

VINE DINING

If Spain has a taste, it's the myriad flavours of sherry vinegar used throughout Iberian cuisine – even when you don't know it's there



Just as no fruit bowl is full without lemons, no chef's pantry is complete without vinegar. And, with sherry vinegar as the star and the mainstay, Spanish pantries are full of possibilities. Of course olive oil, world-class canned fish, cured ham, olives and spices assemble alongside it to form the backbone of a distinctive and enviable food culture. But take away the vinegar and you'd have a restaurant filled with very cross Spaniards.

A few dots of sherry vinegar can transform a sauce, tickle a salad into life and form a mellow backdrop that makes flavours sing. Like the wine it's made from, sherry vinegar is incredibly varied, running from aged and sweet to fresh and lively. Along with a surprising range of flavours, it boasts heritage by the barrel, which is another reason why it's worthy of a spot in kitchens across the world. Luckily, it's exported.



How it all began

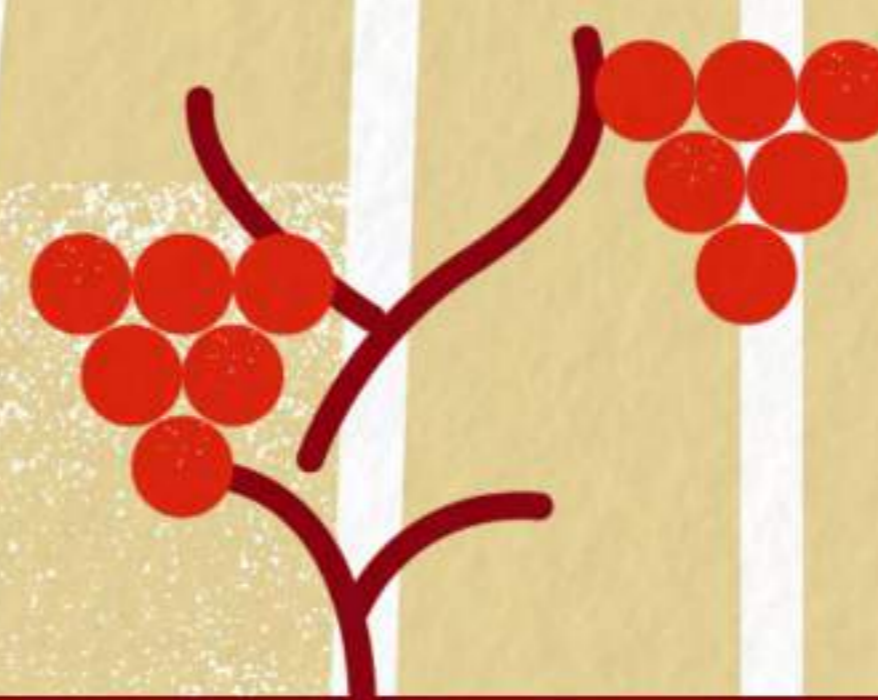
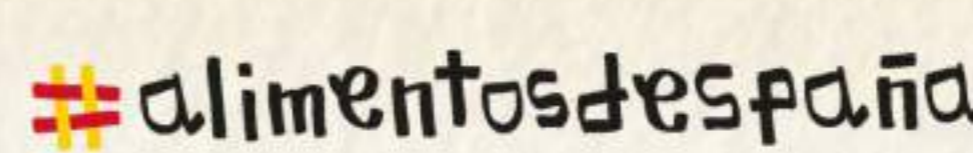


