

Madrid restaurant offers homeless taste of luxury

A restaurant in Madrid is transformed at night into an establishment where homeless and those in need are served a sophisticated dinner for free. Hagar Jobse reports.



Spanien Robin Hood-Restaurant für Flüchtlinge in Madrid (DW/H. Jobse)

"The worst of having to queue for your food is the shame," says Olga, who prefers not to reveal her last name, while she takes a bite of her Spanish omelette. Olga, a tiny woman with grey hair pulled into a ponytail, has been unemployed for almost 10 years.

She has a roof above her head, but the monthly 400 euros (\$430) she receives from the Spanish government are not enough to make it until the end of the month. So she has had to queue up outside, waiting for the social services to give her a sandwich. "I am always afraid a family member or friend will see me," she tells DW. "I went to university you know. What if I ran into someone from my class? What would they think?"

But tonight, Olga doesn't have to stand in line for food. She is sitting at a table in Madrid's recently opened Robin Hood restaurant, a fairly ordinary looking Spanish bar with a cigarette machine in the corner and a ham leg on the counter. Here, Olga is served dinner by professional waiters. Every half hour she is asked whether she wants another drink or a refill on her soup.

During the day the Robin Hood restaurant is a regular establishment where customers pay 11 euros for a fixed menu. But at night the place transforms into an establishment where homeless and people in need like Olga are served a sophisticated dinner for free. The business-model is simple: the earnings made at breakfast and lunch fund the evening meals for the homeless.



Spanien Robin Hood-Restaurant für Flüchtlinge in Madrid (DW/H. Jobse)

The Robin Hood restaurant uses its daytime earnings to fund meals for the homeless

Messengers of peace

The restaurant is the latest initiative launched by the charity organization Mensajeros de la Paz, which means messengers of peace, and was founded 54 years ago by priest Angel Garcia Rodriguez. In conservative Spain Father Angel, as he is often called, is a revolutionary. For example, the church he opened two years ago in Madrid's trendy Chueca neighborhood is open 24/7, has a WiFi connection, and features livestreams from the Vatican and religious films. During the winter months homeless are allowed to sleep on the church benches.

When DW assists a service at the San Anton Church on Sunday, it is packed with people listening to Father Angel's sermon. Unlike in other churches people are walking in and out and mumbling quietly. After the service Father Angel explains why the noise doesn't bother him. "In most churches you need to be silent. We don't want to tell people how they must behave. We want them to feel welcome," he tells DW.



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Finding a connection: San Anton Church offers free WiFi to homeless people

Father Angel says the idea to open the Robin Hood restaurant was inspired by Pope Francis. "He always speaks about how important is to give people dignity. It is not only about giving food to the poor, it's also about how you give it to them. So seeing the long lines of people waiting outside in the cold for food, I thought: 'why don't we serve these people food in a restaurant, with proper cutlery and crystal glasses instead of plastic cups?'"

The economic crisis in Spain has had a severe impact on the country and Spanish charities like Mensajeros de la Paz are still dealing with the consequences; 30 percent of Spaniards are living close to poverty and 300,000 people in the country are homeless.

Helping the homeless

Currently, 100 homeless and people in need, selected by the social services of Madrid, can have dinner at Robin Hood every night. "They have a table reserved for them, just like paying customers when they go out for dinner," Father Angel explains.

And it is that reservation Antonio Pachon, 62, looks forward to every day. Pachon has been living on the streets of different cities in Spain since he left his native Seville in 1996. "During the day I usually wander around the city by myself," he explains. "It's nice to have a place like this where a seat is waiting for me and where I can talk with people I know. As soon as I step into the door of this restaurant, I forget about my problems. And when I leave I always feel a little lighter and happier."



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Maria Vizuete has worked in several upmarket restaurants but says her job in the Robin Hood has been the most fulfilling

It's 8 p.m. and 42-year-old waitress Maria Vizuete is running around with plates stacked in her hand. During a break she explains that she has more than 20 years of experience working in hotels and restaurant. "I have worked in the Ritz and other expensive hotels. But when I was asked to work here I immediately said yes. Now I am working for people who really need it and that is very gratifying," she

tells DW. Vizuite explains that the restaurant also tends to be full during the day. "Two weeks in advance we are usually completely booked."

During DW's visit to the restaurant the place is packed. Elena Sanchez and a friend are just finishing desert. They think the food is wonderful and are glad they can help other people by coming here.

"Since the economic crisis in 2008 so many people have gotten into deep financial trouble after losing their jobs," Sanchez thinks the Spanish government hasn't come up with enough solutions to fight poverty in Spain. "There is a big need of initiatives like the Robin Hood restaurant in our country," she tells DW

Hagar Jobse - <http://www.dw.com/>