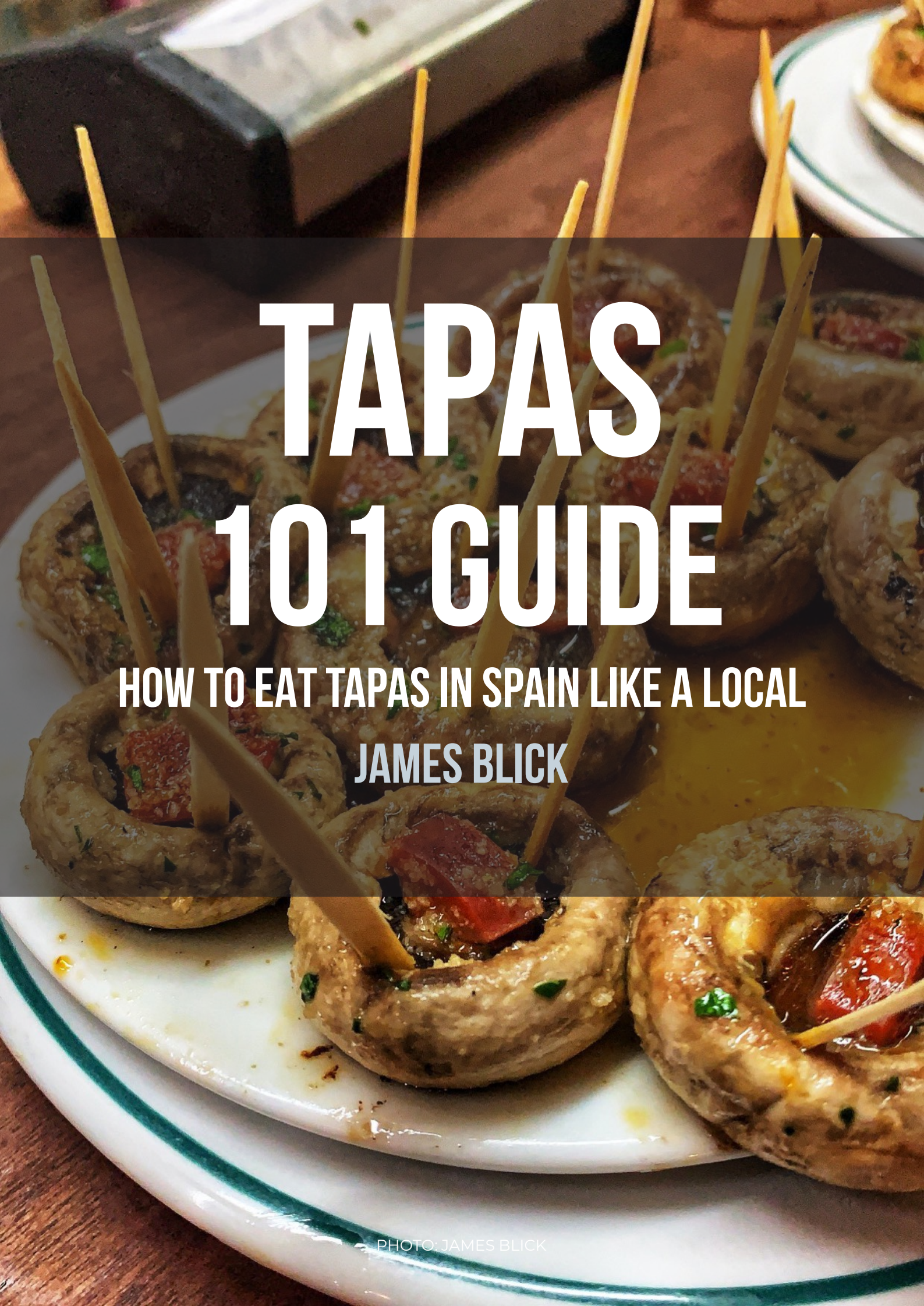




TAPAS 101 GUIDE

HOW TO EAT TAPAS IN SPAIN LIKE A LOCAL

JAMES BLICK

PHOTO: JAMES BLICK



1. HELLO SPAIN LOVERS!

Thank you for trusting me to help you experience Spain like a local!

I've lived in Madrid since 2011 with my madrileña wife Yoly (pictured above!), and **I'm obsessed with helping people explore this country deeply, deliciously and authentically.**

This free Tapas 101 Guide will help you hit Spain's tapas bars like a pro.

