SPANISH FLAVOURS

IMAGES: DAVID EGUI; BEN ROBERTS; AWL IMAGES

Crisp croquetas filled with gooey bechamel; succulent squid, charred and glistening under a coat of olive oil; a slice of lightly browned tortilla, packed with perfectly cooked potato. Spanish cuisine is mouthwatering wherever you eat it, but it's at its best in context and on location. The country's flavours and traditions come to life when you're hopping from tapas bar to tapas bar in Granada, sitting among new friends in a Galician home that doubles as a restaurant, or sipping something dry and delicious in the sunshine: cider in the Basque Country, sparkling wine in Catalonia. These are Spain's essential culinary experiences, and while you're there, you can learn the tricks of the trade to continue the feast — and the fiesta — back home.

WORDS: MIKE MACEACHERAN, TINA NIELSEN, JESSICA VINCENT & BARBARA WOOLSEY

SPAIN

Albóndigas, a classic tapas dish

Left: View of The Alhambra and Albaicín neighbourhood, Granada

TAKE A TAPAS CRAWL IN GRANADA

You'll find the true taste of this Andalusian city in its small plates, from seafood salads to croquetas and meatballs. Words: Jessica Vincent

Previous pages, clockwise from top: Almond curd with 100% Venezuelan Araguani cocoa mass at Noor, Córdoba; Placa de la Virgen in Valencia's historic centre; tortilla at Furancho Chipirón, served with local bread and wine; deep-fried padrón peppers at Furancho Cadaval

Eating tapas has brought Spaniards together for centuries, but determining its origins can be divisive. Some believe the clue is in the name: the word 'tapa' comes from the Spanish word 'tapar', meaning 'to cover'; the story goes that when King Alfonso XIII stopped for a drink in a beachfront bar in Cadiz, he needed something to protect his wine from the flies and sand, so a waiter put a slice of ham on top of the glass. Another theory has it that an earlier monarch, King Alfonso X, invented the tapa after being prescribed alcohol for an illness — he used the small portions of food to help him stay sober.

Much like its history, the definition of tapas depends on where you are in the country. But in Granada — an ancient Andalucian city with one of the largest student populations in Spain — it can only mean one thing: a free plate of food with your drink. While raciones (larger sharing plates you have to pay for) are chalked on blackboards across the city, the best way to enjoy Granada's tapas scene is to bar hop from bodega to bodega, letting the food flow as slowly — or as quickly — as the vermouth.

Night one

Start the evening at **Bodegas Castañeda**, a tavern in Plaza Nueva where ham legs hang from the ceiling and vermouth and moscatel are served straight from the barrel. The best place to stand is at the bar, where lightning-fast waiters dish out saucer-sized plates of salpicón (a vinegary salad of octopus, crab sticks and onion), habas con jamón (broad beans with cured ham) and hard-boiled eggs stuffed with tuna and red pepper.

Afterwards, follow the crowds across the street to the intricately carved doors of **Bodegas La Mancha**. If there's no room at the bar, grab a barrel on the street and wait for plates of chicken and mushroom stew and blue cheese croquetas, which are best paired with a cold caña (smaller than a half pint of beer) or tinto de verano (red wine mixed with soda). And if you're ordering from the menu, try La Mancha's flamenquines, pork loin wrapped in serrano ham and deep-fried in breadcrumbs.

End the night at nearby **Los Manueles**, a restaurant that dates back to 1917 and has an experimental selection of tapas, including mini tortellini carbonara and jumbo-sized croquetas filled with cured ham and bechamel sauce, served with lightly spiced pickled cabbage. There's plenty of seating available and the atmosphere is more relaxed than the bodegas, so take your time over some of the heartier items like roasted garlic soup and tennis ball-sized albóndigas — meatballs in a paprika-spiced tomato sauce — which can be ordered individually.

Night two

The next evening, head to Plaza Bib-Rambla, Granada's pedestrianised square that's lined with 19th-century townhouses, for seafood tapas at **Bar Los Diamantes**. Apart from a garlic mushroom tapa, the free dishes here — steamed mussels, grilled prawns, fried anchovies — are exclusively fishy. If you're in the mood for a racion, the clams and prawns with artichokes cooked in lashings of butter are sublime.