What the tapas master says



Why the method makes all the difference

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How it all began



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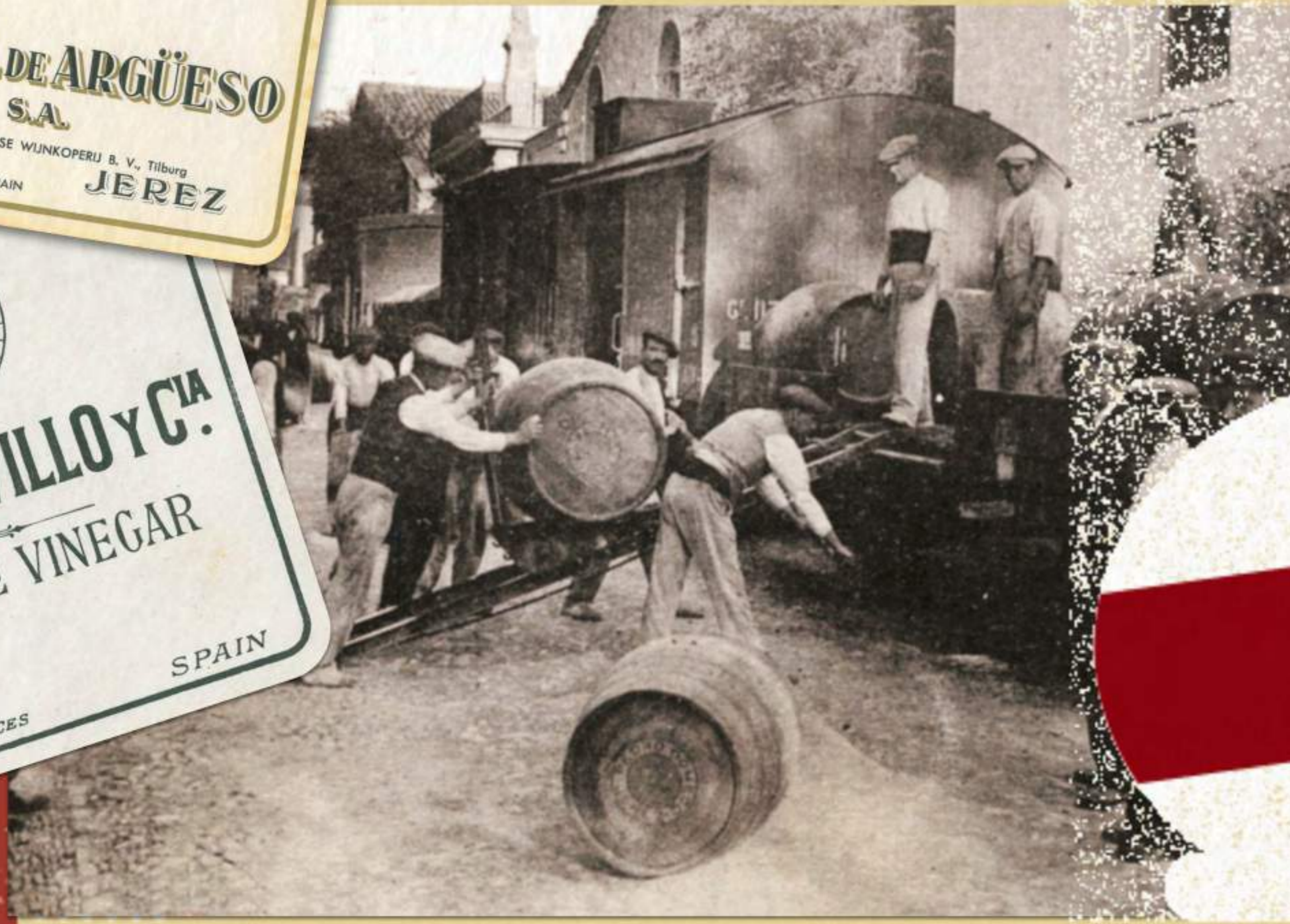
In a nation richly blessed with food that's well made, carefully grown and often daringly cooked, it takes something special to stand out. Sherry vinegar's "something special" is its unique starting point: the sherry wine it's made from. Both are produced in the same place, using the time-honoured method by which the prized wines of Jerez, in Spain's vibrant coastal southwest, become the prized vinegars of Jerez. When the raw material is this good, things are always going to turn out well.

Although vinegar can be made from other natural products (rice and fruit, for example, also undergo the same controlled natural fermentation), wine and vinegar share a history. It undoubtedly begins in ancient Egypt, where wine was made and vinegar was used in both food and medicine. The Romans considered oil, salt, vinegar and pepper to be kitchen essentials, and they likely got their vinegar from what is now Andalusia. On the Iberian peninsula the first vinegar is believed to go back at least as far as the first wine; they grew up together.

"When the raw material is this good, things are always going to turn out well"

We might not have detailed tasting notes from the ancients, but sherry vinegar's enduring popularity across the region suggests that the flavours have always worked with Spain's natural larder. The nutty flavours of younger vinegars, aged in wood for six months or more, dress a nation's leafy salads, add resonance to pickles and balance the richness of pork dishes, while maturity brings a deeper colour and complex flavour to older vinegars, with their spice notes and hints of sweetness.

The roots of sherry vinegar



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The Roots Of Sherry Vinegar

The "sherry triangle", between Jerez de la Frontera, Sanlúcar de Barrameda and El Puerto de Santa María, basks in its own microclimate. Here, Atlantic humidity meets almost constant sunshine and the dazzling white albariza soil that (somewhat miraculously) nurtures the palomino grapes used to make both sherry and sherry vinegar. Impossible to replicate, these conditions give sherry its unique character from the start.



