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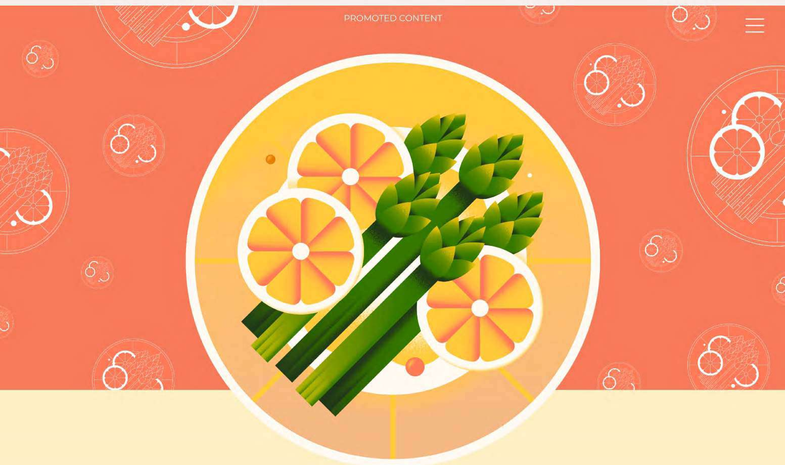

Illustration: Elen Winata for News UK

RICH PICKINGS

A rainbow of fruit and vegetables grows in abundance in Spain, bringing a never-ending taste of summer to our kitchens, says **Renate Ruge**

As the Mediterranean sun warms the countryside under Spain's cloudless electric blue skies, spring is marked by the appearance of glorious fruit and vegetables – kiwis, apricots, loquats, prickly pears, tomatoes, a bounty of avocados and succulent raspberries, mulberries and strawberries.

Successive waves of healthy produce crop up across the *campo* in a riot of red, yellow and purple hues. In late spring, herbs and lush green vegetables flourish, with spring onions, asparagus, leeks, green beans and courgettes in abundance. Summer brings joyous crops of pumpkins and sweet onions, and fruit bowls spill over with nectarines, mangoes and melons. Later, peppers and aubergines are ready for the grill.

Mooch around Spain's market stalls to marvel at the fresh fruit and vegetables

Among the countless varieties of tomatoes plucked sun-warmed from the vines are giant heirlooms, perfect in refreshing salads and chilled soups.

Food lovers need only mooch around the country's colourful market stalls to marvel at the array of fresh fruit and vegetables on offer. Here's our pick of some of the best in show. Most have "protected geographic indication" (PGI) and "protected designation of origin" (PDO) stamps – a marker of standout varieties. This produce is often organic and from farmers whose methods are rooted in tradition and focused on sustainability.

Top five fruits

Top five vegetables

Chef interview: Nieves Barragán

For more on Spain's fantastic fruit and vegetables – including inspiration on where you can pick your own and meet passionate producers keen to share their wares – visit foodswinesfromspain.com/spainfoodnation

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TOP FIVE FRUITS

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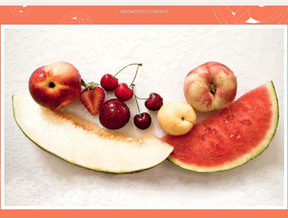


Top five fruits

Freshen up your fruit bowl: lush bursts of Spanish sunshine to try

1 Figs

Figs are the essence of Spanish summer. Equally at home in savoury dishes as they are in desserts, this fragrant fruit features luscious, honeyed flavours ideal for adding sweetness to salads or offsetting the acidity of a chilled gazpacho tomato soup. For a pretty addition to any cheeseboard, cut figs into wedges, almost to the base, and press them gently into flower shapes. Dried or fresh, figs are a perfect complement to salty slices of Spanish jamón and blue and goat's cheese, and are well suited to being simmered into jams and jellies.

These nutritionally rich fruits contain minerals such as potassium, calcium and magnesium, as well as antioxidant properties and vitamins A, E and K. Fig season stretches from June to October in regions such as Alicante, Catalonia, Granada and Extremadura, with Almohalín considered the fig capital of the world.

Once figs reach full size and maximum flavour, they're left to dry naturally on trees before being harvested. Dried figs are made from the ripest fruits collected late in the season, and are further sun-dried and slightly flattened before being loosely packed so that they retain their plump shape.

