into a slab of bread, as he made the traditional dish, "pan con tomate". In a patriotic tone, Norah joked, "In this country, you will not find bread without tomato." A sliver of tangy manchego later, and we were on our way once more.

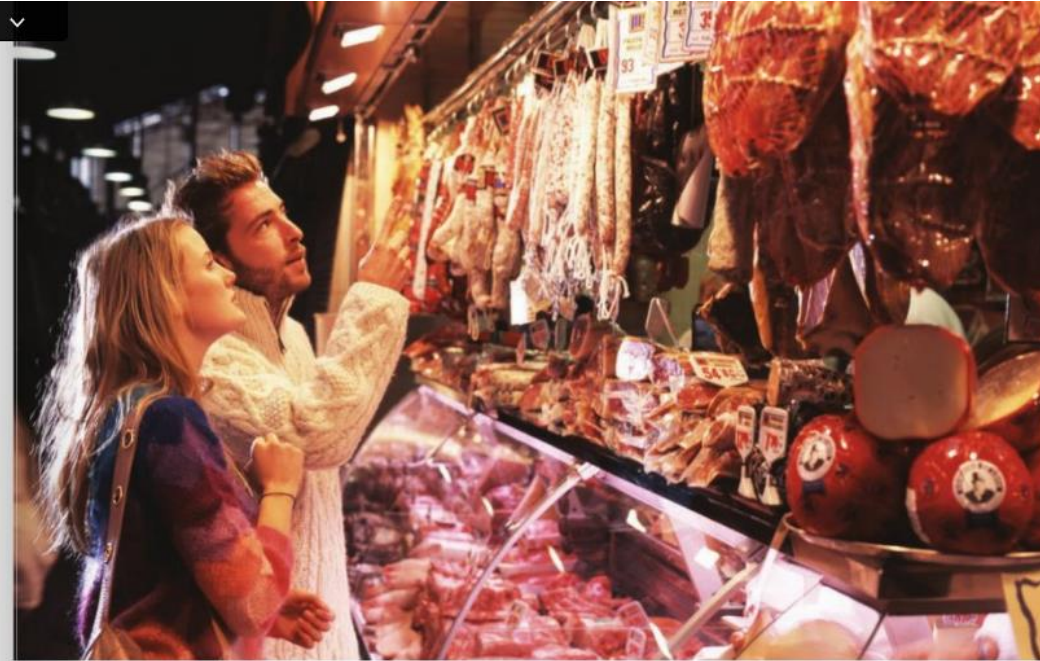
With exclamations of "Bon Dia!" ("Buenos Días" in Spanish), we piled into a charming tapas bar-restaurant down the road. On the menu here was a homemade sausage served between two pieces of crusty bread, moistened by – you guessed it – rubbing tomato on it. The perfect pairing? A fizzing glass of cava.

After all, it was past midday.

The next beverage was served in a dark and dingy back room of a

Previous page: preparing Iberico ham sandwich/Spanish bocadillo de jamon iberico; La Rambla Barcelona; this page: young couple at meat counter in market; calçots, a large green onion, roasted and served with romesco sauce; detail of the exterior façade of the Sant Antoni Market

saasawubona.com



SITTING AMONGST THE WINE BARRELS WE FELT TRANSPORTED BACK IN TIME



bodega – meaning wine shop – that has been a favourite with locals for the past 80 years or so. Sitting amongst the dusty wine barrels and vintage posters, we felt instantly transported back in time. The only other table in there was occupied by a group of octogenarians sipping on vermouth, while one of their grandchildren lay fast asleep in a pram next to them. We too sampled the sweet, red vermouth, which originally started out as white wine but became darker after being infused with caramel, spices and botanicals.

Heading back out into the glaring sun with the sweet warmth of vermouth still on our tongues, we continued on through Gràcia's labyrinth of pedestrianised streets. Stopping at a tiny deli in a particularly quiet corner of Gràcia, single-handedly run by a family man, we were each handed a small china dish of smoky grilled vegetables – otherwise known as escalivada, from the verb “escalivar”,

“to cook in ashes”. The dish highlight was undoubtedly the romesco sauce – a spicy fusion of red peppers, nuts, garlic, and olive oil. A parting gift from the owner was a small bowl of meatballs, homemade and tender, served in an intense bean-pea gravy which was slurped up eagerly by all.

Having started the tour with an injection of sugar, it seemed only right to end with one too. But thankfully, it was only miniature: a soft, creamy, almost jelly-like bite called a cremat. It was the texture and size of a perfectly cooked scallop, and in just one buttery and caramel-flavoured mouthful it was gone; the perfect sweet end to a truly decadent tour. With our appetites more than satisfied, and our knowledge of Catalanian culture and politics sharpened, we parted ways. Suffice to say, we weren't the only ones who headed straight back to the Iberico ham shop for take-home supplies.

THE ESSENTIALS

Devour Tours devourtours.com

WHEN TO GO

Avoid August to escape the heat.

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Sofia Located just 10 minutes from the starting point of the Gràcia food tour, and away from the crowds in the city centre, Sofia is a swanky and sophisticated hotel. Highlights include the lavish breakfast at the in-house restaurant, Impar, and the luxurious spa. The hotel is also in a very handy spot should you be in town for football – Camp Nou Stadium is just a short walk away.

Plaça de Pius XII, 4 sofiabarcelona.com

WHERE TO EAT

Mercado de la Boqueria Barcelona's famous market lies just off Las Ramblas. La Rambla, 91
La Pubilla Try the three-course “menu del dia”. Plaça de la Llibertat, 23
Elsa y Fred The perfect spot for date night. Carrer del Rec Comtal, 11

SAFETY

Pickpockets are rife in Barcelona – particularly around Las Ramblas.

COSTS

Expect to pay around €40 for a tapas dinner including wine for two.

GETTING AROUND

The metro system is easy to navigate, and taxis are good value.



GETTING THERE

•• **FLY SAA** flies to Frankfurt and Munich daily from Johannesburg. From there, catch a connecting flight to Barcelona on SAA codeshare partner and fellow Star Alliance member Lufthansa. Visit flysaa.com