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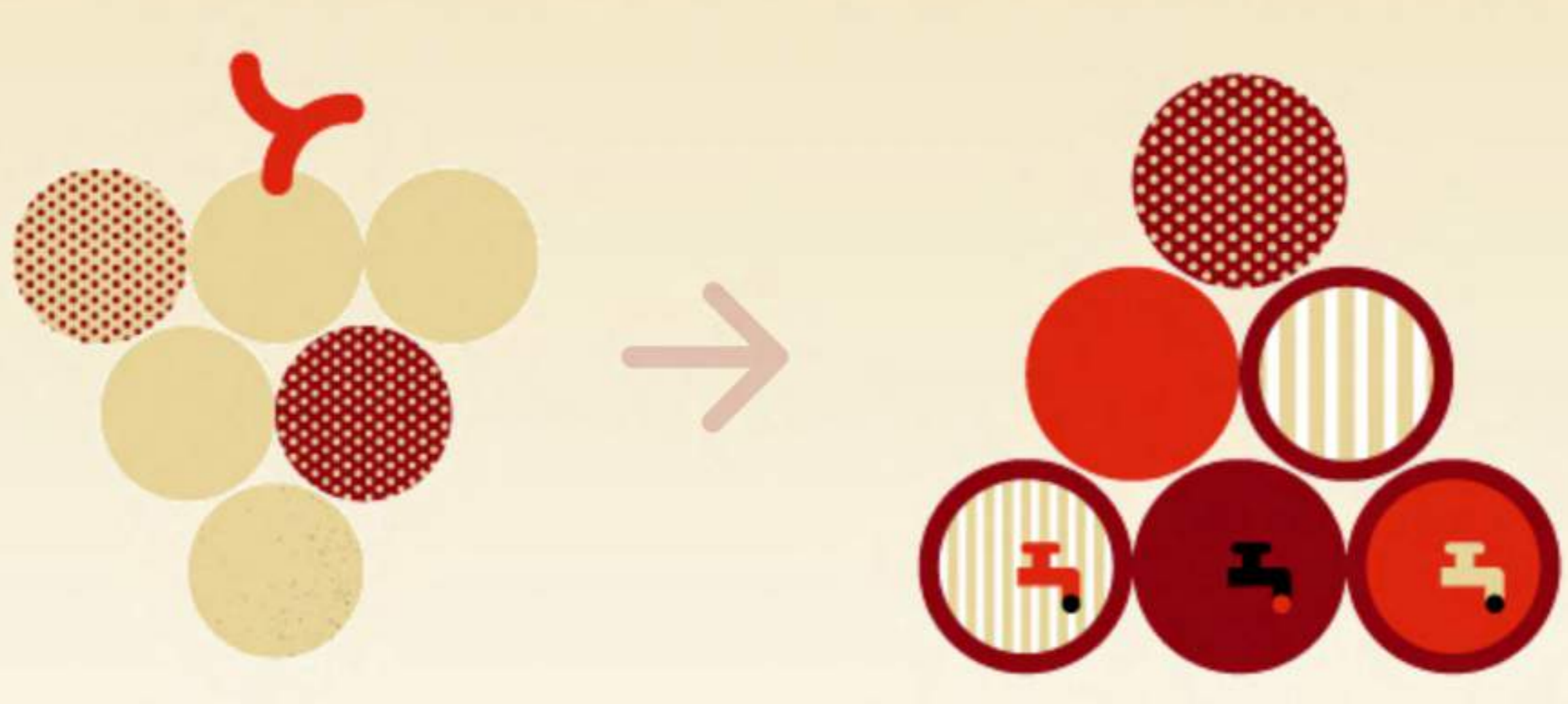
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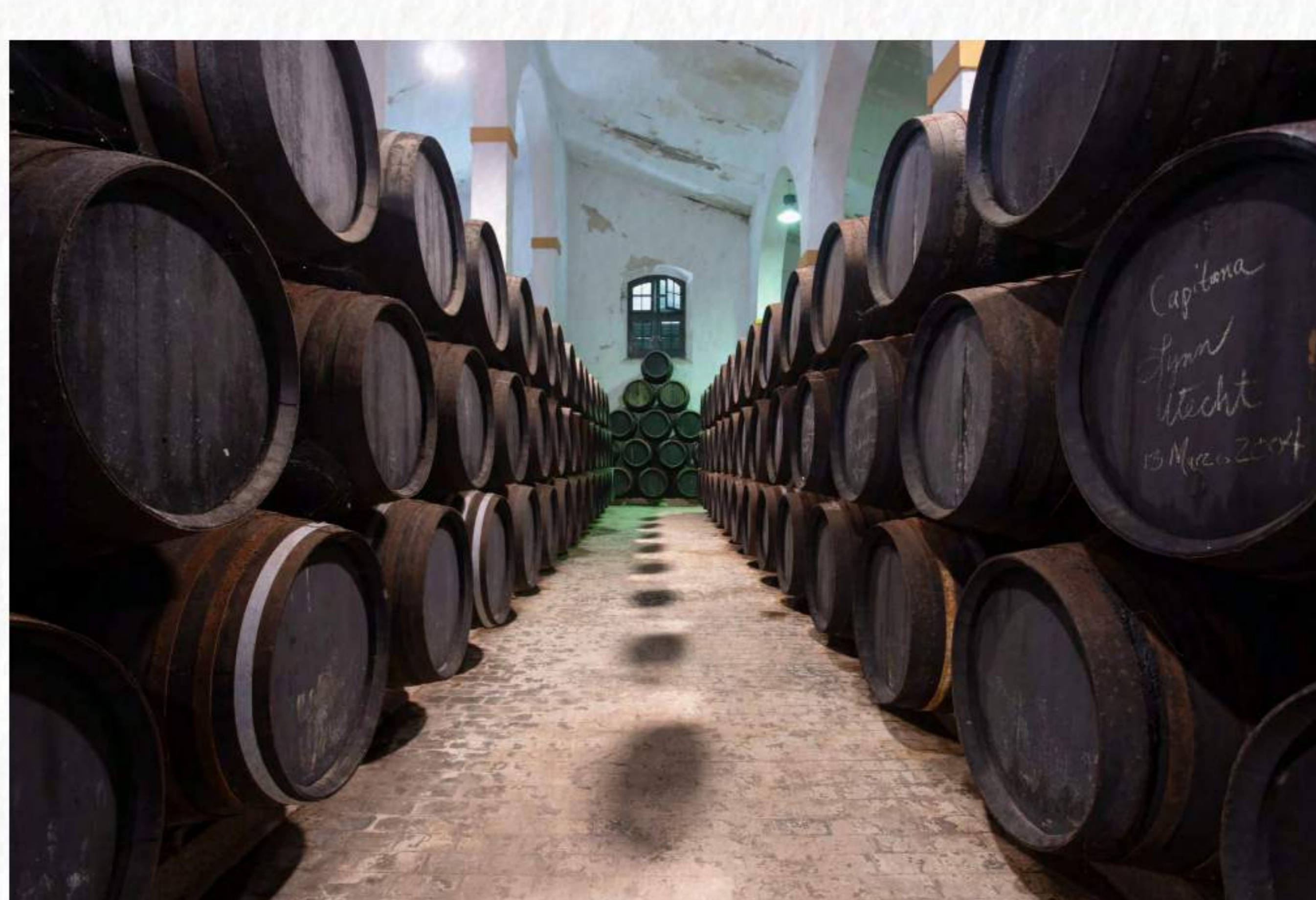
While many winemakers consider the nuances of their craft to be unique, the bodegas of sherry country really are on another level – or, more accurately, several other levels. Both sherry wine and sherry vinegar are aged and blended (often by the same family-run producers) using one of the most time-consuming and nobly idiosyncratic systems in modern use: criaderas y soleras. Five-hundred-litre American oak butts (yes, they like big butts and they cannot lie) are stacked in rows three or four deep, forming a set of “nurseries” (the criaderas) in which younger vinegars slowly gain age, blending as they move through the levels. The vinegar at the “floor” levels (soleras) is the oldest; when a small measure is removed from these casks for bottling, it's replaced by vinegar from the barrel above it, and so on until room is made for new vinegar to be added to the top butt.