2 Peaches

In spring, fields around Alcañiz shimmer with the rosy hues of pink blossom, marking the start of peach season, when the *Prunus persicos* trees are pruned to promote fruit growth. The velvety-skinned peaches can be available as early as March, and their sun-blessed season stretches well into autumn.

Aragón's Calanda peaches are golden, the trees thriving in the valleys of the Martín, Guadalupe and Matarraña rivers, which flow into the Ebro in Lower Aragón. Fragrant and firm, these large and somewhat "pampered" peaches are hand-wrapped in waxed paper bags on the tree to protect them as they slowly ripen, their juicy sweetness revealed at harvest time.

Peaches add sweetness to chicken casseroles, or simply poach them and serve with clotted cream. In Catalonia, they're grilled to perfectly partner with guinea fowl.

3 Plums

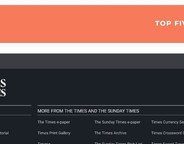
While plum trees grow all over Spain, different varieties are suited to particular terrains, including European (*Prunus domestica*), which can resist cooler temperatures if grown in a sheltered spot, and Japanese (*Prunus salicina*), which prefers warmer climes and fares well in Extremadura, Andalusia and Murcia, where the deep red plums pack a rich, sweet punch.

This soft fruit ranges in colour, from pale green through the amber Golden Globe and warm yellow Sun Gold varieties to the red Fortuna and Laetitia, and purply blue-black Angelino, Black Beauty and Black Splendour. This stone fruit's impressive list of health-giving nutrients includes vitamin C, potassium, magnesium and calcium. Plums are best eaten fresh from the tree, cooked in pies, jam and chutney, or poached with crisp-skinned fish like mackerel.

4 Cherries

Jerte cherries have the perfect balance of sweetness and tang, a crisp bite and luscious, juicy flesh that varies in colour from ruby red to rhapsody yellow. The small towns found in Extremadura's green valleys, which sit among towering granite mountains, have been growing cherries since the 16th century. When more than a million cherry trees burst into bloom in spring, the fertile corner of Spain is blanketed with snowy blossom, celebrated in the Fiesta del Cerezo en Flor.

Soon after, the first cherries of the year (the Navalinda variety) appear in markets across the country. Wine-red Ambrunés cherries are also abundant – they're a perfect partner for Cabrales cheese and make scrumptious jam and compote. They form part of the Picota del Jerte cherry family, whose fruit naturally separates from its stems when harvested. Other stemless stars include orangey-red Pico Colorado and purplish-black Pico Negro and Pico Lincoln Negro.



5 Watermelon

Juicy watermelons are stacked high on Spanish market stalls from late spring. Known locally as sandía and hailing from the berry family, these giant fruits grow on flowering vines. The rosy flesh inside is made up of 92 per cent water and is rich in vitamins A and C and other antioxidants such as lycopene.

Watermelons are thought to have originated in Africa – seeds were discovered in the tombs of Egyptian pharaohs. The fruit was brought to Spain by the Moors in the 13th century and is now grown in Murcia, Almería and Valencia. Seedless varieties, such Reina de Corazones, Apirena and Fashion, are popular, while favourite seeded watermelons include Dulce Maravilla, Sugar Baby and Crimson Sweet. Bite into a cooling slice or use it to add a fresh dimension to salads and gazpachos.

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RICH PICKINGS | TOP FIVE VEGETABLES

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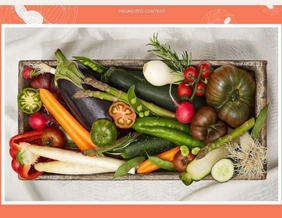

Top five vegetables

Root for vegetables: elevate your soups, stews and salads with this Spanish produce

1 Tomatoes

Spain's long relationship with tomato-growing goes back to 1540, with Andalusia and Extremadura now leading the way as producers par excellence.

This essential ingredient appears in countless dishes, from pan con tomate to salads and chilled soups such as salmorejo and gazpacho (Spain's ultimate homage to the tomato).

Natives of the New World, tomatoes were brought to Spain in the early 16th century – the name is derived from the Aztec language. The fleshy Montserat tomatoes of El Vallès are partly named after a holy Catalonian mountain and just one of many star picks; cherry tomatoes, a type of Almerian Tomate La Canada, are aromatic; pretty heritage tomatoes that have grooved sides; the firm, pink-toned Rosa de Barbastro from the north can grow up to a kilogram in weight; and the intense, sweet flavour of black Kumato tomatoes is popular with Michelin-starred chefs.

