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INVENTORY: F&B

Bread winners
Madrid

A new crop of bakeries is resurrecting the art of Spanish bread-making, a tradition disrupted by civil war and industrialisation. We sample the upper crust.

Writer
Francheska Melendez

Photography
Ben Roberts

In Spain, vestiges of the country's civil war and subsequent dictatorship crop up in odd places, even bread-making. Loaves were rationed in Spain from 1939 to 1952, with wheat production remaining under state control until 1984. As a result, bread became contraband.

In Madrid, the *barra de pan*, the equivalent of the French baguette, is still known colloquially as a *pistola*, or gun. The moniker comes from a parallel that madrileños observed between a firearm and a loaf of bread: while the former killed people, the latter killed hunger ("*matar el hambre*"). This turn of phrase betrays a macabre sense of humour that arose from the country's tumultuous past, in which the civil war's front lines crisscrossed not only the country but the capital.

"The older generation has a more vivid memory of what bread used to be like," says Antonio Ramos, co-founder of Obrador San Francisco, a bakery in the shadow of the Royal Basilica of Saint Francis the Great. "There was a horrible gap in our bread culture in Spain. What we're doing now with sourdough starter might seem novel but it's just the way things used to be done here. Our job is to recover that practice, to dignify the typical loaf." And dignity is a quality that abounds in his clean, white-walled space, where a queue is beginning to form.

Ramos is just one of many younger bakers who are rediscovering Spain's bread-making past. At Obrador San Francisco, as well as the classic *pistola*, you'll also find items made using traditional recipes from across the Iberian peninsula. There's the *ensaïmada*, a sweet, shell-shaped pastry from Mallorca, and the *coca cerrada*, a savoury tomato pie from Castellón. Our favourite? A brioche bun from the Levante called a *panquemao*.

At Madreamiga bakery, north of the historic city centre, co-owner Icíar Aragón says that even younger madrileños feel nostalgic when they smell freshly baked bread. "It's an emotional link to our childhoods. Growing up in Madrid, we were all sent to the bakery every day for a *pistola*," she tells Monocle.

But Begoña San Pedro, Madreamiga's head baker and co-founder, says that residents of the city needed to be brought along on the journey and reminded of the effort that goes into creating bread the old-fashioned way. "We spent months explaining our 24-hour fermentation process, why we use unrefined flour and how the human body is better at digesting bread that retains more hydration, like ours does," she says.

1. Reina and David of Amasa
2. Shaking flour into proofing baskets at Obrador San Francisco
3. Tucking in at Alma Nomad
4. Guido Miragoli, co-founder of Cientotreinta Grados Grados, and his dog Gecko
5. Counter at Obrador San Francisco
6. Seats in the sun at Amasa
7. Seeded loaf at Amasa
8. Madreamiga's cinnamon roll

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Address book:
Five bakeries in Madrid.

Alma Nomad
Calle de Santa Feliciana, 10
+34 6 1302 6888

Amasa
Avenida de los Reyes Católicos, 3, Majadahonda
amasa.es

Cientotreinta Grados
Calle de Fernando el Católico, 17
cientotreintagrados.com

Madreamiga
Calle de Teruel, 26
madreamiga.com

Obrador San Francisco
Carrera de San Francisco, 14
obradorsanfrancisco.com

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"We did this every day because new customers would come through the door who didn't know about this process."

San Pedro says that the arrival of rapid-rise yeast in the 1960s heralded the death of the old ways and the beginning of industrialisation in bread-making. Loaves from these big bakeries were whiter, more uniform and could be leavened in just 20 minutes. But what we gained in time, we lost in flavour. "People who came in never having tasted bread that had been made with sourdough cultures would say that the bread had gone off, that it had a vinegary flavour," she says. "So I would explain that it's a matter of letting the palate adapt. Like when you're sampling wine, it's best not to begin with the exceptional, as that would be too complex to start with." Instead, she recommends that those new to the flavours of sourdough should begin with a low-acidity loaf, such as Madreamiga's organic-wheat *miguiña*, fermented over a 48-hour period.

Despite the few ingredients required for bread-making – flour, water, salt and a leavening agent – several bakers tell Monocle about their desire to increase transparency in the industry. This has translated to the design of retail interiors linking the shop counter with the factory floor, for example, as well as plenty of big windows.

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At just 60 sq m, Alma Nomad, a short walk east from the Plaza de Olavide, is the newest and smallest of the bakeries that we visit. A queue of chatting customers often extends well beyond the front door, while many sit on the benches lining the shop's exterior windows to enjoy the oven-fresh spoils. Founders Timi Argyelan and Joaquín Escrivá never expected that transplanting the bakery from its first location in Argyelan's native Hungary to Madrid would help to make it such a success. "Madrileños have a serious sweet tooth," says Escrivá, motioning to a display that includes chocolate and hazelnut croissants and ricotta and blood-orange puff pastry tarts filled with homemade strawberry jam.

Madrileños are also increasingly embracing flavours with a distinctly international influence, from the brioche-like challah bread at Alma Nomad and the spicy babka cake at nearby Cientotreinta Grados to the *pão de queijo* at Silene da Rocha's Brazilian bakery Amasa.

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1. Fresh rye loaf at Obrador San Francisco
2. Scouring dough at Alma Nomad
3. Timi and Joaquin, owners of Alma Nomad bakery
4. Silene da Rocha, founder of Amasa bakery
5. Classic 'pistola'
6. Madreamiga bakery
7. Cientotreinta Grados has become a local hangout

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In Spain, bread is linked not only to the language of war but also to the language of love. "*Contigo, pan y cebolla*" is a popular saying in the country. This expression loosely translates to, "I'd stand by you even if the only things we had to eat were bread and onions." It's an oath of loyalty in love and friendship through times of strife. With humble *pan* rising to new heights in Madrid, it's an oath that many seem more than happy to take. — Ⓜ

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On the table
Global

A Dublin restaurant that's bounced back better than ever, Lebanese home cooking in Paris, culinary ingenuity in London and the freshest seafood in Milan – just some of the moreish delights we've sampled this month.

Edited by
Josh Fehnert

Uno Mas
Dublin

Too often, restaurant reviews celebrate novelty rather than consistency. But Uno Mas has become a bastion of both since opening in a slim space on an old terrace in Aungier Street. Co-founders Simon Barrett and Liz Matthews (behind the also-excellent Etto on Merrion Row) recruited chef Paul McNamara when they opened this Spanish gem back in 2018 (Monocle covered it then too). Since the pandemic and in spite of the pressure put on the hospitality industry by rising costs and staffing woes, the buzzy spot has bounced back even better. On a recent trip – ensconced in a semi-circular booth near the lively kitchen pass – we enjoyed one of the best meals we can remember. The menu is simple and blissfully free of adjectives, starting with tidbits *para picar*. The scallop *aguachile* is a colourful cornucopia of limey zest, coriander and the crunch of onion. The beetroot and *ricotta agnolotti* and salt-aged lamb sirloin with belly *merguez* and wild garlic seem alchemically elevated beyond their humble ingredients. Even the potatoes on the side (you're in Ireland after all) are remarkable, rosemary-topped and slathered in garlic butter. Save room for the *flan de queso*. If you need a walk afterwards the Lucky Duck pub is worth a pit stop. — JAF

unomas.ie