"Sherry vinegar has sparked the imaginations of cooks worldwide"



Although vinegar was once made at home, and sherry wine turning naturally to vinegar was certainly nothing for a bodega to boast about, in the 18th century wineries started producing it using these strict artisanal methods. Since then sherry vinegar has gained its Protected Designation of Origin (one of three PDOs earned by very special Spanish vinegars, all from Andalusia) and sparked the imaginations of cooks worldwide; half of the four million litres made annually is exported to the US, UK, Germany and Italy. And just like the amber nectar progressing through those barrels, the sherry vinegar industry keeps on moving. In recent years, new, sweeter styles of vinegar made with Moscatel and Pedro Ximénez wines have joined a stellar line-up of aged vinegars, offering something to match with fruit and cheese or simply inhale deeply before drizzling.



Patience is a virtue: sherry vinegar is carefully stored until the right moment

Sherry vinegar

The youngest of the sherry vinegars is matured from six months to two years, and the wooden casks of the solera system confer gentle nutty and woody notes. Versatile and easy to like, sherry vinegar works well as the pickling liquor in an escabeche for fish or vegetables as well as in dressings and vinagretas (Spanish versions often include chopped herbs, onions or capers).



Sherry vinegar Reserva

Aged from two to ten years until it's the colour of dark wood, Reserva brings flavours of vanilla, nut and wine-soaked barrels to the table, as well as an appealingly bright, acidic character and dry sherry notes. If you're making gazpacho or its creamy almond cousin ajo blanco, this is the vinegar you want on hand to add balance and vibrancy that will withstand a thorough chilling.



