



Barcelona's Taste Trends

by Suzie Docherty August 5, 2016



Dining out in Barcelona is a dizzying affair. With around 7,500 bars and restaurants scattered citywide, culinary allegiances run deep and turnover of new ventures is high. Catalunya's is a cuisine of contrasts—be it sweet and savoury, or *mar y montaña*—and it should come as no surprise that strong regional pride and ties to Catalan identity determine that the most commonly consumed type of food here remains local in origin. That said, the complex history of Catalunya has long defined its cuisine, and the region has historically proven adept at incorporating other cultures into its dishes. Acceptance of new techniques, ideas and importantly, ingredients, has always been part of Barcelona's fabric, given its strategic Mediterranean location and role as a cultural crossroads—Greeks, Romans and Arabs, as well as influence from the Americas, have all made a sizeable contribution to local fare here.

However, it's also worth noting that, according to a 2015 report by the Ajuntament de Barcelona, today only a relatively modest 16 percent of the city's permanent residents come from overseas, though it might not seem like it given the vibrant stream of visitors constantly passing through. Compare that figure with places such as New York City—where around 36 percent of the city's residents were born outside the country—or London, whose migrant population sits at 37 percent. With high percentages of ethnic variance come thriving, inclusive dining scenes encompassing all the globe has to offer, although judging by these figures, dining diversity isn't something that should come entirely naturally to Barcelona. Yet, one of the city's most notable attractions is its culinary kudos, thanks in no small part to a certain few individuals.

The elBulli factor

Though the following is by no means news to anyone, it would be difficult to overstate the influence the Adrià brothers have had on global dining. But, perhaps more interestingly, elBulli's tenure as the 'World's Best Restaurant' still resonates on a local scale.

Carrying the torch for creativity, exploration, imagination and innovation, since the closure of their famed restaurant in 2011 the Adrià's have ploughed numerous foreign pastures for inspiration. The global flavours often employed subtly in the modern Catalan cuisine of elBulli were dipped into at Tickets and went on to take centre stage at Albert Adrià's experiential restaurant 41 Degrees, with a round-the-world gastronomic tasting menu incorporating Japanese, Vietnamese, Peruvian, Nordic and Mexican-inspired dishes into the mix. Much of these have been explored further in the subsequent satellite establishments that collectively encompass 'elBarri Adrià' (the area surrounding Paral·lel that the restaurateurs have monopolised), be it the high-end Mexican of Hoja Santa, Niño Viejo's refined street eats or the Nikkei plates of Pakta.

It holds a certain level of credibility when one of the Adrià's takes a step in a particular culinary direction, as the far-flung flavours they ambitiously play with tend to trickle down into Barcelona's mainstream appetite, be it deliberately or inadvertently. The impact isn't restricted to their own enterprises, where prices can be high and tables often hard to come by. Raised awareness of global cuisine and unfamiliar tastes encourages the general public to take a closer look at the different options already available to them. So with that in mind, here are just a few examples of global flavours that have enjoyed the spotlight in recent times, all of them beyond the city's traditional comfort zone.

Japanese Imports—'don' of a new era

From *shoyu* to *shio* and *tonkotsu* to *miso*, ramen was big in 2015 and has continued to make its presence felt this year. Across the globe, Japan's national soup finally started garnering the mass attention so many thought it deserved—Michelin even awarded their first star for the dish to humble Tokyo shop Tsuta, dispelling all myths that ramen sits merely in the realm of students and salarymen. Closer to home here in Barcelona, shops have been popping up all over the place. "It's been really well-received" says Ross O'Doherty, one of the three guys behind Koku Kitchen. "We saw how well it was doing in places such as London and New York and thought we could bring the same ideas over here, serving traditional ramen in a different kind of environment."

Run by Irishmen Ross O'Doherty and Mark Liston, along with Swedish chef Bobby Johansson, they're perhaps an unlikely trio to take on the flavours of Japan, but that hasn't deterred droves of visitors and locals from dropping by. "It's definitely sought after in the city, people are looking for something a bit different I think," suggested O'Doherty. "Trends like the gourmet hamburger come and go, but it seems people are really enjoying Asian-influenced food right now." Certainly Barcelona caught onto the craze at an uncharacteristically fast pace and it's not just ramen that's captured everyone's attention. "When we were researching what dishes to put on the restaurant's menu, we found that *gyūdon* (beef-topped rice) is the best-selling fast food in Japan, so we thought we had to add one of those to the list." To the uninitiated, 'don' bowls simply consist of meat, fish or vegetables served over rice, often with a dashi-based sweet sauce, and at Koku Kitchen they favour *butadon*, the pork variation. Simple, satisfying and—importantly—inexpensive, this Japanese one-pot approach to eating looks like it'll last in the Catalan capital, with numerous places now offering variations on the concept.

