

Things the locals know: How to have lunch at El Brillante

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Raymond Chen

One of my colleagues moved to Granada last year, and he kindly provided me some recommendations for places to eat in Madrid. We found El Brillante easily, positioned across the street from the Atoche train station, with its back door and terrace facing the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (which mercifully goes by the nickname *Museo Reina Sofía*). But once you step inside to order your lunch, you enter a crowded, cacophonous world with people yelling back and forth and nothing even resembling a line. Here is how to have lunch at El Brillante:

- When you step inside, you will find the restaurant in the shape of a long, wide hallway, with a path down the center and a set of counters along each wall. Go to the side with the bar. The bar is the crowded place with the beer tap, as opposed to the cook who is the busy but lonely guy with the cases of food in front of him.
- Work your way to the bar, which may be very crowded. We found that if you wander towards the side facing the museum, the bar is much less crowded.
- The counter staff will come to you when it's your turn. I don't know whether there is an invisible queue or whether you have to get the attention of a staff person. When I was there, I was the only one waiting to order, so even if there were a queue, I was the only person in it.
- Place your order. Do it in Spanish because nobody speaks English here. Fortunately, each item on the menu is numbered, so if you've learned your numbers, you can at least order your food. For beverages, you're on your own.
- The counter staff will shout your order to the cook on the other side of the hall.
- Enjoy your beverage while you wait for your food. Soak up the atmosphere as the counter staff shout more orders to the cook, the waiters from the terrace come in and shout five or six orders to the cook in rapid succession, the cook shouts completed orders to the wait staff, waiters deliver the food to the counter and shout the order to the counter staff... You may have noticed that there's a lot of shouting. That's just the way they do it here. Don't fight it. Revel in it.

- Eat your food. Watch the counter staff juggle multiple tasks: Shouting orders, pouring drinks, making coffee, washing dishes, settling bills. Note that this arrangement would be a major health code violation in the United States, because the United States is safety-obsessed.
- Napkin dispensers are on the counter, and you're going to run through a lot of napkins. But where's the trash? At your feet. The kickplate is a trough for soiled napkins.
- When you're finished, get your server's attention (I asked for *la cuenta*—the check). But there is no actual check. The server merely calculates your bill in his head and tells you the total. Of course, if your knowledge of Spanish is limited to counting to twenty (learned from watching Sesame Street as a child), you may not understand what he says. If you have a pen, you can ask the counter staff to write the total on a napkin for you.
- Pay, leave a 5% tip, and head out on your way.

As you can see, it's a well-choreographed zoo. Oh, and the food is good, too. That's why the place is so crowded. During our brief stay, we saw calamari sandwiches whipping past one after another; they are apparently famous for them.

[Raymond is currently away; this message was pre-recorded.]

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