Sherry vinegar Gran Reserva

Prolonged ageing of more than 10 years earns a vinegar Gran Reserva status, which means mellow but prominent flavours of spice and aged wine. Punchy acidity is balanced with a well-rounded character and it's got the complexity to work with rich dishes like garlicky tomato salmorejo or to dress oven-roasted vegetables. Some are aged for decades, and the very old ones can be sipped.



Sherry vinegar Pedro Ximénez

The sundried grape famed for producing naturally sweet, raisiny dessert wine does the same for sherry vinegar, with the added structure of a sharp backbone. Dark, glossy and with plenty of body, it's brilliant simply dotted over some fragrant strawberries or added to a caramel. Semi-soft goats' cheese is another winning pairing in a salad or tart.



Sherry vinegar Moscatel

With a mahogany glow and intense perfume, Moscatel sherry vinegar can be traced back to its origins – silky-sweet, floral Moscatel sherry, made from the muscat grape – either by eye or by aroma. It pairs well with citrus fruit and works in marinades too. It's aged for a minimum of six months but can be much older, when the aroma intensifies.



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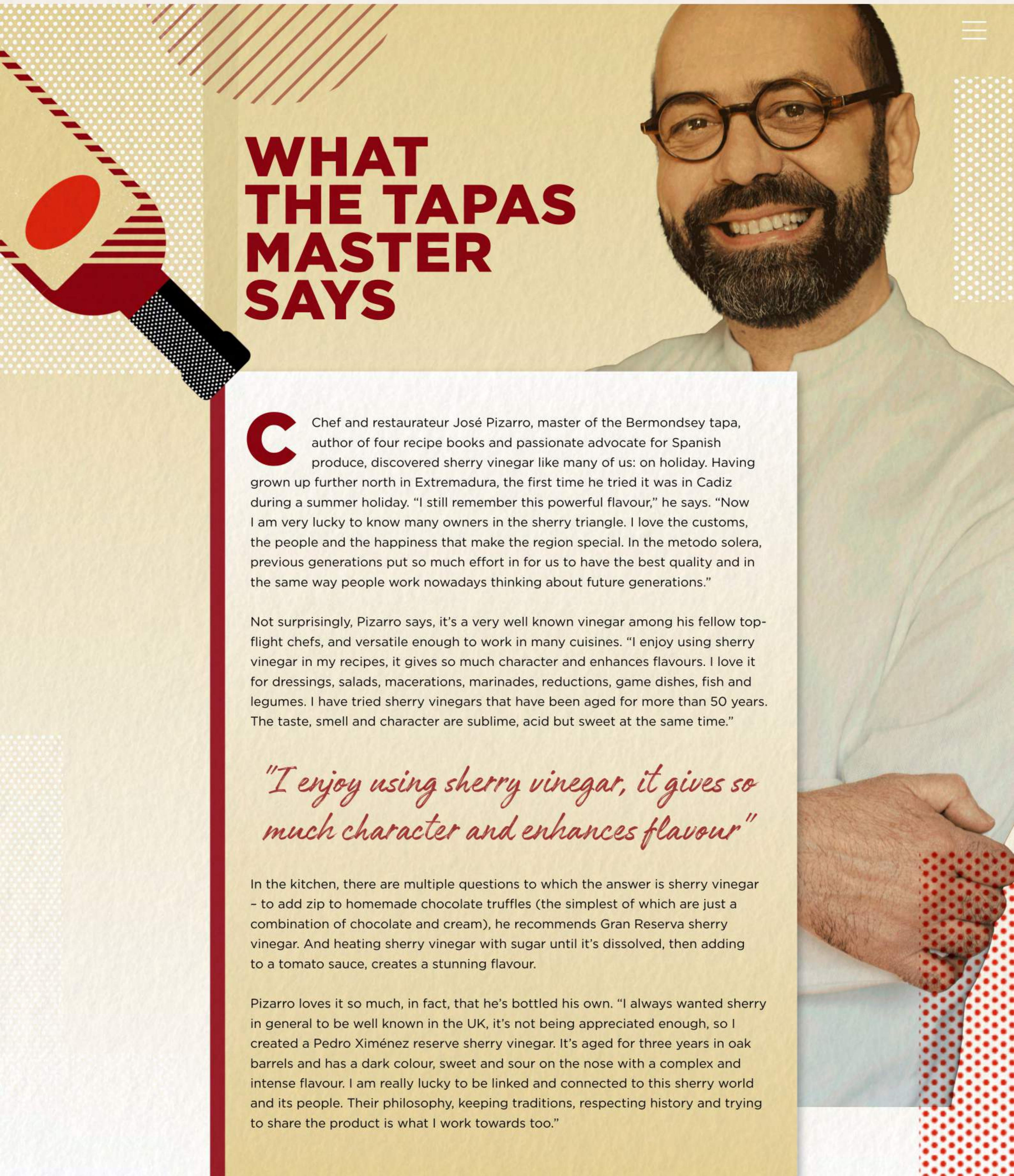