Sticking to seafood, make the five-minute journey to **Cunini**, where some of Granada's most generous tapas portions are served on a striking marble bar studded with Roman-style pillars. This 1950s restaurant is best known for its award-winning ensaladilla de gambas (a silky-smooth potato and prawn salad whose trophy sits proudly by the till), but the hunks of fried hake and seafood rice, which features mussels and prawns from the nearby Costa Tropical, are also wonderful.

Finish the evening next door at **Restaurante Oliver**, where migas (pan-fried breadcrumbs with chorizo and peppers) and baby tuna sandwiches are the star tapas. To finish, order a pionono — a dinky cinnamon sponge cake with toasted cream — to enjoy with a coffee.

HOW TO DO IT Vueling flies from Gatwick to Granada. Hotel Barceló Carmen Granada has doubles from €63 (£53) a night, B&B. barcelo.com

IMAGES: GETTY; PETER CASSIDY – RYLAND PETERS & SMALL

Albóndigas

These meatballs can be served with aioli and lemon instead of tomato sauce if you prefer. The meatballs reheat well, and once cooked they'll last 2-3 days in the fridge.

SERVES: 4

TAKES: 1 HR 15 MINS

INGREDIENTS

150g minced pork
150g minced veal
1 tsp lemon juice
½ small onion, peeled and finely chopped
2 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
2 tbsp chopped flat-leaf parsley
½ tsp freshly grated nutmeg
½ tsp ground cloves
30g dried breadcrumbs
1 egg
1 tbsp single cream
plain flour, for dusting
2 tbsp olive oil

FOR THE TOMATO SAUCE

125ml white wine
400g tin chopped tomatoes
½ small onion, peeled and finely chopped
2 garlic cloves, peeled and crushed
½ tsp smoked sweet paprika
1 bay leaf

METHOD

1 Put the pork and veal in a large bowl. Add the lemon juice, onion, garlic, parsley, nutmeg, cloves, breadcrumbs, egg, cream and a pinch each of salt and white pepper (black can be used instead). Mix, then roll into 16 walnut-sized balls. Sprinkle with flour to lightly coat.

2 Add the oil to a large saucepan or casserole, and place over a medium-high heat. When the oil is smoking, add the meatballs and fry for 2-3 mins, moving them around, until browned on all sides.

3 Reduce heat to low. Add the sauce ingredients and 100ml water. Cover with a lid and simmer for 1 hr. The sauce should be quite wet, so add extra water if needed. Serve warm.

Taken from Tapas: and Other Spanish Plates to Share (£9.99, Ryland Peters & Small)

TRY 'GASTROARCHEOLOGY' IN CÓRDOBA

At his restaurant Noor, Paco Morales depicts the historic cuisine of Moorish Spain through a fine-dining filter. Words: Barbara Woolsey

When it comes to experimental cuisine, El Bulli put Spain on the map. And while the iconic Catalonian restaurant closed its doors more than a decade ago, its influence can still be felt among a generation of chefs and restaurateurs looking to push culinary boundaries ever further.

One such chef is Paco Morales, who returned to his home city of Córdoba in 2016 to open Noor. Morales had left Córdoba aged 17, heading north to work in restaurants such as El Bulli and Mugaritz, because in southern Andalucia, "a culture of big, fine-dining restaurants did not exist." Since his return, however, he's been spearheading change, with a distinct culinary concept that's so far garnered two Michelin stars.

Noor's menu draws upon the cuisine of Al-Andalus, the Muslim-ruled region that covered most of the Iberian Peninsula from the eighth century to the end of the 15th. It does this by only using ingredients that would have been available in Spain during this period, presenting them in dishes that display all the fine-dining flair and technique one might expect from a chef who passed through El Bulli.

Playfully dubbed the world's first 'gastroarcheology' restaurant, Noor commemorates a period of Moorish rule that may historians believe saw Muslims, Jews and Christians coexist in relative harmony. "The challenge wasn't to create history, but to be able to translate and express it through cooking," explains Morales. "Time is an ingredient at Noor — that was the difficulty."

The restaurant's multi-course tasting menus are the product of meticulous archival research — recipes are developed in conjunction with food historian Rosa Tovar and other local experts who have trawled ancient cookbooks and manuscripts for a clearer picture of Córdoba's culinary history.

The fruits of this approach can be seen in creations such as Puerta del Perdón, or Door of Forgiveness, a dish named after an architectural feature found in Córdoba's Mosque-Cathedral. Comprised of fried brick dough dressed in garlic puree, parsley mayonnaise and coriander, it features the same decorative motifs found on the real door, created using special moulds.