La Tomatina, the late-summer festival held in Buñol in Valencia, celebrates the fruit in a famous food fight where people pelt each other with squashed tomatoes.

2 Asparagus

Fat white tips of asparagus poke through the fertile soil of La Ribera del Ebro, a landscape dotted with hills and mountain ranges. The special espárrago de Navarra is smooth, snowy in colour and tasty, with a slight bitterness on the bite thanks to the cold nights and water quality in the area where it is grown. Planted in February, its pale stems sprout in spring and summer, with the spears harvested by hand and celebrated on local menus in myriad dishes.

Sold both fresh and preserved, white asparagus can be enjoyed all year round. Simply cook until tender, sprinkle with salt and drizzle with extra virgin olive oil.

The greenish-purple or bronze spears of the espárrago de Huétor Tajar are a natural cross between cultured and wild varieties. After soaking up the spring rain, they pop up and are collected from the fields of Granada by hand. Cook a la plancha (griddle) or sauté and serve with runny eggs and slivers of a hard cheese like Manchego.

3 Onions

Providing the base to many dishes as part of a sofrito, sweet Spanish onions have flavoured meals for centuries, supplementing bread and pulses on the humblest tables. Some taste as good raw as they do cooked, like the crisp and succulent Cebolla Fuentes, grown in Zaragoza.

Calçots are reminiscent of oversized spring onions or skinny leeks and grow in Catalonia (under the Calçot de Valls PGI), where shoots of fully developed white onions are replanted. Then, as they grow, the plants are dug up and the base is blanched and eaten.

It was a farmer from Valls, known as the Chat Benages, who began cooking these tender buds, which have become the basis for a traditional feast known as a calçotada. The charred spears are barbecued and dunked into romesco sauce. Whoever eats the meal is crowned champion and toasted with crisp cider.

As the season progresses, calçots become firmer and more intense in flavour.

4 Aubergines

A true hero of vegetarian and vegan diets, aubergines are super at soaking up flavours and work well in stews and curries, baked or barbecued. They re a dream with goat's cheese and equally good roasted with peppers or fried and drizzled with honey. Try berenjenas al ajillo, a garlicky Spanish aubergine dish, where the vegetable is griddled and sprinkled with paprika.

Thought to originate in China and India, and part of the nightshade family, aubergines were first planted in Spain by the Moors. Today, covered cultivation in Almería means a year-round supply; in Catalonia, Valencia and Seville, small numbers of aubergines are still grown outside and picked by hand in June.

The PGI Almagro aubergine from Castilla-La Mancha is preserved, giving a distinctive flavour that makes for a perfect appetiser. In Catalonia, the roasted vegetable dish escalivada is a must try – charred peppers, aubergine and onions take on the smokiness of the flame and can be topped with olives and anchovies.

5 Cucumbers

Known for their short squat shape, dark green colour and spiny skin, Spanish cucumbers have a characteristically intense flavour and aroma.

Soaking up the sunshine in Almería and Granada, they are a source of vitamin B – good for your nervous system – and also contain folic acid, vitamin C, calcium, iron, magnesium, phosphorus, potassium and zinc.

Cucumbers are versatile and many well with peppers, onions and tomatoes, adding a refreshingly crunchy snap to salads. Drizzle with olive oil and sherry vinegar for a cooling addition to spicy tapas, slice and serve with oily fish such as sardines, or use them in gazpacho.

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MEET NIEVES BARRAGÁN MOHACHO

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SECRETS OF A SPANISH KITCHEN

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So what does Barragán recommend? "At the counter, you should order any fish. We always use seasonal produce, so it depends on what's freshest and at its best. I love it when people dine upstairs and come back for a bite at the counter, or the other way around."

In her own words... Nieves Barragán

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"I was lucky that my mum cooked every day at home. She'd put on her apron while I'd pop peas and broad beans. At every meal, we talked about what was for the next one.

"Spanish cuisine is special – mealtimes are about sharing and interacting. Spain's food culture is so diverse. Wherever you go – north, south, east or west – the food scene is different.

"At Sabor, we're creative with fresh flavours in our changing daily specials, cooking with the very best seasonal ingredients. My latest creation is inspired by a delicious fish and rice dish with saffron and tomatoes I ate in Ibiza recently. Two weeks later, we had it on the menu in Asador, served in a beautiful porcelain bowl.