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WHAT THE TAPAS MASTER SAYS

Chef and restaurateur José Pizarro, master of the Bermondsey tapa, author of four recipe books and passionate advocate for Spanish produce, discovered sherry vinegar like many of us: on holiday. Having grown up further north in Extremadura, the first time he tried it was in Cadiz during a summer holiday. "I still remember this powerful flavour," he says. "Now I am very lucky to know many owners in the sherry triangle. I love the customs, the people and the happiness that make the region special. In the metodo solera, previous generations put so much effort in for us to have the best quality and in the same way people work nowadays thinking about future generations."

Not surprisingly, Pizarro says, it's a very well known vinegar among his fellow top-flight chefs, and versatile enough to work in many cuisines. "I enjoy using sherry vinegar in my recipes, it gives so much character and enhances flavours. I love it for dressings, salads, macerations, marinades, reductions, game dishes, fish and legumes. I have tried sherry vinegars that have been aged for more than 50 years. The taste, smell and character are sublime, acid but sweet at the same time."

"I enjoy using sherry vinegar, it gives so much character and enhances flavour"

In the kitchen, there are multiple questions to which the answer is sherry vinegar – to add zip to homemade chocolate truffles (the simplest of which are just a combination of chocolate and cream), he recommends Gran Reserva sherry vinegar. And heating sherry vinegar with sugar until it's dissolved, then adding to a tomato sauce, creates a stunning flavour.

Pizarro loves it so much, in fact, that he's bottled his own. "I always wanted sherry in general to be well known in the UK, it's not being appreciated enough, so I created a Pedro Ximénez reserve sherry vinegar. It's aged for three years in oak barrels and has a dark colour, sweet and sour on the nose with a complex and intense flavour. I am really lucky to be linked and connected to this sherry world and its people. Their philosophy, keeping traditions, respecting history and trying to share the product is what I work towards too."

Get the flavour of Spain at home

Chef and author José Pizarro shares a couple of his favourite recipes, fresh from the kitchens of his renowned restaurants