The restaurant's aesthetic is inspired by the former Caliphate of Córdoba, with plates featuring Islamic geometric designs like those found across the city. Meanwhile, the ceiling of the main restaurant is a skylight framed in spiral shapes, which represents its name (Noor means 'light' in Arabic).

While Noor has received plenty of praise for its creativity, Morales claims many locals were initially sceptical — not least his own father, who ran a rotisserie chicken shop in the same neighbourhood until last year. "He didn't take it very seriously at first," says Morales. "When my father eventually recognised the project, that was the biggest marker of its success."

Since its launch, the restaurant has operated in 'seasons', each reflecting a different historical period — starting with the 10th-century Caliphate of Córdoba in 2016. Its current fifth season is a retrospective of the previous four, while upcoming 'new world' seasons will see Noor moving beyond the 15th century, allowing the kitchen to use ingredients such as cacao and potato. And, having explored Spain's own complicated history as a conquered land, the team must now navigate the country's problematic past as a colonial power.

As such, all eyes remain on Morales. "Noor is like *Game of Thrones*," he laughs. "If you don't know what it's about, you have to go back and watch the rest or you're kind of screwed.

"But the great thing is, you never know what will happen next."

Paco Morales' four key ingredients

SAFFRON
A common spice in the recipes of Al-Andalus, saffron adds a "delicate opulence" to Noor's beef tartare dish.

CAROB
Cacao only arrived in Spain in the 16th century, so Morales has replaced it with carob in desserts and marinades as the legume has a similar colour and flavour.

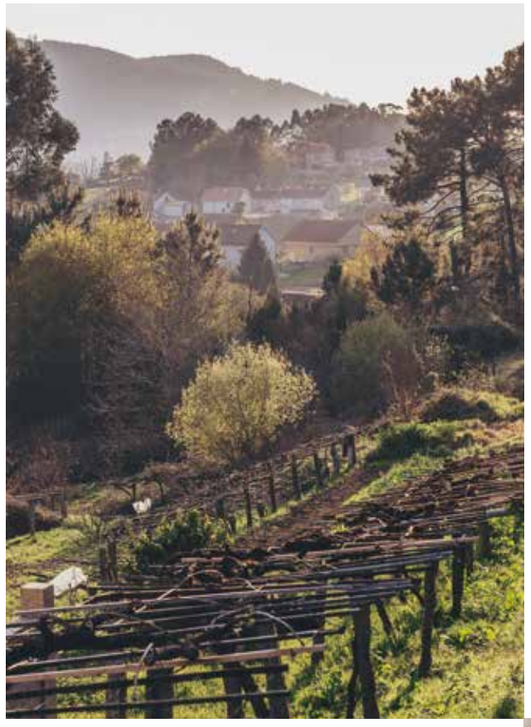
LABNEH
Morales sees this thick, strained yoghurt as a key Mediterranean flavour — his version is churned from sheep's milk.

COUSCOUS
At Noor, couscous represents the influence of Morocco. "It gives a lot of space for experimenting with taste and texture."

IMAGES: DAVID EGUI

Clockwise from top left: Noor's dining room; vegetable stew with corn spread and black mole; Paco Morales in the kitchen at Noor; avocado in spinach jelly with yoghurt and pumpkin seeds accompanied by white prawn in carob and cascabel chili

SPAIN



Clockwise from top left: diners at Furancho Chipirón enjoy the house wine; baby squid cooked in garlic and olive oil, served with potatoes; vineyards in Pontevedra province; daily lunch menu at Furancho Cadaval; chorizo at Furancho Cadaval, where it's cooked at the table by setting alcohol alight in a terracotta dish

DINE OUT IN GALICIA'S UNOFFICIAL RESTAURANTS

For a few months each year, winemakers open their homes to visitors, serving local dishes — and their own tipples. Words: Jessica Vincent. Photographs: Ben Roberts

The waitress arrives with a stack of china bowls and an oversized milk bottle filled with yellow liquid, glowing bright gold against the afternoon sun. It's wine — sharp and sweet, almost like cider — and the bowls, cuncas in Galician, are for drinking from.

"What can I get you?" she asks. I haven't seen a menu, but I'm expected to know the answer. Noticing my blank expression, she flashes an oil-splattered note with five dishes scribbled on it. "Usually people order the chipirones and the raxo," she says, disappearing back into the kitchen. Baby squid and grilled pork loin it is.

