Spain: On a Plate

By Matthew Starr

As a self-proclaimed foodie, one of the most exciting parts of living abroad was trying local dishes. It often felt like I was on a culinary tour of Southern Spain, exploring new flavors and comparing how food differed across the various cities I visited: Barcelona, Madrid, Granada, Málaga, and Sevilla. Food became a way for me to connect with people. I often practiced my Spanish while ordering at restaurants; my friends and I enjoyed discovering new words on every menu.

While there is definitely an overall theme to Spanish food – fresh, tradition-rich, olive oil – each city has its own flavor. My summer tasted a little something like this.

Granada: My home base, buzzing with tapas culture and many hidden gems. Nothing beats the free tapas that come with an ordered drink or dish. Yes, free. Every time you order a drink, you're given a small plate of food to accompany it. One of my favorite discoveries here was a dish of potatoes with a white cream topped with a separate basil cream.

It was rich, indulgent, and unlike anything I've tasted elsewhere in Spain. Potatoes are common everywhere in this country, but this preparation felt special and luxurious.

Málaga, with its coastal location right off the Alboran Sea, brought a taste of the Mediterranean. Seafood was the star of the show in this city. During the one night that I stayed in Málaga (I wish we were there for longer), I had my first taste of Gambas Al Ajillo (garlic shrimp), served piping hot and steamed to perfection. I mean the dish was literally eaten right off of a skillet; this tapas bar knew a thing or two about good presentation.

The garlicky, herby sauce was so addictive. Alongside this dish I also enjoyed a serving of Tortilla De Patatas, one of my favorite traditional Spanish foods. It's simply fried potatoes mixed into an omelet style egg, but the texture is what reels me in. Think quiche, but without the crust and with potatoes as the only filling. Though I had tortilla de patatas in every city, Málaga's was especially comforting. With the garlic cream sauce on the side and accompanied by steaming, hot shrimp, this version was by far the most enjoyable. And yes, I ate tortillas de patatas for breakfast (almost every day).

Barcelona's food leaned into its Catalan roots and had some unique takes on familiar dishes. On my first day living abroad, I tried La Flauta, a crispy sandwich typically served with beef. As someone who doesn't eat red meat, I opted for the atún alternative (tuna).

I loved that it came as two smaller sandwiches, which made it perfect for tasting and sharing. I will say that it was much more oily than I had expected, but I quickly learned that olive oil is a

staple in traditional Spanish cuisine and with its health benefits, you can never really have too much.

Another standout meal in Barcelona was at an upscale tapas restaurant that I tried with my roommate Arek. Arek had traveled to Barcelona the year prior, so he already knew all the best spots in town to grab a good bite. We ordered a variety of plates, using our spanish skills of course, and my favorites had to be the Patatas Bravas (fried potatoes with a delicious spicy sauce) and Pan Con Tomate (bread rubbed with fresh tomato, olive oil, and salt). Simple, but so satisfying.

One of the last cities that we visited while in Spain was Sevilla. I made some of the best memories in this city with my friends. One night, we tried toast with tuna and tomato paste, another common, yet very tasty, tapas dish. The combination of fresh, crunchy bread, savory tuna, and tangy tomato was the perfect light bite, especially on a warm evening out with friends.

Learning Spanish in the classroom by day then practicing it at the local tapas bars and restaurants by night made the experience come full circle. Through every plate, I grew more confident in my fluency and more appreciative of the beautifully proud culture around me.