Koku Kitchen also recently expanded from their ramen restaurant in the Gothic Quarter by opening a Taiwanese *gua bao* joint called Koku Kitchen Buns in the Born, which has a far more pan-Asian approach to flavours. “We like the Japanese *izakaya* way of dining”, explained O’Doherty, highlighting the small plates menu, which serves dishes such as Korean *kimchi* and chicken, Japanese salads and *yakitori*. “But it was important to us to get the ramen right first. Once you have perfected one thing, you can play about with other elements on the menu and make it more accessible.”

For Japanese food, go to:

- [Koku Kitchen](#) (Carrer d'en Carabassa 19). Try the *Miso Ramen* and *Butadon*.
- [Ramen-Ya-Hiro](#) (Girona 164). Try the *Shoyu Ramen*.
- [Grasshopper](#) (Plaça de la Llana 9). Try the *Shio Ramen*.

Plentiful Peru—multi-faceted flavours

Elegant, fresh, explosive and exciting, Peruvian cuisine has emerged as one to watch in recent years, offering some of the most diverse flavour combinations around. But of course this isn’t surprising to those already well-versed with the nuanced palate the country has to offer. “I think one reason for its recent popularity is that Peruvian cuisine offers such a huge range of flavours and products, with thousands of different varieties of potatoes, peppers, quinoa and so on,” enthused Nicky Ramos, executive chef at [The Market Peru](#). “Aside from its historical legacy, Peru is all about natural, regional and avant-garde fusion, and we try to be an ambassador for the country here in Barcelona,” which is clearly working, given that the restaurant, and the food it advocates, is well-loved by locals.

In his restaurant on Gran de Gràcia, Ramos espouses a classic cuisine with just a touch of the experimental, focusing on the sort of refined Peruvian plates that are seeing a surge in popularity. “There are over 80 Peruvian restaurants in Barcelona, most of them inexpensive and serving the local Latin American communities,” he explained. “They use good flavours but are lower in quality, whereas we try to show the real dimensions of our food. The current recognition of our flavours, that were hidden to the world for a long time, really drives my inspiration.”

Indeed, Peru’s cuisine has been somewhat underrated over the years, with its numerous methods of cooking only just starting to get global appreciation. A new slew of *cevicherias* have been setting up all over the shop, not least here in Barcelona, bringing the fresh, citrus flavours of the South American coast to a wider audience. And at the fine dining end of the scale, it’s all been about *Nikkei*, which combines more ‘traditional’ Peruvian flavours with Japanese influences. Thanks in part to establishments such as the Michelin-starred *Pakta* here in Barcelona and Lima’s own *Maido*—ranked number 13 in this year’s list of the World’s 50 Best Restaurants—the latter has been enjoying its season in the spotlight, but Ramos is keen to emphasise that it all comes from the same larder. “*Nikkei* isn’t separate from other types of Peruvian cuisine; be it *Nikkei*, *Chifa*, *Creole*, *Novoandina*, *Norteña*, or any of the other many factions of our food, all are Peruvian at their core.”

At *The Market Peru*, Ramos incorporates as many of these different influences as possible into the menu, all the while offering those new to the country’s flavours an accurate overview of just how far-reaching Peruvian influences are. Yet, considering

how many Peruvian plates have been born of fusion, Ramos is keen to keep his food free of too much further interference. “Barcelona is a city where Peruvian cuisine has come to stay and we want to strengthen what we do here,” said Ramos. “First, we have to show people the real cuisine, fusions can come later.”

For Peruvian food, go to:

- [The Market Peru](#) (Gran de Gràcia 7). Try the *Aji de Gallina* or *Seco de cordero a la chiclayana*.
- [Lascar](#) (Roser 74). Try the *Ceviche El Verde*.
- [Ceviche 103](#) (Londres 103). Try the *Ceviche Nikkei*.
- [Pakta](#) (Lleida 5). Try the *Miso-cured scallop tiradito* with *yuzu* and *leche de tigre*.

Middle Eastern tastes—life with a little spice

Globally, Middle Eastern cuisine is having a moment. From Yotam Ottolenghi reviving the spice-speckled, whole-roasted cauliflower to delicious Arak-scented cocktails on the menu at top bars, Arabian influences are seeping through to everyday dining. Here, beyond the *falafel* and *shawarma*, which are ubiquitous throughout the city, many are employing the scents and spices of the Arab world in their cooking, creating something unique for a new wave of intrepid diners. “I think people seek more flavour and spice these days,” mused Kate Burton of [Ziryab](#), an Arabian fusion restaurant in the Born, that opened in 2012 and bridges the relatively small gap between the Spanish and Middle Eastern style of dining. “For me, the combination of Catalan and Arabic cuisine works brilliantly—Arabic food is all about ‘mezze’, which is essentially a variation of tapas—but I find that a lot of places here tend to serve the same deep-fried food, which isn’t always fresh and lacks in spice”.