I respect traditional cooking but my dishes should be sexy too

"Going on holiday is my time to explore, soak up new ideas, try as many local dishes as I can and taste local produce like Iberico lamb – my god, it's good. Spain has the richest ingredients in the world: suckling pig, seafood, olive oil and the prawns from Huelva.

"Our suppliers make sure everything is sustainable and right for us. I have good memories of figs, and I love green, nutty beans made into stew with sweet potatoes, and black Iberiko tomatoes simmered in fish stew. Asparagus is also a favourite. It goes so well with Idiazabal cheese from the Basque country.

"I like to introduce our diners to new foods. I have respect for traditional cooking but we're in 2023, so my dishes should be sexy too. I use Swiss chard, something grandmas used to cook with, in a sandwich with ham and cheese, known as a penca. We can't lose our traditions though, it's important to keep them alive because it's our roots, our identity."

Savour the Sabor

Planning a dinner party? These delicious recipes straight from chef Barragán's personal kitchen are sure to stun your guests

As chef director of Michelin-starred restaurant Sabor, Nieves Barragán has to wow everyone who walks through its doors. Balancing rustic Spanish style with delicate flavours, each Sabor dish celebrates the tastes of her home country.

Her book, *Sabor: Flavours From a Spanish Kitchen*, though, is all about the food she likes to cook when she's off duty – what she grew up eating and still loves to relish alongside friends and family.

Here, Barragán shares three recipes from the book that make use of her favourite Spanish ingredients, including crisp asparagus, Idiazabal cheese, tomatoes and juicy figs.

GREEN ASPARAGUS, ROMESCO & IDIAZABAL CHEESE

SQUID, PUNTARELLE, TOMATOES, ANCHOVIES & CAPERS

RICOTTA & HAZELNUT CAKE, SERVED WITH FRESH FIGS

Illustration: Elen Winata for News UK

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PHOTOGRAPHY: KOHRE TERRY

GREEN ASPARAGUS, ROMESCO & IDIAZABAL CHEESE

SERVES 4-5

I love this with a crispy fried egg (puntilla) on top, or with shaved summer truffle. You may not need all the romesco sauce but any that's left over will be delicious with other dishes and will keep well in the fridge.

FOR THE ROMESCO

There are many types of romesco. Some people use hazelnuts but I use almonds. You need to make about 500g or it just doesn't blend together properly. Any extra romesco can be kept covered in the fridge for up to 4 days – it goes with pretty much anything, so it won't last long.

INGREDIENTS

3 whole heads of garlic
250ml extra virgin olive oil, plus extra
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
200g whole blanched almonds
6-8 fresh ripe plum tomatoes
2 slices of stale bread
1-2 dried chillies (depending on size), soaked in warm water for a few hours
3-4 dried choricero peppers (depending on size), soaked in warm water for a few hours
100ml sherry vinegar

METHOD

1. Preheat your oven to 180°C. Cut the garlic in half horizontally and place it on a large piece of foil. Drizzle with olive oil, season with salt and pepper, and fold over the foil to close. Roast for 20 minutes, until very soft, then squeeze out the cloves.
2. Put the almonds on a baking tray in a single layer and roast until light golden brown (about 6 minutes).
3. Remove the core from the tomatoes with a small knife, place on a roasting tray with a drizzle of olive oil, season with salt and pepper and roast for 8-10 minutes. The tomatoes will break down and lose their liquid, and the juices will colour the olive oil.
4. Put 1cm of oil into a pan, set to medium heat and fry the bread until golden brown on both sides – it should absorb all the oil.
5. Blend the tomatoes (skins on), garlic, chillies and choriceros, olive oil and sherry vinegar into a dark, thick paste. Rip up the toasted bread and add along with the almonds. Season with salt and pepper. Pulse to blend, so that it comes together but you keep some texture – if you want it creamier, keep blending. Keep it warm until you need it.

INGREDIENTS

6 fresh medium-sized asparagus spears, woody ends snapped off (usually 3-4cm)
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
80g roasted hazelnuts, roughly crushed with the back of a knife
2 shallots, chopped
3 tbsp Pedro Ximénez (PX) balsamic vinegar
6 tbsp extra virgin olive oil, plus extra for the griddle
80g Idiazabal cheese or other sheep's cheese
1 romesco (see right)
½ bunch of fresh basil leaves

METHOD

1. Blanch the asparagus in boiling salted water for 40 seconds. Remove and place in a bowl of iced water to stop them cooking and keep them green.
2. In a bowl, mix the crushed hazelnuts with the shallots, vinegar and olive oil to make a dressing. Shave the Idiazabal in.
3. Heat a drizzle of olive oil in a large griddle pan on a medium heat. Add the blanched asparagus and season with salt and pepper. Cook for about a minute – just enough to slightly caramelise and warm through.
4. Spoon the romesco onto your plates, place the asparagus on top and drizzle with hazelnut dressing.
5. Finish with thinly sliced Idiazabal, another drizzle of olive oil and the basil leaves.

