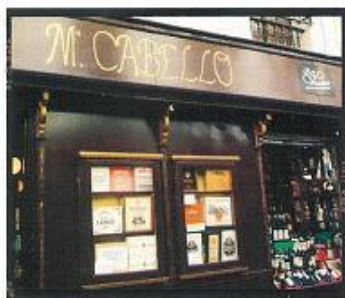


By Bel Mooney



When in Madrid...

...on this page, clockwise from top: tasty chorizo sausage; Bel Mooney on her tapas tour with James Fraser, centre, and Will Leonard; a Cabello wine store. Right: membrillo (quince paste) is traditionally served with local Spanish cheeses



The tapas bar was called Cervantes, and the clamour of voices and clatter of plates and forks rose to the smoky ceiling, high above a floor strewn with paper napkins. It was 11.30pm – midweek. All around me people sat at marble tables forking delicious plates of food with appreciation, at the same time laughing, arguing, and shouting for yet more wine.

In Madrid, the eating and drinking, which is a national pastime, goes on late indeed. This was the end of my evening, but many of those around me looked like they might party for most of the night. On the table in front of us were *tostadas* – toasted bread with toppings of raw salt cod and mushrooms – and a platter of *pulpo a la gallega*, a dish from Galicia consisting of potatoes and octopus that has been tenderised by being bashed repeatedly against a wall. As I was to discover, food in the land of the bullfight is not for the faint-hearted. Yet at this time of night, I was replete. I had to tell the nice young men who run Adventurous Appetites that mine had just failed, and all I wanted after their specialised tapas tour in the Spanish capital was to go to bed. What, with the wine unfinished? I'll never live it down...

To spend four days in Madrid is to expose yourself not only to a feast of art and urban beauty, but to a tapestry of tastes. The range of cuisine in the city reflects all the different cultural influences of a diverse land – from Basque to Latin American. During the day, a food lover can spend hours exploring the shops and markets of Madrid.

I gazed longingly at pastries and *pasteles* (cakes) in La Mallorquina, the famous shop founded in 1894, and indulged my sweet tooth with prettily wrapped packets of violet bonbons from La Violeta, a tiny shop where generations of courting *madrileños* have bought presents for their girlfriends. Very different was the Museo del Jamón, festooned with hams like Christmas decorations. In Spain, they use every part of the pig, and *jamón*, often in the form of sausage, is an essential part of many dishes. The *ibérico* cured ham is a real delicacy, delicious simply served with bread.

The vegetarian might move on quickly to discover the government store (Fundación Patrimonio Comunal Olivarero) devoted to promoting around 90 varieties of olive oil, and the old wine stores owned by the Cabello family. As for the markets... I visited three, and was entranced by the displays of fish (even though Madrid is right in the centre of Spain), ever-popular tripe, local cheeses with typical *membrillo* (quince paste), and every variety of fruit and vegetable – all of it (it seemed to me) reasonably priced, by our standards.

At lunch I stopped for fast food, Spanish style, at La Taurina, one of a chain decorated with stuffed bull heads. I ate *chopitas* (deep-fried baby squid) with *patatas bravas*, washed down with *tinto de verano* (new red wine mixed with sweetish soda). The three-course meal of the day was €8, and the quality was amazing.

After a necessary siesta, it was time to try Spain's signature tapas, those snacks with drinks that are now so popular in the UK. I was lucky >



They reign in Spain: clockwise from top: a selection of pastries; bulls' heads adorn the walls of La Taurina; sherries; a tray of delights at La Mallorquina

to have guidance, since I often make mistakes in new cities, ending up in tourist traps rather than authentic places. The two jolly, 20-something, multilingual Brits who run Adventurous Appetites were with me to share their love of Madrid and to give me gastronomic help.

James Fraser and Will Leonard devise personal tapas tours, which take an individual, a couple, or a very small group on a wonderful, informative trip off the beaten track. As you meander through the streets, they tell you all sorts of things you don't necessarily learn from the guidebooks, and as the 'pub crawl with food' goes on, you have more and more fun. It's an inspired idea.

