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# DEPARTURES

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## Edible Expectations

Barcelona is bursting at the seams with new flavours, new ideas and new chefs. *by Ann Abel*



From top: Bar del Pla, a casual tapas eatery near Museu Picasso; the bruschetta-based pizza Michelangelo at Contraban

**THERE ARE REASONS** Barcelona has attracted (too many?) millions of tourists all these years. Gaudí's perpetually unfinished Sagrada Família and his stunning apartment buildings on Passeig de Gràcia. The charm and chaos of the narrow streets of the Gothic Quarter, and the bustle of La Rambla. The viewpoints of Tibidabo, and the beaches and port at the bottom of the hill.

Food had a way of coming in lower, with gastronomes choosing Madrid or San Sebastián instead. Even for those who picked Barcelona, it probably had something to do with the Adrià empire, especially the pioneering Tickets. But when that empire fell to Covid, something remarkable happened. With enough oxygen for other restaurants, and a new need to please locals rather than high-spending tourists, a genuinely interesting – and wildly diverse – food scene took flight. Said to have one of the highest numbers of restaurants per capita, Barcelona is stepping into its own as Spain's next great culinary destination.

On the playful gourmet side, the Torres brothers, Sergio and Javier, based the fine-dining experience at their namesake **Cocina Hermanos Torres** ([cocinabermanostorres.com](http://cocinabermanostorres.com)) on their childhood memories of being in the family kitchen while meals were prepared. The difference here is that the kitchen – actually three cooking stations spotlighted in the centre of the dining room – is hushed, the equipment is top of the line, and the beautifully presented dishes, such as the mussels moqueca with prawns, king crab, saffron and noodles on a cherry-red plate (called “Barcelona, Brasil” on the menu) are worthy of their two Michelin stars.

What is a bit more expected is a newly renovated outpost for one of Spain's most famous chefs, Martín Berasategui. His Barcelona restaurant, **Lasarte** ([restaurantlasarte.com](http://restaurantlasarte.com)), accounts for three of the 12 Michelin stars he retains, thanks to the skills of chef de cuisine Paolo Casagrande. He adds his own innovations to Berasategui's signature classics – when I visited, a deep-pink hibiscus-pickled oyster with white garlic and purple shiso granita set the tone for the extensive, exquisite tasting menu that followed, although I expect the specifics have changed by now. (It's one of those ever-evolving kind of places.)

Pushing the creativity even further are two more hotel chefs, Carme Ruscalleda – the only woman in the world to have seven Michelin stars to her credit, including two at **Moments** in the Mandarin Oriental hotel ([mandarinoriental.com](http://mandarinoriental.com)) – and Alain Guiard, who created a menu of “relentless innovation” at the boutique Wittmore hotel. At Moments, Ruscalleda's menu (in collaboration with her son, Raül Balam) is organised around the United Nations' 17 Sustainable Development Goals for 2030, something that is surely a category of one. And so, “gender



## More Expert Barcelona Advice

Kristian Brask Thomsen is a communications consultant for star chefs, a culinary ambassador, organiser of extraordinary dinner parties, and producer of documentaries about Michelin stars, who has chosen to base his life and business in Barcelona for the past nine years. As one of the most passionate eaters out there, here (in his words) is where he dines in his adopted hometown.



equality” is composed of egg, asparagus and banana, and “responsible consumption and production” is monkfish with green curry.

Not to be outdone, Guiard is cataloguing emotions in his jewel box of a restaurant, called **Contraban** (*wittmorehotel.com*). The menu is divided into sections like “impatience” (artisan cured meats, pork rinds, pig’s trotters with pistachios and pickles), “freedom” (cod croquettes with roasted garlic and parsley aioli), and “frustration” (beetroot cooked in a clay crust with cream cheese and truffle sauce).

Meanwhile, along with the high-concept flights of fancy, there are plenty of chefs in Barcelona who are just doing what they do best – and reminding us, along the way, that the Catalan capital is home to some 190 nationalities. That means that not only are there Japanese cooks, but there are also sushi chefs from Brazil, a country with a huge Japanese population and one of the best sushi scenes in the world. One of those is Saulo Meireles, who opened **Shido** (*shidorestaurant.com*) at the end of 2021, and who infuses super-fresh fish with a craftsman’s touch, as well as a few Mediterranean surprises like nigiri with hedgehog and shiso in tempura.

No one can live on fine dining alone, of course, and Barcelona is also hitting its stride as a city for good eating in casual surroundings. At the upper end of everyday is **Suculent** (*suculent.com*), an ambitious yet relaxed bistro in an unmanicured corner of Rambla Raval. Head chef Antonio Romero passed through some of Spain’s most famous kitchens on his way here, and it shows in his skills with sauces (the name not only sounds like succulent in English but also references the Catalan “sucar lent,” to dip slowly), as seen in dishes like Iberian pork-jowl tartare with almond milk and caviar.

That one is favoured to win a Michelin star later this year, but Barcelona also has its share of places with no Michelin pretensions. The narrow tapas spot **Bar del Pla** (*bardelpla.cat*) advertises itself as a place for folks who “like going out to eat but don’t always feel like going to a restaurant”. Instead, it’s a counter-seating joint with a great selection of natural and biodynamic wines and a range of seasonal small plates like squid ink croquettes and crispy oxtail with foie gras.

And speaking of tapas bars, it’s hard to do better anywhere than **Bar Cañete** (*barcanete.com*), a third-generation restaurant specialising in comfort food and classics, like fried artichokes and bellota ham, composed dishes like the delicious tomato salad with cured tuna and anchovies, and a whole section of the menu – featuring plates like aged beef with foie gras and truffle sauce – that appear to be dedicated to the motto of the place. “F\*ck your diet”, reads the motto on the menus and the placemats. It’s a good rule of thumb for Barcelona dining in general.

### ALKIMIA/AL KOSTAT

Local hotspot for foodies in an extraordinary location, [alkimia.cat](http://alkimia.cat); [alkostat.cat](http://alkostat.cat)

### BAR MUT

A Barcelona classic. Bring your lover, [barmut.com](http://barmut.com)

### COMPARTIR

Disfrutar’s new casual restaurant. Enough said, [compartirbarcelona.com](http://compartirbarcelona.com)

### DIREKTE

Top-market cuisine at a nine-seat counter in La Boqueria, [direkte.cat](http://direkte.cat)

### DOS PEBROTS

Informal spot serving the evolution of Mediterranean gastronomy, [dospebrots.com](http://dospebrots.com)

### ESTIMAR

Best seafood in town. Top products, [restaurante-estimar.com](http://restaurante-estimar.com)

### LA COVA FUMADA

If you can find it. Want to make a reservation? Forget it, [lacovafumada.com](http://lacovafumada.com)

### MONT BAR

Top casual spot with elaborate cooking by the former Tickets head chef, [montbar.com](http://montbar.com)

### NAIROD

Heavy, deep-flavoured Catalan cooking, [instagram.com/restaurantnairod](https://www.instagram.com/restaurantnairod)

### TORPEDO BAR

Best burger in town, [bartorpedo.com](http://bartorpedo.com)

### XAVIER PELLICER

Most likely the best vegetable restaurant in Spain, [xavierpellicer.com](http://xavierpellicer.com)

### XEMEI

Casual Italian on Montjuïc serving spaghetti vongole to die for, [xemei.es](http://xemei.es)