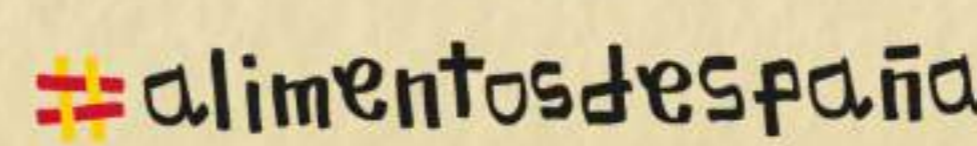


**Bacallà A La Llauna,
Spinach & Piquillo Peppers**



**Tenderloin With Pears
And Hazelnuts**

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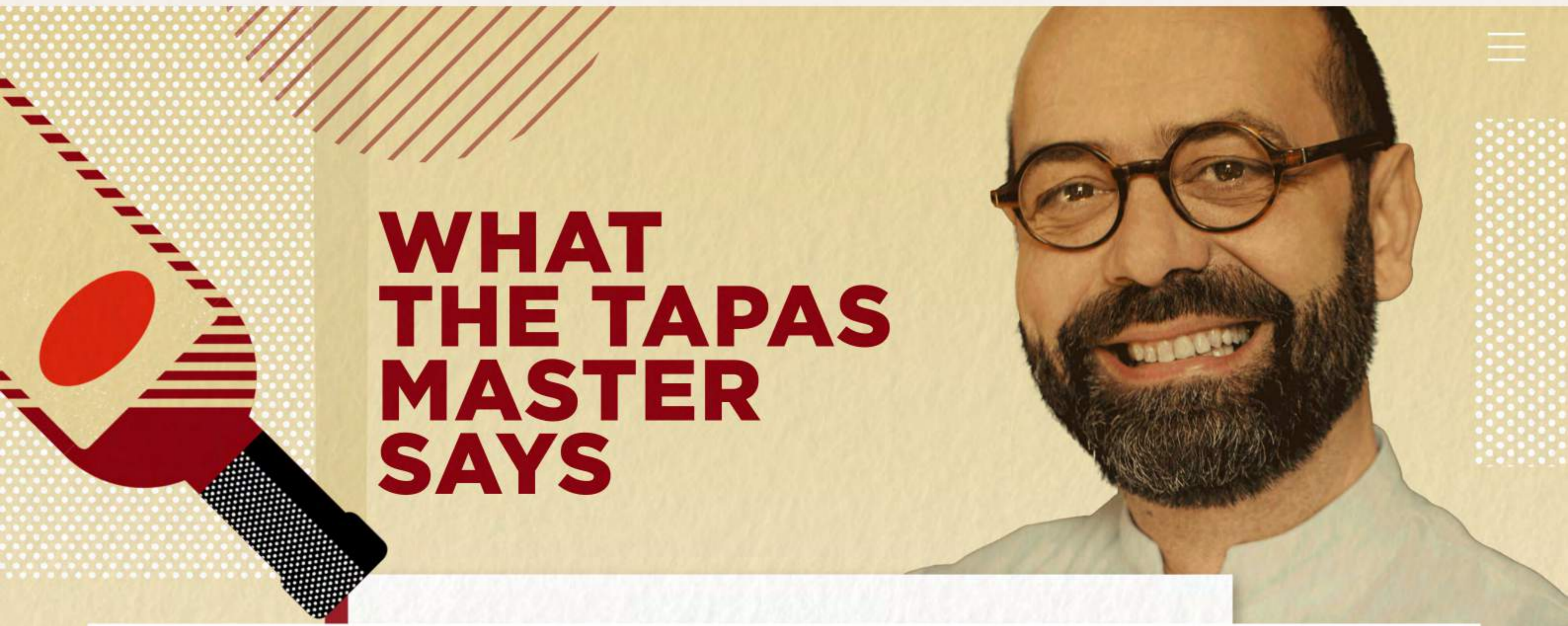
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WHAT THE TAPAS MASTER SAYS



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BACALLÀ A LA LLAUNA, SPINACH & PIQUILLO PEPPERS

SERVES 6

This recipe comes from Aleix, head chef at my restaurant Pizarro. He's a great Catalan chef, and has given me lots of ideas for my book *The Spanish Home Kitchen: Simple, Seasonal Recipes and Memories From My Home*. In Catalonia, people would normally use salted cod but we use fresh, and cure it ourselves with plenty of good sea salt. Don't use table salt, as it has additives and a different flavour.

INGREDIENTS

- 1.2kg chunky cod loin, skin left on
- 750g coarse sea salt
- 2-3 tbsp plain flour
- 250ml light olive oil
- 4 garlic cloves, finely sliced
- 2 tsp pimentón
- 50ml sherry vinegar
- 3 piquillo peppers, drained, opened out and halved
- 1 tbsp olive oil
- 120g raisins
- 3 tbsp pine nuts
- 500g baby spinach

METHOD

- Put the cod in a plastic container, cover completely with the salt and set aside for 20-30 minutes.
- Rinse and dry then cut into 6 pieces and dust all over with flour.
- Preheat the oven to 180C/350°F/gas mark 4.
- Heat the light olive oil in an ovenproof pan - not too hot - and add the fish.
- Cook on the hob for 5 minutes, turning halfway through, until lightly golden. Remove with a slotted spoon onto a plate lined with kitchen paper.
- Add the garlic to the oil and fry gently for a minute.
- Add the pimentón and vinegar.
- Return the fish to the pan and lay the piquillo peppers on top. Place in the oven for 5-6 minutes until the fish is just cooked (when it is just opaque and a thin knife inserts without resistance).
- Meanwhile, heat the olive oil in a pan