Chipirón only opens as a restaurant a couple of months a year. It's one of dozens of furanchos — homes in Galicia's Rías Baixas, mostly in the province of Pontevedra, where winemakers sell surplus from the year's harvest. The tradition dates back to the medieval period, when winemakers, advertising with a bay branch on the front door, would sell leftover wine to neighbours and friends. Over time, their customers began to bring food — tortillas, fried padrón peppers, cold cuts — to accompany the wine, and eventually Galicia's enterprising winemakers began to make and serve their own food to paying guests too.

IMAGES: BEN ROBERTS

Over time, the furanchos — also known as loureiros (named after the laurel or bay tree) — have found themselves at the heart of a thriving underground food scene. They became so popular that in 2012, under pressure from mainstream restaurants losing out on weekend custom, the government imposed a number of rules to regulate how and what they could sell. Furanchos can only open for a maximum of three months of the year, between 1 December and 30 June, and can only serve up to five dishes, selected from a pre-approved government list of 10. They're only permitted to sell their own wine (no water or coffee), which must be made from local grape varieties.

At Chipirón, the eponymous dish of baby squid is served with boiled potatoes and crispy fried garlic, and arrives first. The squid is pink and glistening with oil. It's soft in the middle, with a light crunch from the charred tentacles coated in sizzled garlic. The pork loin follows, coated in a lightly spiced marinade of garlic and paprika. It's cooked to perfection.

As I'm savouring my meal, I'm interrupted by a fellow diner. "Where are you from?" a man shouts from his table. I tell him I'm from England, but that I grew up in the south of Spain, and ask whether many foreigners come here. By now everyone in the room is listening in, and they shake their heads in unison. "There was a couple from Catalonia the other week," the man says.

The room goes quiet for a moment, so I take the opportunity to ask what it is about furanchos that they love so much. "I love them because the food tastes like home," says one man, which elicits a lot of nodding and murmurs of agreement. "It's the communal feel for me," adds a grey-haired woman, who tells me she's been coming to furanchos since she was a girl. "It's like being in your own living room."

I leave my new friends and head north to Furancho Cadaval, where I've arranged to meet furancho enthusiasts Carlos López Alonso and his wife, Rebeca. They're the founders of Furancheiros.com, a not-for-profit website that helps people find furanchos in Pontevedra. On my way, the narrow roads wind past stone

Clockwise from below: diners share empanadas and house wine at Furancho O Cabalo; after a busy lunch service, Carlos, owner of Furancho Chipirón, pours himself a cup of wine to accompany his meal; Llopart's vineyard; Jesi Llopart, who comes from a family of winemakers

houses dotted among vines and citrus trees. At every junction, there's a reminder we're deep in furancho country: hand-painted signs, nailed haphazardly to peeling tree trunks, point left and right; bay branches hang on front doors; a man, likely a winemaker, carries a plastic container stained red from grapes.

When I arrive at Cadaval, Carlos and Rebeca are waiting for me. They introduce me to the Campelos family, who turned their home into a furancho 10 years ago when the parents, Isabel and Jose, lost their jobs. "We were too old to get new jobs," explains Isabel as she works on her signature dish, empanadas made with millo corvo, ancient black corn that's experiencing a revival in Galicia. "But we couldn't afford to retire, so we opened a furancho."

We sit on a long wooden table in a brick and stone courtyard next to the chicken coop, where a typical furancho feast awaits: padrón peppers glistening with rock salt; golden-coloured tortilla made with eggs laid that morning; the black corn empanadas and flambéed chorizo. I try the empanadas first, which are filled with Galician zamburiñas — baby scallops. The corn dough is dense but fluffy, like a savoury cake; the thumbnail-sized scallops simultaneously salty and sweet.

As we tuck into a fresh batch of empanadas, this time filled with squid cooked in its own ink, I ask Carlos why he and his wife decided to start their website. He fell in love with furanchos after visiting with his parents as a boy, he tells me, but, "in the past, many people — even Galicians — didn't know about furanchos because there was no information about them online. You couldn't even find them on Google." Rebeca chimes in between sips of albariño wine: "We couldn't understand why we were keeping such an important part of our culture hidden. We love furanchos and we want future generations to be able to enjoy them."

We round off the meal with tetilla (a local cow's milk cheese) and quince jelly as the setting sun turns the cloudless sky a dusty pink. As we say our goodbyes, Isabel returns to a question I'd asked earlier but she'd been unable to answer. "When you asked what furanchos mean to Galicians... there's this word we have: enxebre," she says. "It's hard to explain, but it means something that preserves tradition; something that binds us together. That's the essence of furanchos."