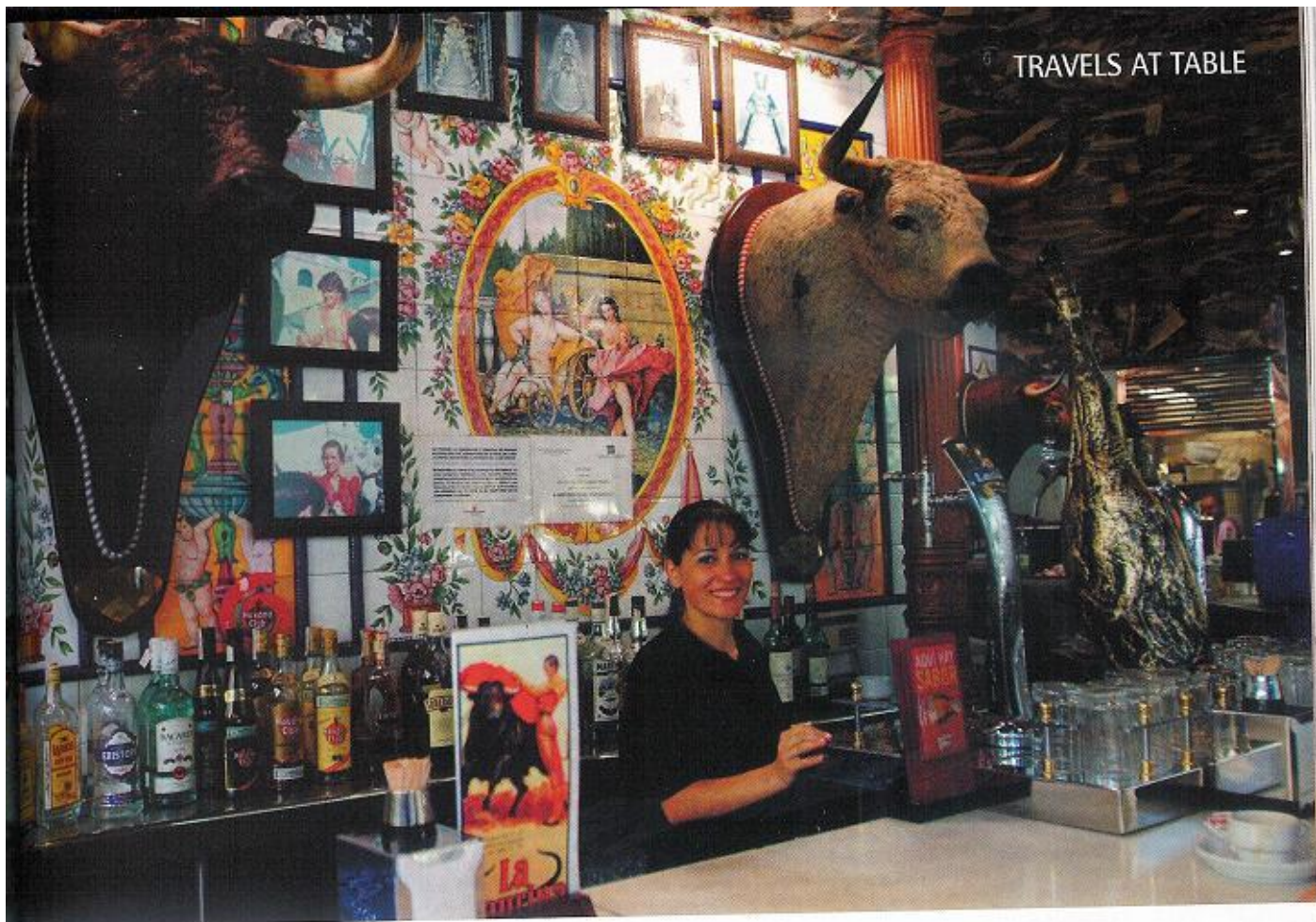
We started the tour in El Nera, famous for its Asturian food. There we sampled *sidra* - Asturian cider, poured from on high with great skill by a barman who kept his eyes ahead, knowing he wouldn't miss the glass. For tapas we were served cabrales cheese on bread, and we also sampled meltingly soft chorizo sausage fried in a little cider. James warned me, 'After this, we'll try some sherry, then a vermouth - so pace yourself.' This was going to be hard. The sherry bar they took us to hadn't changed in years: high brown ceiling, posters from the 1950s on the walls, dusty bottles. You don't like sherry? You'd be in trouble, because that's all they serve - straight from the barrel. Will and James brought a fino, an amontillado, a palo cortado and