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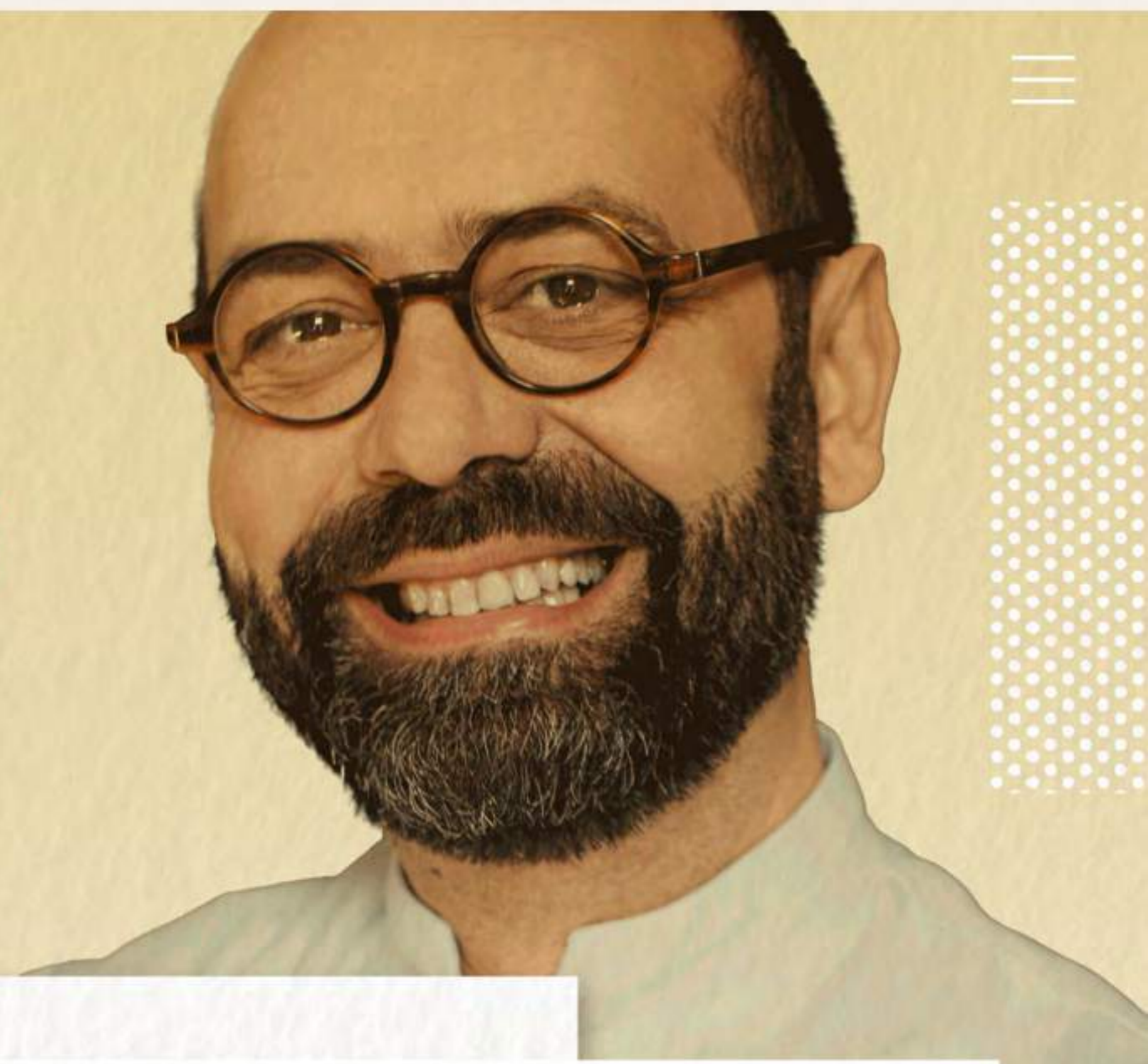
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PHOTOGRAPHY ©EMMA LEE

TENDERLOIN WITH PEARS AND HAZELNUTS

SERVES 4-6

The first time I cooked Ibérico pork in London was around 2001, when I was working with the chef David Eyre. When I described it to him, he thought I was crazy - medium rare pork?! Once he tried it, though, we put it on the menu and it became a favourite at the restaurant. If you are not using Ibérico pork, make sure to cook the fillet for 10 to 15 minutes longer until it is cooked all the way through. I first created this recipe for a collaboration with my friends at Cinco Jotas. Whenever I meet my dear friend María Castro, I always have to cook this for her.



INGREDIENTS

- 1 x 800g pork tenderloin, preferably Ibérico
- 150ml extra virgin olive oil, plus some for frying
- Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 50ml sherry vinegar
- 3-4 sprigs of fresh thyme
- 1 tbsp ground cumin
- 1 tsp sweet smoked pimentón de la vera
- 1 large garlic clove, very finely chopped

For the pears and hazelnuts

- 3 x ripe comice pears, peeled, cored and finely sliced
- Juice of 1 lemon
- 50g skin-on hazelnuts, toasted
- Fresh thyme leaves to garnish

METHOD

1. Place a frying pan, large enough to fit the whole pork loin, over a high heat.
2. Rub the loin in a little oil and season well.
3. Sear the loin on all sides, around 4-5 minutes, until caramelised, then lift out of the pan and place in a deep glass or ceramic dish.
4. Mix the oil, sherry vinegar, thyme, cumin, pimentón and garlic together in a small bowl, then pour over the pork.
5. Cover and marinate in the fridge for at least 8 hours.
6. Bring the pork out of the fridge 30 minutes before serving, so it comes to room temperature.
7. When almost ready to serve, gently toss the pears in a bowl with the lemon juice.
8. Remove the pork from the marinade, reserving the liquid, and cut into 1cm slices.
9. Place the slices onto individual plates or a sharing platter with the pear and toasted hazelnuts and spoon over the reserved pork marinade.
- 10 Top with fresh thyme leaves and serve.

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