

Spain, an edible treasure trove

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Crispy lettuce, fiery peppers, tangy oranges, perfect peaches and juicy olives – a rainbow of fruit and vegetables grows in Spain, bringing an intensity of flavour to the country's characterful dishes

Renate Ruge

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Fruit of the nation: ripe clementines grow in the Spanish sunshine (©ICEX/Fernando Madariaga)

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Travelling through sun-soaked Spain, you don't need to be told why the country is prized for its fresh produce: everywhere you look, the trees are laden, the fields full to bursting.

In fact, so rich are the country's pickings that Spain is the number-one exporter of fresh fruit and vegetables in Europe. As a pioneer in the use of environmentally friendly farming practices, it's the number one producer of organic foods and wines on the continent, too.



On the market: colourful displays at La Boqueria in Barcelona (©ICEX/Fernando Madariaga)

FRUIT

Spain's beautiful weather and state-of-the-art irrigation systems provide the perfect growing conditions for the finest, sweetest fruit. Gastronomes need only take a mooch around the country's market stalls to marvel at the range and abundance of produce available. It's little wonder that Spanish cuisine is so highly rated when it has such ingredients to play with.

Just saying their names can make a person drool: bananas from Gran Canaria, so close to the African coast; bright golden Calanda peaches; and *fresones* - giant strawberries - from Aranjuez.

If Spain had a national fruit it would be the orange, but the country boasts more than one kind. Among its most celebrated varieties are the late-season Valencian (which has its own protected designation of origin); the navel, a seedless easy-peeler; and the aromatic, tangy Seville, which is perfect for marmalades and flans. Spring in Seville, when the orange blossom is out, is heaven for the nose.

Nearly every bar and café in the country has a juicer and a big glass of *zumo de naranja natural* is generally considered to be the best way to wake up in the morning.



Salad days: segments of zesty orange complement delicate cod at Garum 2.1, Córdoba (©ICEX/Fernando Madariaga)

Heaped high on the backs of carts, few foods announce the arrival of summer in Spain quite like watermelons. Though widely grown in Murcia, Almeria and Valencia these days, they are thought to have originated in Africa - seeds have been discovered in pharaonic tombs. Producers are working on new seedless varieties, which tend to have a lighter green exterior and sometimes yellow flesh.

Autumn isn't without its gifts either: juicy stone fruit such as the "mountain-grown" Claudia plum (better known in this country as the greengage) and the highly perfumed Ercolini pear are picked as the temperatures begin to drop, alongside figs, pomegranates and persimmons.



Hot or not: crispy fried padrón pepper with silky jamón (©ICEX/Fernando Madariaga)

VEGETABLES

Vegetables in Spain are all about making the best of what grows locally. Farmers work the land hard and for everything it has to offer, tending crops with care and picking them at the perfect moment of freshness, using methods perfected over generations.

Spanish vegetables are so good you can simply eat them on toast - after roasting them in the oven with a sprinkling of salt and olive oil - or fried like padrón peppers. As green as the landscape they hail from in Spain's lush northwest, the peppers are served sizzling straight from the pan. Generally sweet and mild, the heat from the occasional one will make your eyes water, lending an element of surprise to eating them with friends.

Fava beans thrive in Asturias; and calçot onions, which look like leeks but taste like spring onions - and go brilliantly with romesco sauce - are a protected speciality of Catalonia. The annual Calçotada festival in January marks the start of the growing season for this fabulous veg.



Know your onions: delicious calçots are cooked over coals in the city of Vallès, Tarragona (©ICEX/Nelson Souto)

Catalonia's heritage tomato, the Montserrat, is perfect for stuffing and baking, and is named after the region's holy mountain and the patron saint of El Vallès, where it has been grown for centuries. The Raf, from Almeria, is interesting, too. It ripens from the inside out, so its skin holds firm as its flesh gets juicier. Also from Almeria, the incredibly aromatic cherry variety known as "La Cañada" has protected status.

For a fantastic *patatas bravas* (with a pinch of smoky spice ground from Extremadura's fiery red peppers), look no further than Galicia's Kenebec potatoes. They may not look like much, but they taste phenomenal.

Ajo Morado de Las Pedroñeras, the purple garlic grown in Castilla-La Mancha, adds layer upon layer of flavour to Spanish cuisine. Intensely fragrant, they deserve to be made into a dish of their own. Spaniards swear by garlic's health-giving properties.



Foraged treats: plentiful mushrooms at weekly Ordizia market (©ICEX/Matias Costa)

And as the autumn leaves fall, foraging in Castilla y Leon begins in the woods east of Burgos with entire villages partaking in guided mushroom hunts. Over 50 varieties are sold in shops and at markets where the "Setas" label guarantees the ceps, chanterelles and truffles, among many other types, were foraged by experts.

To discover more of Spain's delicious gourmet products and find the artisans behind them, visit [foodswinesfromspain.com/spainfoodnation](https://www.foodswinesfromspain.com/spainfoodnation)