



PHOTOGRAPHY: SAM CORNISH

SPANISH CLASS

There's more to Spain than tapas – Britain's evolving restaurant scene is welcoming lesser-known regional dishes to top menus, finds *Lisa Harris*

From the dry heat of Andalusia to the rainswept mountains of Picos de Europa, Spain is a land of variety – something that is also reflected in its cuisine. Smoky pimenton, colourful saffron and rich tomato sauces might be a common thread through classic dishes, but Spain's strong history of modernist cuisine, embodied by restaurants such as elBulli, means it is just as famous for turning tradition on its head.

In this spirit of change, a quiet revolt has been bubbling away on the UK's Spanish food scene, as ubiquitous tapas dishes give way to more nuanced regional cooking. "It's evolution rather than revolution," says Owen Morgan, chef owner of restaurant group Bar 44, reflecting on how Spanish cuisine has changed over the years in the UK. "We're seeing

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fantastic Spanish produce done simply and very well on the high street, whether it's in a tapas bar or British pubs."

An essential, and relatively unsung, driver of this change is the "Restaurants from Spain" certification. Its plaque is an undisputed marker of quality, and sits over a restaurant's front door, often alongside others from The Good Food Guide, Michelin or AA Rosettes.

Launched in 2020 by ICEX, Spain's trade and investment government body, the initiative recognises restaurants serving authentic cuisine outside of Spain. "When you see the sign, you know you'll enjoy a real restaurant from Spain, not an imitation," explains Javier Fernandez-Hidalgo, director of Hispania – one of the first UK

restaurants to gain the accolade.

While the plaque guarantees quality, gamechanging Spanish chefs hope the food is a surprise. Nieves Barragan Mohacho (left), chef director of Michelin-starred Sabor in London (above), says: "I've tried to introduce the whole of Spanish gastronomy through my dishes. Not just tortillas and tapas, but other dishes you don't usually see in restaurants outside of Spain." Lagarto iberico rice is one such dish in her newest London restaurant, Legado. "It's made in a mushroom stock that's filled with umami, and the pork fat is almost sweet. Guests love it."

Ultimately, the best Spanish restaurants return to the simple things they know to be true. Pablo Rodriguez, executive head chef at London's Maresco, remains dedicated to Spanish ingredients: "We always use Spanish penjar tomatoes for our pan con tomate because they have the best flavour and juice."

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BAR 44, BRISTOL

A glorious old bank with Spanish tiling and counter seats, this vibrant local suits casual after-work tapas at the bar or big celebrations in the private dining rooms downstairs. Pair jamon iberico croquetas or deep fried hake, above, with a glass of its very own en rama bottling UVA 44 Manzanilla.

PLUMA, AMERSHAM

Combines Spanish energy with 18th-century interiors. Dedication to sourcing is next-level, as it raises lambs and chickens, and grows its own produce, too. The Pluma cut of iberica de bellota pork is the must-have dish, along with unique wines from under-the-radar vineyards.



MARESCO, LONDON

The spirit of Barcelona spills onto Soho's Berwick Street at this lively bar and restaurant, above. Food is high quality and fun: think Loch Broom oysters cradled in a shell of chilled gazpacho, or Txistorra-style sausage reimagined with sea bass, instead of meat.