I gazed longingly at pastries and *pasteles* in La Mallorquina, the famous shop founded in 1894

an oloroso to try and share, and filled us in with information about the sherry-growing areas.

The next tapas bar was noisy and crowded: not a tourist in sight, people shouldering their way to the bar yelling greetings... the sort of place I'd never have dared to enter. I would have missed the most eccentric décor I've seen in a long while, as well as delicious food. We tucked into *boquerones en vinagre* (anchovies) followed by an *empanada* (flaky pastry with tuna and tomatoes), which we divided between us. And so the evening went on, until I had to totter back to the hotel, Puerta del Sol's famous old Tío Pepe sign twinkling overhead.

Will and James also recommend restaurants. That's how I ended up at the wonderful old Taberna Carmencita. Tiny, with brown walls and lace curtains, this family restaurant served bowls of *ajo blanco* (chilled almond soup) followed by monkfish grilled with olive oil and herbs. Perfection. The next night, I invited the boys to join me at Casa Lucio, where Queen Sofia brought George W Bush's mother, Barbara, who loved the speciality dish:



egg and chips. James demonstrated how to eat Spanish style, starting with tripe cooked with black pudding, chorizo and paprika, followed by a steak so rare it was blue. But, being less adventurous, I chose gazpacho followed by hake in a green sauce - and we ended the evening tasting wine in El Tempranillo, where you can sample half-glasses.

Some restaurants are justly famous with tourists and local people alike - and that's why Restaurante Sobrino de Botin is a must. According to Guinness World Records, this is the oldest restaurant in the world, dating back to 1725. With beams, dusty cellars and crisp white cloths, it's a temple of food.

Ernest Hemingway used to eat here - and I can certainly imagine the carnivorous writer tucking into the house speciality: *cochinillo asado al estilo castellano* is roasted suckling pig, and the soft-hearted certainly wouldn't like the sight of these tiny piglets on their terracotta platters that the chef has pushed into the oak-fired oven with his *pala* (long spade). But the meat is like velvet. I also tried the other speciality of the house - clams in a tomato sauce - as well as creamy potato croquettes...

Now, here's a mystery. I understand why Velázquez is a great painter and I've even read *Don Quixote* - in translation. But I cannot comprehend how so many *madrileñas* remain so slim. Why, I didn't even get round to that Spanish staple, *padilla*... next time. ▶

MADRID FACTFILE

TRAVEL INFORMATION

Bel Mooney travelled with Bridge Travel. A three-night stay at the three-star Hotel Petit Palace Londres is from £315 per person, including British Airways flights from Heathrow and bed-and-breakfast accommodation, based on two people sharing. For further information, call Bridge Cities on 0870 191 4065 or visit www.bridge-travel.co.uk.

WHERE TO EAT

To find out about tapas tours with Will Leonard and James Fraser, call 00 34 639 331073 or visit www.adventurousappetites.com.

LA MALLORQUINA Puerta del Sol, 8 (00 34 91 521 1201)
LA VIOLETA Plaza de Canalejas, 6 (00 34 91 522 5522)
MUSEO DEL JAMON Gran Vía, 72 (00 34 91 541 2023)
FUNDACION PATRIMONIO COMUNAL OLIVARERO Calle Mejía Lequerica, 1 (00 34 91 308 0505)
LA TAURINA Carrera de San Jerónimo, 5 (00 34 91 531 3969)
CASA LUCIO Calle de la Cava Baja, 35 (00 34 91 365 3252)



DAVID HITCH