HOW TO DO IT Vueling flies from Gatwick to Santiago de Compostela, an hour's drive from Pontevedra, while Ryanair flies from various UK airports to Porto, a two-hour drive away. Gran Hotel Nagari Boutique & Spa in nearby Vigo has doubles from €112 (£93), room only. granhotelnagari.com

IMAGES: BEN ROBERTS; JOSEP MA QUERAL

SAMPLE CATALONIA'S SPARKLING WINE

On the slopes of the Ordal Mountains in Penedès, Catalonia, Jesi Llopart's family have been making sparkling wine for 135 years — but, she says, they prefer not to call it cava

What's the history of sparkling wine in this part of Catalonia?
The production of sparkling wines in Penedès began in 1872. This was when the phylloxera louse attacked the vines of Northern Europe, so as France and others began to lose their vines, they looked to the south. Winemakers in Catalonia, who before then only produced still wines, took advantage of demand and began making sparkling wine. My family were among the first winemakers to produce it in Penedès, labelling their first bottle in 1887.

How did you get into winemaking and what continues to drive you?
I grew up making wine. As children, my four siblings and I were always helping our parents in the vineyards. Now, four out of us work full-time for the company. I love being a winemaker because it makes me feel connected to my homeland. I work every day with the same soil that 26 generations of our family have worked on — there's something very special about that.

Sparkling wines from Catalonia are most commonly referred to as cava, but Llopart no longer uses this classification — why is that?
The perception of cava around the world doesn't match the quality of the wine — even though we use the same method as champagne, it's not as highly regarded. We approached DO Cava to see if certain regulations could be imposed to ensure the label reflected the specific origin and quality [but that didn't happen], so four years ago, we founded Corpinnat, a collective of now 11 winemakers from Penedès whose grapes are 100% organic, historical varieties and are harvested entirely by hand. Corpinnat wines also have to be vinified on site and must be aged for a minimum of 18 months in the bottle.

What's your winemaking process?
We haven't changed our methods much since we labelled our first bottle in 1887. We use the traditional sparkling wine method, which requires two fermentations. First, the grape is fermented into a still wine, and then yeast and sugars are added to begin the second fermentation, which is what gives the wine its bubbles. This method, together with the strict parameters of Corpinnat, requires a lot of effort, but it produces the highest quality wine. If we fail to market ourselves as a high-end product, small producers like Llopart — who focus on quality over quantity — will find it hard to continue. *Interview: Jessica Vincent*

HOW TO DO IT Llopart's vineyard tour, with tastings and snacks, costs €26 (£21.70), or €67 (£56) with brunch in the family's home. The winery is a 35-minute drive from Barcelona, or a short taxi ride from Sant Sadurní d'Anoia train station. llopart.com corpinnat.com

Peniscola, a coastal town on the Costa del Azahar;

Below from left: Orange blossom crème chiboust; orange tree in the streets of Moncada, a small town just north of Valencia

Right: Chef Vicky Sevilla in her restaurant

IMAGES: GETTY; MIGUEL CINTEROS; MIKEL PONCE

TASTE VALENCIAN ORANGES

The fruit of the Costa del Azahar — aka the Orange Blossom Coast — is known for its sweet and juicy flavour. Chef Vicky Sevilla sings the praises of Valencia oranges

I've had oranges in my life since I was a little girl. When you're from the Valencia region, they're a constant presence; you grow up with boxes and fridges full of oranges.

My house is surrounded by orange trees — as soon as I step outside, I see them. My uncles have orchards of oranges, my mother worked in a warehouse processing them, and throughout his life my father would spend the winters picking oranges and the summers preparing trees for the new season. It's tough work; in our region, at least, it's still done by hand — the pickers go to pick the fruit, they don't use machines.

You know an orange from Valencia as soon as you taste it — it has a unique flavour you won't find anywhere else. The fruit has a spectacular quality and what many people don't realise is there are many different varieties. In my home village, Quart de les Valls, we grow a type called navel chocolate orange. It's a variety that's slowly dying out, but some people are trying to make it commercially viable. It's not your typical 'pretty' orange, it really is chocolate coloured, but it's so sweet and has the perfect acidity.

Different varieties have different seasons, so at home we've always had fridges for oranges, to conserve them beyond their season. They keep well, but of course they're not like an orange you've just picked off a tree.

