



SWEET ESCAPE

WE GO OFF THE BEATEN PATH WITH CHEF
SABRINA GHAYOUR TO GET A TASTE OF
THE REAL GRAN CANARIA

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he sun is still rising in the morning sky as we drive through the mountains, the rocky outcrops and rolling valleys softly illuminated in the dawn glow.

We're on our way from the port city of Las Palmas to Tejeda, a picturesque village of whitewashed homes with terracotta roofs in the centre of Gran Canaria. Sitting on the edge of the Caldera de Tejeda volcanic crater, Tejeda is the highest village on the island and borders an area rich in archaeological wonders. From here you can explore the iconic Roque Nublo and Roque Bentayga rock formations and the ancient cave dwellings of Cuevas del Rey (Caves of the King), all of which are a treat for hikers and day trippers.

But today, we're here for a different kind of treat. Tejeda is also famous for its almonds. The nuts – which are not technically a nut, but rather a seed of the almond fruit, or a drupe – are thought to have arrived in Gran Canaria around the time of the Conquest in the 15th century and proliferated across the island, including in Tejeda, where the warm, dry climate made for ideal growing conditions.

There are some half a million almond trees on Gran Canaria, and surveying the landscape in and around Tejeda, you'd think all of them were right here. Almonds are a key part of the village's gastronomy; it even hosts an almond festival every winter when the trees are in full bloom with their pink and white flowers, where Canarian folklore is celebrated through traditional music and dance and market stalls offer regional delicacies.

I'm in good company to explore this slice of paradise. I'm travelling with Sabrina Chayour, the chef and bestselling cookbook author whose vibrantly flavoured recipes and popular supper clubs have earned her a reputation as one of the UK's foremost experts on Persian and Middle Eastern cooking. We're at an almond grove just outside Tejeda, and as we meander through the trees, Sabrina draws a poignant connection to her Iranian heritage.

'Sometimes you'll come to a country that uses produce in a similar way to you,' she says. 'Almonds – and the nut trade in general – are one of our biggest exports in Iran. We soak them in salted water and eat them whole. As soon as I saw these almonds, they instantly reminded me of Iran and my mother. If she was within 10 miles of here, this grove would be in trouble!'

The grove is owned by José Antonio Quintana. 'My family has worked here with almonds for generations,' he says. 'Ever since I was little, they've taught me how to work on the plantation and how to harvest the almonds.'

Strolling through the sloping fields of green and spindly trees with the caldera as a backdrop, you get the feeling that this could be any point in history – that this plantation has stood the test of time. 'Almonds are important in Tejeda,' says José. 'Historically, people lived off the land >

PREVIOUS: The Gran
Canarian coast; Sabrina
at the almond grove. THIS
PAGE: Sabrina with Rosa.
OPPOSITE: José at his
almond grove





here, and the almond trees were abundant. Today they bring tourism, which has helped the industry grow.' And the 'living off the land' ethos continues: a local man buys José's discarded almond shells for €1 a bag and uses them to heat his swimming pool.

José brings us up to a terrace overlooking the grove. Using a simple metal contraption, he cracks the almonds' hard outer shells and reveals the fruit inside for us to try. They taste rich, natural and full of a unique flavour, courtesy of the volcanic soil in which the trees grow.

'It's beautiful to see old-school traditions preserved here, as sometimes it feels like technology is killing them,' says Sabrina. 'It's so important to maintain our traditions; otherwise they'll just be erased from our memories.'

Armed with a new appreciation for the humble almond, we take the short drive back down to Tejeda. The scenic village looks like something out of an old Western film, and despite having a population of fewer than 2,000, it's a lively spot where locals and tourists stroll the paved stone streets and rub shoulders at bustling shops and bakeries.

Dulceria Nublo is a popular meeting spot. The traditional family bakery is run by Rosa María Medina and has been serving hungry visitors since 1946. Rosa is José's wife, and together the couple could be considered the almond king and queen of Tejeda.

'Dulceria Nublo is a family business that my great-grandparents founded 73 years ago,' says Rosa. 'Today, there are 18 of us working here and we're all family – my husband and me, my sister-in-law, my sons, my uncle.'



The almonds José grows are a key ingredient in many of Dulceria Nublo's sweet creations, from marzipan to cakes and the moreish *bienmesabe*, a popular Canarian dessert with a texture that falls somewhere between nut butter and treacle and is used to top everything from ice cream to cheese and biscuits. Though it's just as delicious eaten directly off the spoon – there's a reason its name translates as 'tastes good to me'.

We'll get the chance to taste it ourselves soon, but not without rolling up our sleeves first. Rosa invites Sabrina to try her hand at making this local speciality. She sets out a table in front of the bakery, and from here we have spectacular views over the caldera and the villages below. The ingredients are simple – water and sugar are combined to make a syrup, to which lemon and cinnamon are stirred in. Once boiled, the ground almonds are added slowly, followed by egg yolks. It's a straightforward process, but one that requires care and attention – and, ideally, generations of practice.

As Rosa takes Sabrina through the recipe in Spanish, it's clear to see that food transcends language. The pair laugh together as they cook, while locals stop to say hello and check out the action.

The final confection, which we enjoy on top of a tempting trio of cheese, ice cream and flan, tastes sweet, rich and nutty – and even better in the fresh mountain air. It's one of those experiences that all food lovers savour: enjoying a local dish made with local ingredients, created with care by someone who knows the terrain inside and out.

It's the type of encounter that Sabrina sees as an essential part of travelling. 'There are so many reasons we see the world differently from one another; so many reasons why we can't seem to have the same vision. But one thing we all do in life is eat. And because of that, food has the power to bring people together,' she says.

Driving back down to the bustle of Las Palmas, the mountains fading behind us in the glow of the afternoon sun, we're filled with a sense of having experienced something unique to Gran Canaria. 'Sometimes, I think the soul needs something that perhaps you don't even have the time to think about,' says Sabrina. 'I don't think you truly see a place unless you're understanding how some of its people live. Learning something about other people and their cultures and traditions is integral to my kind of holiday. It's a very precious gift to see that.' □

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Get a taste of Tejeda on a cruise to the Canary Islands:
pocruises.com/ports/gran-canaria-spain

FAR LEFT: Tejeda church; almonds on the tree. LEFT: José crushes almonds the old-fashioned way. BELOW: *Bienmesabe* spooned onto ice cream; Sabrina samples local *bienmesabe*