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PHOTOGRAPHY: ECHIRE TERRY

SQUID, PUNTARELLE, TOMATOES, ANCHOVIES & CAPERS

SERVES 4

If you can't find puntarelle you can use something peppery and bitter, like rocket. This is easy, quick to make, tasty and healthy. All you need to buy is squid, tomatoes and puntarelle – the rest of the ingredients should be in your cupboard.

INGREDIENTS

100ml extra virgin olive oil
800g good-quality squid, including tentacles, or cuttlefish (ask your fishmonger to clean them for you)
Sea salt
20ml Moscatel vinegar
12 tinned anchovies, roughly chopped
2 tbsp capers
300g Datterini or other fresh baby plum tomatoes, cut in half
150g puntarelle
Chilli oil to finish (see right)

METHOD

1. Heat 50ml of olive oil in a pan set to medium heat. Season the squid with salt and fry for about 90 seconds on each side – you don't want it to colour too much or to get a crust, as this will make it tough and chewy.
2. Combine the remaining olive oil with the vinegar, chopped anchovies, capers, tomatoes and a bit of salt (the anchovies and capers are already salty) and mix with the puntarelle.
3. Put the salad on a plate, top with the squid and drizzle over ajillo and chilli oil to finish.

CHILLI OIL

MAKES A SMALL JAR

This is smoky, only a little spicy and will lift the flavour of whatever it's added to in a subtle way.

INGREDIENTS

200ml extra virgin olive oil
200g dried guindilla chillies, soaked in water and finely chopped.
Mix together until the oil turns red.

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"Spanish cuisine is special – mealtimes are about sharing and interacting. Spain's food culture is so diverse. Wherever you go – north, south, east or west – the food scene is different.

"At Sabor, we're creative with fresh flavours in our changing daily specials, cooking with the very best seasonal ingredients. My latest creation is inspired by a delicious fish and rice dish with saffron and tomatoes I ate in Ibiza recently. Two weeks later, we had it on the menu in Asador, served in a beautiful porcelain bowl.

PHOTOGRAPHY: KHARCUS COBOLN

RICOTTA & HAZELNUT CAKE, SERVED WITH FRESH FIGS

SERVES 4

I have such good memories of eating juicy figs at home in Spain.

INGREDIENTS

For the base:
140g ground hazelnuts
100g icing sugar
80g soft butter
50g flour
4 room temperature eggs
12g baking powder, sifted

For the icing:
400g double cream
350g ricotta
100g sugar
½ vanilla pod

For the tuile:
700ml water
300ml seed oil
70g flour
30ml beetroot juice
(optional – for colour only. If using, subtract 30ml from the above water weight)

To serve:
Fresh figs, quartered
Icing sugar
Shaved chocolate

METHOD

1. Whip the eggs and sugar together until they turn white and foamy.
2. Gently add the ground hazelnuts, flour and sifted baking powder. Mix together.
3. Incorporate the butter and place in your desired mould.
4. Cook at 180°C in a preheated oven for 15 minutes.
5. For the icing, mix the ricotta with the sugar and the vanilla together for about 5 minutes.
6. In another bowl, whip the double cream. Then combine with the ricotta mixture.
7. Once the cake has cooled, cover it with the icing and let it set overnight.
8. For the tuile, mix all the ingredients together using a blender.
9. Preheat a frying pan and pour in the liquid until it covers the bottom of the pan.
10. Cook until the water evaporates and the oil separates. Then gently remove and leave to drain.
11. Serve a slice of the cake with the chopped figs and a tuile.
12. Top with icing sugar and shaved chocolate

For more on Spain's fantastic fruit and vegetables – including inspiration on where you can pick your own and meet passionate producers keen to share their wares – visit foodswinesfromspain.com/spainfoodnation

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TOP FIVE VEGETABLES

RICH PICKINGS

BACK TO TOP

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