Today, in my restaurant I cook with Valencia oranges. I could cook with mango, for example, but I'd know that I wouldn't be serving it in the best condition; if I choose to make a dish using local fruit, I know they're the best they can be. On the menu I have a 'pre-dessert' that's made with lemons as well as oranges, and is served with an orange cake. It really reminds me of the land I come from.

Vicky Sevilla is chef-owner of the Michelin-starred Arrels restaurant in Sagunto, Valencia. restaurantarrels.com Interview: Tina Nielsen

Three ways with oranges

ORANGE MARINADE
Mix three parts oil with one part vinegar and one part orange juice. Use to marinate fish or meat.

ORANGE AND FENNEL SALAD
Combine raw, segmented orange with sliced fennel and season with a vinaigrette.

USE TO ELEVATE DESSERTS
Use orange zest to flavour any cream base; you can even make it the central flavour of a creme brulee.

Vicky Sevilla's orange blossom crème chiboust

SERVES: 6-8 **TAKES: 2 HRS, PLUS 3-4 HOURS CHILLING/FREEZING**

INGREDIENTS
1 litre whole milk
2-3 drops orange blossom essence
200g liquid egg yolk (from a carton)
100g cornflour
550g white caster sugar
3 sheets leaf gelatine, soaked in water
420g liquid egg white (from a carton)

FOR THE ICE CREAM
500g white caster sugar
8 lemons, juiced, 6 of them zested
2 oranges, zested
2 tbsp liquid glucose
1 litre whipping cream
500ml whole milk

FOR THE TUILES
50g plain flour, sifted
100g unsalted butter
100g ground almonds
200g icing sugar
zest of 1 orange
100ml orange juice (from approx. 1-2 oranges)

METHOD
1 First make the ice cream. Combine the sugar and lemon juice. Add both zests and liquid glucose and mix well. Add the cream and milk, then pour into an ice cream maker or simply whisk and freeze for 3-4 hrs.
2 For the tuiles, mix all the ingredients until well combined. Chill for 1-2 hrs until firm.
3 Heat the oven to 170C, 150C fan, gas 3-4. Divide the mixture into 8-10 small balls (15g each). Place on a lined baking sheet, place another layer of baking paper on top and gently flatten with your palm. Bake for 10 mins until golden. Leave to cool.
4 For the crème chiboust, put 750ml of the milk in a medium saucepan, add orange blossom essence and place on a low-medium heat. Heat to 90C, just below boiling point.
5 Meanwhile, put the remaining milk, egg yolks, cornflour and 150g of the sugar in a mixing bowl and beat to combine. Once the milk has reached 90C, pass the egg yolk mix through a sieve into the hot milk. Using a balloon whisk, continue to mix over the heat until thickened. Set aside to cool.
6 For the meringue, place the egg whites and the remaining 400g sugar in large mixing bowl and whisk with an electric whisk until it reaches stiff peaks. Add the gelatine leaves and gently fold the crème chiboust into the meringue.
7 Spoon the crème chiboust onto plates and top each with a scoop of ice cream and a tuile.

EXPERIENCE THE BASQUE COUNTRY'S BEST CIDER HOUSES

On the outskirts of San Sebastián, the town of Astigarraga is home to historic cider cellars and some decidedly rowdy rituals.
Words: Mike MacEacheran.
Photographs: Markel Redondo

Saturday lunchtime at Gurutzeta Sagardotegia, in a cavernous room overlooking orchards of fallen, rust-red apples, and everything is about to get cockeyed. A warning shout of "Txotx!" triggers a reaction in the tightly packed crowd as though a starting gun has just been fired. Seconds later, a toothpick-sized spigot is plucked from the end of a gigantic chestnut barrel.

Suddenly, a golden arc of apple cider gushes from the wooden cask like frothing surf, coating the floor with drink as revellers rush to fill their glasses. Cider sprays onto sleeves, skirts and shoes as each tumbler fizzes with apricot-coloured alcohol. Soon, nearly every barrel is tapped, giving the drinkers their choice of the fermented blends, from intensely bitter to full bodied and floral. As each glass is filled, another is discarded, the remains sloshed onto the stone floor, not in disappointment but in anticipation of the next drink to come. It's a routine that creates chaos and jubilation in equal measure. "We say, 'Gutxi baina sarri'," explains tour guide and former txotxero (the person responsible for tapping the barrels) Julen Gorostiaga, as he tops up his glass. "A little, but often."