Burton has a close personal connection to the cuisine Ziryab champions, having fallen in love with Arabian culture during her years working on humanitarian missions in the Middle East. “There are quite a lot of Middle Eastern restaurants in Barcelona but they’re fairly traditional and are often lacking in terms of ambience and service. As far as I know, there are no other Arabian fusion restaurants and we thought this was a niche that could be filled.” But Burton’s aspirations for the place stretch beyond the cuisine. “I also wanted to combat some of the stereotypes and anti-Arab sentiment that exists post-9/11, to show people there is more than poverty, war and Islamic extremism, and demonstrate instead the more cultural side of the Arab world.” (See our review on page 38 to find out more about what’s on the menu).

Although foreigners and tourists form the main part of their customer base, mainly due to their location in Ciutat Vella, Burton considers their type of cuisine to be well-received in the city. “The local Catalan and Spanish community are loving the concept and we get a lot of return customers,” she enthused. “I think the key is to maintain a local element. Traditional dishes using fresh, locally sourced ingredients with a twist makes it less heavy and more exciting.”

For Middle Eastern food, go to:

- [Ziryab](#) (Carrer dels Ases 16). Try the Cleopatra bacon dates or bite-size Syrian *baklava*.
- [Bismilla](#) (Joaquín Costa 22). Try the super cheap *shawarma*.
- [Karakala](#) (Torrent de l’Olla 136)

Taquerías—the latest Mexican wave

Whilst Barcelona is no stranger to Mexican fare, the *taquería* trend has fully ignited in recent months, ensuring decent tacos and street food are available in almost every area of the city. But cast aside any notions of Tex-Mex; authentic is where it's at when it comes to the current crop of *cantinas*. “We opened the restaurant as we saw a gap in the market for quality Mexican cuisine in Barcelona,” said Paulina Arochi Millán of [Tlaxcal](#), a Born-based taquería and firm favourite of those in the know. “These days there are plentiful options for eating Mexican food in Barcelona, although not all are as authentic as ours. We have a very ‘homemade’ style, but we also try to adapt to new gastronomic trends in Barcelona, especially in terms of presentation and ingredients.”

Sticking faithfully to time-honoured flavours has served Tlaxcal well since opening in 2011—it has garnered the affection of locals and visitors, and gained plaudits from experts, such as acclaimed chef Paco Méndez, who partnered with Albert Adrià to open Hoja Santa. “The appreciation of Mexican cuisine has increased considerably amongst locals over the past five years,” explained Arochi Millán. “At first it was difficult to get someone to try a *michelada* or taco with unfamiliar flavours, or we would find that people had a particular aversion to coriander, one of the essential ingredients. But now, we welcome a lot of non-Mexican customers who appreciate what we do and have come to understand Mexican cuisine for what it really is.”

Attractive for their simplicity, speed and affordability, it's really no wonder the taco trend has gone from strength to strength in recent years, and as more and more gourmet options become available, it's a cuisine that looks set to stick around in the world of fine dining too. Here in Barcelona, restaurants such as Hoja Santa, Niño Viejo and Oaxaca are doing their part to elevate perceptions of Mexican cuisine but, according to Arochi Millán, the reason for its wider success is simple. “At Tlaxcal, we believe its popularity is due to a wide range of quality ingredients, appealing flavours and an extensive cookbook to pick from.”

Soon to open another location, seafood-focused with smaller servings to encourage a tapas style of eating, Tlaxcal looks to be one of those places determined to ride the tide and keep bringing their branch of traditional Mexican to the masses. Perhaps a sea change is on the way for this gastronomically proud city? “I don't feel Catalan cuisine dominates the dining scene in Barcelona anymore,” offered Arochi Millán. “I think cuisines from other countries are finding their feet here, especially thanks to the tourist and foreign populations, who are used to travelling and sampling all kinds of food.”

For Mexican food, go to:

- [Tlaxcal](#) (Comerç 27). Try the *Taco de Cochinita Pibil*.
- [Oaxaca](#) (Pla de Palau 19). Try the *Taco de Carnitas*.
- [Niño Viejo](#) (Av. de Mistral 54). Try the *Taco al Pastor*.