THIS GUIDE HAS TWO PARTS:

Part 1. I'll help you understand what tapas really are (most people get it wrong!) and give you some tips so you know how to handle yourself in these often bustling (and intimidating!) places.

Part 2. I'll give you my 3 favourite tapas bars in Barcelona, Madrid, Seville and San Sebastian! These are the places I take my family or friends to when I visit these cities with them! It's that simple! (Note: The bar names are hyperlinked to their Google Maps address)

This guide is meant to be used digitally. Store it on your



phone and save a tree 🌲

PART 1: WHAT THE HELL ARE TAPAS?

First, let me throw out something a little controversial:

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A TAPAS BAR IN SPAIN

Now let me explain.

Spain is full of bars. But “bar” doesn’t mean what it means in English.

I don’t think you can truly understand the concept of the Spanish bar until you’ve gone to a small village that only has one bar and entered said bar. It’s the indoor equivalent of the village square.

There are old men playing dominoes, kids running around, families eating together, a guy getting drunk on wine at the



bar. The whole community is there. Like the French café or the English pub, the Spanish bar is all things to all people.

It's the place where you can get your *café con leche* in the morning, your *digestivo* at night, and every drink and meal in between.

What's more, when we eat in Spain, we often share food. And when we share food in a dynamic setting, we're having tapas.

So, effectively every bar in Spain is a tapas bar – regardless of what it says on the sign. To illustrate this a little more: in Spanish, we don't say, "Let's go to a tapas bar." We just say, "Let's go to a bar." Of course, they're going to serve tapas because that's how bars serve food.

So you won't often see a place with a sign above it saying "Bar de Tapas"... and to be honest, if a bar does have "Tapas" in its name, it can often be the sign of a tourist trap.

 [Watch my video that explains what tapas really are!](#)



KEY THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN GOING FOR TAPAS:

- ✓ The tapas culture changes depending on where you are in Spain — which can make it very confusing! In the next section, I'll give you some tips on the regional tapas quirks of each region.
- ✓ A tapas bar is never too busy. It may look packed, but here in Spain, we have no sense of personal space. Translation: There is always room for more people in a tapas bar. So elbows out and in you go! (Barcelona can be an exception to this — as some tapas bars don't let diners stand in the bar area).
- ✓ If you're not sure what to order in a tapas bar, just order a beer (*una cerveza*) or a glass of red wine (*una copa de vino tinto*) and bide your time while you figure it out. No rush!
- ✓ Tapas aren't always called "tapas" on a menu. They might be called *raciones* (large sharing plates), *pintxos* (Basque tapas), or *tostas* (yummy things on bread).
- ✓ Despite the common belief to the contrary, substantial amounts of tapas are rarely given for free. Yes, you might get something to nibble on with your drink. But you're rarely going to make a whole meal of free tapas (unless perhaps you're in Granada).
- ✓ Think of tapas more as an activity, than a food. In fact, in Spanish, we have the verb "tapaer", which means to go to bars and share food with friends. So keep it fluid. Combine a few bars in one evening. Or just stay at one. There are no rules! Be

open to meeting new people along the way! To “tapear” is a social activity!

PART 2: MY FAVOURITE TAPAS BARS

MADRID

Pro Madrid Tapas Tip: You won't often see the word “tapas” on a Madrid menu. Madrid menus are usually organised into *raciones* (large plates to share) and *media raciones* (half portions). But you will often get a “free tapa” with your drink - nothing you can make a meal out of though.



Casa Toni

Casa Toni is the home of zero-pretensions and deliciously rustic no-nonsense tapas. It's my happy place. I go there when I'm hungry for fresh-off-the-grill treats like *chorizo* or garlicky mushrooms or a soulful plate of crispy *patatas bravas* in a slightly-spicy homemade sauce. The wine is average, the welcome is warm, and long may this place live. It's also one of the few remaining places — along with [La Casa del Abuelo](#) alongside — where the kitchen is a simple griddle and fryer behind the bar (which is how so many Madrid bars once were).

La Castela

Amongst two or three nondescript residential blocks in the well-heeled Ibiza barrio are some of the best tapas bars in the city. And my favourite amongst a strong bunch is La Castela.

It's always busy (so book ahead!), the free tapas are usually yummy and the plates — especially the seafood — are excellent. The food is traditional with a very light modern touch — uncomplicated cooking with excellent produce. The wine by the glass is good.