A slight haze kicks in by glass four — or is it five? — and the warehouse fills with the softly lit graininess of an afternoon that's getting late. The cellar carries the threat of a party that might not end any time soon. On the wooden tables and benches all around us lies the aftermath of today's lunch — gnawed T-bones and bloody napkins, cheese rinds and walnut shells. "It's common to split them with your forehead," says Julen, shrugging off the stupidity. "Too much cider can make you crazy, I think." Outside, sunlight mellows from yellow to red, like fruit ripening. Back in the cellar, they begin to prepare for dinner, when the txotx ceremony will begin in earnest all over again.

In the Basque region of northern Spain family-run sagardotegi (cider houses) are central to community life and identity. During my visit to the town of Astigarraga, on the fringes of San Sebastián, I feel very much the odd man out — as confused by the centuries-old traditions on display as I am by the deeply bacchanalian excess of it all. Many sagardotegi are only open from January to April, following the autumn apple harvest — meaning there's a real sense of pent-up demand among the locals.

Cider making was first documented in the Basque Country in the 11th century, and the hills cradling San Sebastián are today still scattered with jewel-green orchards, home to an almost incomprehensible 500 apple varieties. In the 15th century, the locals came up with the smart idea of replacing drinking water on board whaling ships with cheap, natural cider, and the stock of the sagardotegi soared. By the 18th century there were some 2,000 farms across the Gipuzkoa region alone. When time was called on the Atlantic whale harvest, it led to the eventual crash of this

From left: Apples ready to make traditional Basque cider in Astigarraga; customers at Zapiain cider house in Astigarraga

prized crop, yet the Basque Country remains a rock pool of tradition, and today, 80 sagardotegi remain defiantly open. Astigarraga, with 18 rumpled farm orchards, is still something of a cider Shangri-La.

Convention dictates that any visit to a Basque cider house should start with the txotx ritual. So, when I visit the dimly lit Petritegi Sagardotegia the following lunchtime, I'm welcomed by the reassuring sound of a chestnut barrel being unplugged to a roar from sun-drowsy drinkers. Astigarraga's largest cider house is replete with giant walk-through barrels and gigantic recreations of medieval apple crushers. Here, the txotx ceremony is legendary — the moment the cider is released from the barrel there's a blurring shudder as the diners stand, sample and sit back down en masse, draining hundreds of litres between them. "Cider is the same price as water here," says Jon Torre Gurutzealde, Petritegi's co-manager, raising a glass with me. "It's our Coca-Cola."

My final night in Astigarraga calls for something special: Lizeaga Sagardotegia, a timber-framed cellar dating back to 1523 — and the point from which cider barrels were traditionally floated down the Urumea River on rafts en route to the Bay of Biscay. The multi-course menu here is intended to prevent rosy-cheeked cider devotees from keeling over, and, following a ramekin of baby chistorra (semi-cured sausage), the first course is a half-moon tortilla de bacalao (salt cod omelette) — a tribute to the seafarers who put San Sebastián on the map. Next comes a holy trinity of salt cod with candied peppers, an extremely bloody, charcoal-fired steak and a plate of idiazábal (a sheep's-milk cheese), beaded quince jelly and wrinkled nuts. This is counter-style cooking that hasn't changed in centuries, complete with no-nonsense service.

Eventually, the food stops coming, at which point co-owner Axier Lizeaga turns to me, pointing to my empty glass. "All done?" he asks, sceptically. I might well be, for now. But the sagardoteg tradition is one that seems worth returning for. It's not just the season-specific menu, or the sheer strangeness of the txtox spectacle. It's the getting up and down from the table. The meeting new people. The conversation. The cider-damp shoes. The little but often.

HOW TO DO IT ToursByLocals offers the four-hour Traditional Cider House Tour from £315 for four people. Sagardoa Route, the Basque Country Cider House Association, runs cellar tastings and guided tours from €44 (£37) per person. toursbylocals.com sagardoa.eus sansebastianturismoa.eus

Cider house favourites

CHISTORRA
This cousin to the beloved chorizo is fried then dressed in a pool of paprika-tinted olive oil.

TORTILLA DE BACALAO
Served steaming without garnish, this Spanish omelette is rich with caramelised onions and flaked salted cod.

TACO DE BACALAO
Not a taco in the Mexican sense, but a filleted cube of salt cod, topped with a hat of fried onions and green peppers.

