

A COOK'S TOUR

Bursting with flavour

Get under the skin of the Spanish culinary capital; learn to whip up a dish or two

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BARCELONA'S cuisine, like its avant garde architecture, modern artwork and chic beach culture, is infused with energy and verve – explosive colours, nouveau styles and eclectic combinations.

The city gyrates whether you're traipsing along the marina of Port Vell, taking in Joan Miro's artwork or enjoying the sands of Barceloneta. Even Gaudi's Sagrada Familia Cathedral and Parc Güell scream modern flair with their organic-looking architecture.

It's no surprise, then, that Catalan cuisine has been sprinkled with edgy character. In the kitchen, Barcelonians blend simple home-cook techniques with unique flavours, giving the food its own twist.

Take one of the locals' favourite side dishes – pa amb tomaquet (crisp bread smeared with wild tomatoes, raw garlic and olive oil). It's easy to prepare, yet outrageously flavourful. Then, there's the distinctive Catalan esqueixada de bacalla (cured codfish salad), simply tossed up with traditional greens and the region's representative fish. For dessert, there's the regional speciality crema catalana, reminiscent of French creme brulee and Spanish flan, yet completely unique.

COOKING WORKSHOP

For visitors who want to delve into Barcelona's



Cook and Taste chef Teresa Rios demonstrating the steps.
PHOTOS NELLIE HUANG

cuisine beyond patronising its restaurants and markets, there is a plethora of cooking schools that take tourists through Catalonia's culinary traditions.

At Cook and Taste, I learnt to pick up a knife like a celebrity chef and stir up paella in a pan the size of a bus tyre. Chef Teresa Rios, a veteran of 13 years, showed us what it takes to prepare a complete Catalan meal.

FOOD SHOPPING

Before whipping up a storm in the kitchen, Teresa took us on a tour through Barcelona's major food market, La Boqueria. The market, famous for its organic food and fresh produce, is an explosion of colours and sounds, with smells of just-caught seafood.

Passing rows of rainbow-coloured fruit

and heaps of exotic herbs, we plunged into the market to find a display of wriggling codfish, giant calamari and scotching red lobster. Barcelona, being a port city, raves about its daily catch. And seafood is often used in Catalan dishes, such as mar i muntanya – a heavy stew of fresh king prawns and meat – and the iconic paella (yellow rice punctuated with condiments and seafood).

From the butchers' ceilings hang the country's iconic jamon: Quality cured ham so smooth and perfect some would pay thousands for. As we sampled the different types of jamon, Teresa explained the making of the savoury meat. "The process is long and tedious. The quality of the ham depends on the type of pig, what part is used and what the pig was fed. A leg of ham can cost between €10 (\$19.50) to €500."

The creme de la creme is the jamon iberico de bellota, produced from free-range, acorn-fed Iberian pigs.

GETTING HANDS-ON PRACTICE

Back in the stylish, modern cooking school, I fumbled in the kitchen along with other students. In a four-hour lesson, Teresa guided us through various stages of cooking, from selecting our ingredients to chopping them up and toying with the heat.

The school organises classes for individuals and groups, as well as company teambuilding events and seminars. Most students are tourists or foreigners living in Spain. Classes are in English, French and Spanish.

After the session of tossing and greasy mingling, we tucked into our creation. Flavourful pumpkin cream and sweet-as-gold crema catalana were no longer dishes on a restaurant table – they were the fruit of my own labour, which made their taste and the experience of transforming raw ingredients into tasty treats rather special.

STIR IT UP AT THESE SCHOOLS

1. Cook and Taste: Cooking lessons cost €60/person, including wine, ingredients and recipes. A visit to La Boqueria market costs €12 extra. Special dietary requests can be made. Bookings must be made in advance. www.cookandtaste.net

2. Travel Bar: Fun cooking classes for young travellers. €18/person (public) and €24/person (private group, min eight pax), includes sangria and tapas. www.travelbar.com

3. Catacurian: Full-day classes from €90 to €110/person depending on group's size. It also organises three- or six-day culinary and winery tours in the region. www.catacurian.com

4. A Taste of Spain: Five-hour classes from €160 to €300/person depending on group's size. A choice of traditional and sophisticated avant garde culinary classes. www.atasteofspain.com

5. Spain Dreams: Prices of classes depend on the tapas or menu you're cooking, ranging from €96 to €125/person (for groups of 10 to 12). A two-day culinary and cultural weekend can be organised. www.spaindreams.com

GO

Getting there: Many airlines fly from Singapore to Barcelona with one stop-over. Tickets cost about \$1,500.

When to go: In spring (April to June) when temperatures are pleasant. Summer can see temperatures up to 40°C and the city extremely crowded.



(From top) A La Boqueria seafood vendor and her catch of the day; success at making paella de marisco, or seafood yellow rice.

SHORT & SWEET GETAWAYS

<p>2D BATAM VIEW BEACH RESORT \$100 Per Pax</p> <p><small>Includes ferry ticket, 1 night stay with breakfast and return land transfers in Batam.</small></p>	<p>3D WOW BALI GETAWAY \$338 Per Pax</p> <p>BONUS FREE 3rd Night + 1 Dinner for 2 persons!</p> <p><small>Includes return air ticket on Garuda Indonesia, 3 nights stay at Matahari Bungalow with breakfast, 1 tour activity and return airport transfers.</small></p>
<p>2D NIRWANA GARDENS RESORT BINTAN \$108 Per Pax</p> <p><small>Includes ferry ticket, 1 night stay with breakfast, welcome drink and return land transfers in Bintan.</small></p>	<p>3D KOH SAMUI FREE & EASY \$415 Per Pax</p> <p>MIN 2 PAX TO GO!</p> <p><small>Includes return air ticket on Bangkok Airways and 2 nights stay at Nora Chaweng Hotel with breakfast.</small></p>
<p>3D PHUKET FREE & EASY \$189 Per Pax</p> <p>MIN 2 PAX TO GO!</p> <p><small>Includes return air ticket on SilkAir, 2 nights stay at Bel Aire Resort with breakfast and return airport transfers.</small></p>	<p><small>Above prices exclude all prevailing taxes chargeable by respective airlines, estimated at \$18.20 - \$165 per person.</small></p>
<p>3D BANGKOK FREE & EASY \$225 Per Pax</p> <p><small>Includes return air ticket on Thai Airways, 2 nights stay at Ecotel Bangkok with breakfast, Free Half-Day City Tour and return airport transfers.</small></p>	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around;"> </div>

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Cook and Taste's recipes for pumpkin soup, noodle paella and crema catalana at www.todayonline.com/traveller