La Fisna

Madrid's wine bar scene has exploded in the last few years, and my favourite wine hangout is La Fisna, in the city's fascinating and bustling Lavapiés neighbourhood. They have an excellent list of interesting Spanish wines by the glass (beyond — but including — Rioja and Ribera del Duero) and a

shop out the back. Also, you can buy a bottle from the shop and drink it in the bar for a small corkage fee. Finally, the food is very, very good.

EXTRA TIP

If you're over tapas, and you want to sit down to a serious plate of food, then [La Posada de la Villa](#) is an excellent option. The decor is rustic Castilian and they do the best damn roast suckling lamb in the city. Pair it with a simple salad and a big bottle of wine and Bob's your uncle.



BARCELONA

Pro Barcelona Tapas Tip: While in much of Spain you never have to reserve at a tapas bar because you can always be assured of a spot at the bar, in Barcelona things are different. The Catalans more often dine sitting down, and that means in

many places (even tapas bars) it's handy to reserve. Plus, you generally won't get a free tapa with your drink in Barcelona.

Bar del Pla

If I could only eat at one place in Barcelona, Bar del Pla would be it. Delicious modern tapas (but not too modern, if you know what I mean), excellent wine, and a fantastic bustling atmosphere. If Casa Toni is my happy place in Madrid, this is it in Barcelona (though they're both VERY different). Oh, and reserve, reserve, reserve. Trust me, this place is popular.



El Diset

Like Bar del Pla, this bar is in the Born neighbourhood. El Diset is my favourite wine bar in the city. It has a particular focus on Catalan producers (there are several wine regions in Catalonia and a wonderfully long wine-making tradition). The food is excellent, especially the *tostas* (or *torradas* in Catalan) which are — put simply — delicious things on bread.

Reservations are again a necessity (are you starting to get the picture about needing to be organised if you want to eat well in Barcelona?) Start with an excellent glass of cava (begone damned Prosecco!) and move on to some of the delicious red wines this part of Spain has to offer.

La Plata

In all of Spain, it doesn't get much simpler, or more delicious than the iconic Bar la Plata. One tile-lined room, a few wine barrels and a 5-item menu, including perhaps the simplest and most delicious salad in all of Barna.

The chap behind the bar is Pepe and he is a hero — he's here at all hours, pouring wine and shuffling those 5 tapas from the kitchen to the hungry hordes.

The crowd of locals and tourists spill out into the streets creating a very festive atmosphere and ask for your wine in a *porrón*, which you pour into your mouth from a great height (the way we all drank wine in the days before we had a wine glass each).

Oh, and if you try to get a reservation here, they will think you're joking. So a nice change of pace there!

EXTRA TIP

You probably know that paella is from Valencia ... not Madrid, not Barcelona, not Seville. BUT that is not to say you can't get great paella outside Valencia.

If you're after excellent paella in Barcelona, then head to the beachfront [Xiringuito Escribà](#). They serve it with wooden spoons and if you're going true school, you simply grab a spoon and eat straight out of the pan (you can get individual plates too). Shotgun on the *socarrat*!

SEVILLE

Pro Seville Tapas Tip: Unlike other parts of Spain, in Seville you can actually order tapas-sized portions in most tapas bars. In fact, Seville menus are regularly divided into three price columns: tapa, media ración and ración sizes. I always stick with the tapa size — that way you can try a greater variety and it always seems the most cost-effective ordering method.



Casa Morales

This gorgeous old tavern is a Seville icon. It opened in 1850 and remains in the same family. There are two parts to the bar: the more ornate side which was once a shop, and the area with the large barrels, which was where wine was once stored (i.e. a warehouse, for want of a better word).

These two distinct spaces reflect the fact that back in 1850 this wasn't a tapas bar (there wasn't such a thing back then). It was a wine shop that stored its wines in the huge clay vats out the back.

Nowadays, both sides serve exactly the same food and drink, so it's up to you which aesthetic you'd prefer to be surrounded by. The *montaditos* (small sandwiches) and cured meats and cheese are excellent. I usually stick to them rather than the cooked tapas.



Palo Cortao

A relative newcomer, I discovered this place on a recent trip to Seville. The name is a reference to the palo cortado style of sherry (dropping the “d” to reflect the local Seville accent). And if you love sherry, this is your place — they serve about 80 of them by the glass. The menu is a short list of deliciously-prepared modern tapas. The staff are also very friendly and helpful.