IMAGES: MARKEL REDONDO; CRISTOBAL PRADO

From left: Customers queue at Lizeaga Sagardotegia; bottle opener at Lizeaaga Sagardotegia; pintxo de foie y pera

LEARN TO COOK THE SPANISH WAY

Whether you want to prepare a traditional tortilla in Madrid or discover molecular gastronomy in San Sebastián, there's a host of Spanish cookery classes to choose from. Words: Tina Nielsen

CLASSIC COOKERY, MADRID
In the heart of Madrid, Kitchen Club is one of the city's most popular cookery schools. Designed for all ability levels, the courses here include Great Spanish Classics, which teaches amateur cooks how to make iconic dishes from all over the country, including tortilla de patatas, ham croquetas and Basque cheesecake, as well as lesser-known but equally traditional plates such as hake in green sauce.
PRICE: €70 (£58) for four hours, including an apron to keep.
kitchenclub.es

ANDALUCIAN FLAVOURS, SEVILLE
There's no better place to experience the cooking of Andalucia than at Seville's Triana Market, which sells produce from across the region. At Taller Andaluz de Cocina cookery school — spread across two stalls — courses include a chef-led market tour that gives you the chance to meet stallholders before learning how to cook Andalucian favourites such as cod croquetas and the cold soups salmorejo and gazpacho.
PRICE: €60 (£50) for four hours.
tallerandaluzdecocina.com

AVANT-GARDE COOKING, SAN SEBASTIÁN
Known for its professional cooking courses, the Basque Culinary Center in San Sebastián has produced some of the world's most exciting chefs, including Santiago Lastra, who went on to open Michelin-starred restaurant Kol in London. But it's not just for top chefs of the future — the school also runs the BCC Culinary Club, a summer programme for home cooks who are serious about food. Courses range from weekends to full weeks — among the former is Avant-Garde in Two Days, which will teach you modern cookery techniques such as making foams and spheres using liquid nitrogen.
PRICE: €245 (£204) for two days, excluding accommodation.
bculinaryclub.com

MICHELIN INSPIRATION, BARCELONA
Catalonia has led the way in earning Spain a place on the world gastronomy map. In the Catalan capital, Barcelona, keen cooks can learn the tricks of the trade at Sabores Taller de Cocina cookery school, recreating plates served at some of Spain's most renowned

Michelin-starred restaurants, past and present. The afternoon course will show you how to make dishes including a banana and cacao dessert from ABaC, Barcelona, and El Bulli's deconstructed tortilla.
PRICE: €55 (£46) for 2.5 hours.
tallerdecocinasabores.es

LOCAL FAVOURITES, SANLÚCAR DE BARRAMEDA

The fact it's Spanish Capital of Gastronomy for 2022 is reason enough to head to the city of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, on the edge of Doñana National Park on the southwest coast. But if tasting your way around the pretty town isn't enough, you can also immerse yourself in preparing local specialities. Espacio DécimoArtes' small-group cooking experience starts at the Mercado de Abastos market, where the chef will seek out the day's best produce and design a menu based around it.
PRICE: €30 (£25) for five hours, including wine and beer.
espaciodecimoarte.com

SEAFOOD SPECIALITIES, GALICIA

Spend the morning on a local fishing boat on the Ría de Arousa estuary, watching the fishermen catching some of the seafood this northern region is famous for: razor clams, mussels, clams and squid. After the two-hour boat trip, the instructors from Cocinando en el Salnés cookery school will lead you to the kitchens of Quinta de San Amaro hotel, where you'll learn to cook a menu of Galician favourites based around the day's catch, which might include grilled razor clams or steamed mussels, ending with a sweet, almond-based tarta de santiago.
PRICE: €90 (£75) for five to six hours.
cocinandoenelsalnes.com

PAELLA PREP, VALENCIA

The Valencia region is home to an array of rice-based dishes, but paella is undoubtedly the best-known — and you can learn to make it yourself with Valencia's Club Cocina hands-on classes. They start with a market visit before chefs talk the group through how to make a classic paella Valenciana, made with chicken and rabbit. At the end of the day, you can enjoy the fruits of your labour, washed down with wine and sangria.
PRICE: €40 (£33) for 2.5 hours.
valenciaclubcocina.com

Kitchen Club, one of Madrid's most popular cookery schools

Above: Taller Andaluz de Cocina, a cookery school based at Seville's Triana Market

IMAGES: CRISTÓBAL PRADO; TALLER ANDALUZ DE COCINA, S.L.