Las Golondrinas

Over the bridge in the independent republic of Triana (local joke — the proud Trianeros consider their neighbourhood a city in and of itself) are a slew of tapas bars.

But my favourite has to be Las Golondrinas. They’re famous for their grilled pork loin on bread and their garlicky mushrooms, and both are excellent.

However, my favourite two dishes here are in fact vegetarian. First, literally, a plate of raw radishes topped with unfiltered olive oil and salt. My God... the crunch, the flavour! Next, carrots that have been lightly stewed in a cumin marinade. Another remarkable dish. Get here!

EXTRA TIP

Part shop, part drinking hole, part tapas bar, *abacerías* are a very Seville concept. And you really need to enter one to understand them. [Casa Moreno](#) is the perfect introduction — a shop out front and a speak easy-style bar out back. Walk in, and just keep on heading back until you hit the stainless steel

bar and probably a couple of local chaps huddled over glasses of fino. Order a glass of wine and dig into delicious canned goods, anchovies and other uncooked delicacies (there is no kitchen as such — everything is prepared using products from the store).



SAN SEBASTIAN

Pro San Sebastian Tapas Tip: The tapas here are called pintxos. You'll see them lining the bar tops buffet-style. But beware: locals generally don't eat pintxos off the bar. Most of the time, they're for tourists. Generally, the best pintxos in each bar are ordered from the bartender and prepared fresh in the kitchen.

Casa Urola

This place is pretty nondescript looking, but boy, the pintxos that come out of the kitchen are good. Although it's been around since the 50s, the food is modern and it's a phenomenal example of how cheaply you can eat fabulous food in this city.

Avoid the pintxos on the bar, and simply start ordering (perhaps 2 at a time) from the daily list of specials. The specials change according to the season, and given this is the Basque country, there's also a big seafood selection. There's a restaurant upstairs, but I always stick to the bar — it means you can stay mobile and head off if you decide you want a change of scenery.



Txepetxa

Did someone say anchovies? I've given enough Devour Tours tours by now to know that lots of people fear the "A" word. But I truly believe that's because they've never had a great Anchovy Experience (yes, capital letters were necessary there). And if I'm talking to you here — Txepetxa may be your moment of glory. They do anchovies in all different styles — both vinegar-marinated (white anchovies, aka *boquerones*) and salt-cured (aka *anchoas*). Grab a bottle of local *txakoli* wine (it's low in alcohol — what could go wrong!?) and get your anchovy on.

Bodega Donostiarra

Over the estuary is the Gros neighbourhood wherein there is also a serious slug of pintxo bars but without the tourist hordes. Most are a little more down-home, and you won't find some of the gastro fireworks you get in the old town. But it's a great area to wander if you feel like getting away from the thick of it for a few hours.

My favourite and a must-visit is Bodega Donostiarra. Founded in 1924, it's busy, and loud and the food is excellent, with a focus on Basque cuisine and the amazing local produce. A simple standout last time I was there was a gorgeously garlicky tomato salad (literally tomato, olive oil, salt and garlic). I could spend hours in this place.

EXTRA TIP

I can't write about San Sebastian without recommending that

you visit a cider house. Northern Spain has long been cider country, and in the hills above San Sebastian are a smattering of incredible cider houses — literally places where cider is made, and many have a restaurant attached.

A visit to a cider house (you'll need to taxi there and back) will be one of the most memorable gastronomic experiences of your life. Trust me.

Many only open from January to April (cider-making season), and of these my favourite is [Zapiain](#). But [Petretegi](#) opens all year round and is also excellent.

So, why is the experience so memorable? You pay €40 for a set menu that includes delicious plates of cured meats, salt-cod, tortilla and one of the best steaks you have had in your life. An aged T-bone cooked perfectly on the grill. You share the food with your group at communal tables, and when it's time to drink, you leave your table and head for the massive barrel rooms to drink cider in the most original way you can ever imagine. Txotx!

WHAT NEXT?

Next, you head to Spain!

If you're going to Madrid, and you want to make sure your stay is unforgettable, take a look at [my Madrid Revealed guide](#). I promise that it will transform your experience in Madrid.

Also, I co-founded Devour Tours, offering local food tours throughout Spain and Europe. The tours visit family-run tapas bars, markets and more. [See Devour's food tours here](#).

See you in Spain! Salud from me and Yoly!

