

S P A I N

GOURMETOUR

FOOD, WINE & TRAVEL QUARTERLY MAGAZINE



No. 21-4th quarter 1990 - US \$ 2

VALLE DE ARAN

HEAD IN THE CLOUDS, FEET ON THE GROUND

MANZANILLA DE SANLUCAR. A VERY PARTICULAR PLEASURE
SPANISH CHOCOLATE. BACK TO THE FUTURE



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The average foreigner's image of Spain is of sun-drenched beaches, whitewashed villages, picturesque scenes under a cloudless blue sky... And it's true, but only partially. Spain is nothing if not varied in its climate, landscape and customs. Few readers will know, for example, that it is the second most mountainous country in Europe. A visit to the Valle de Arán will leave you in little doubt. Tucked away as it is among the towering peaks of the Pyrenees, its tiny villages have kept all their unspoiled charm despite the influx of nature-loving holiday-makers in summer and skiers in winter.

For those who prefer their sunshine reflected off whitewash rather than snow, we take you south to the famous «*ruta de los pueblos blancos*», the picturesque white villages route. Nearby is Sanlúcar de Barrameda, whose singular microclimate is responsible for manzanilla —the classic aperitif from an area that has been producing sherry for centuries.

Another Spanish classic is chocolate, which the conquistadors introduced into Europe from the New World. Unsurprisingly, Spain's chocolate industry is a highly respected one, known for its top quality products. Drinking *real* chocolate is one of the nation's old-fashioned customs that lives on, just like the giving of presents on 6 January, the Day of the Three Kings —a custom curiously unique to Spain.

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COVER

Photography by Michael Pasdzior
The Image Bank
Design by ANC

Director: Enrique Alejo. • Editor: Cathy Boirac. • Publication Coordinator: Sonia Ortega. • Publisher: ICEX, P.^o de la Castellana, 14, 28046 Madrid. SPAIN. Tel.: (1) 431 12 40. Fax: (1) 431 61 28. • Translation: Hawys Pritchard. • Art Direction: AN&C
Design: Juan Soler (ANC). • Subscription: ICEX, Departamento de Publicaciones, P.^o de la Castellana, 14, 28046 Madrid. SPAIN.
Circulation: TURESPAÑA & ICEX, Madrid. • Advertising: Public, S. A. Almirante, 21, 28004 Madrid. Tel.: (1) 308 06 44. Fax: (1) 410 51 41.
Depósito legal: M-45.307-1990. • ISSN: 0214-2937 • Printed in Spain by RAYCAR, S. A. Impresores. Matilde Hernández, 27, 28019 Madrid. SPAIN.

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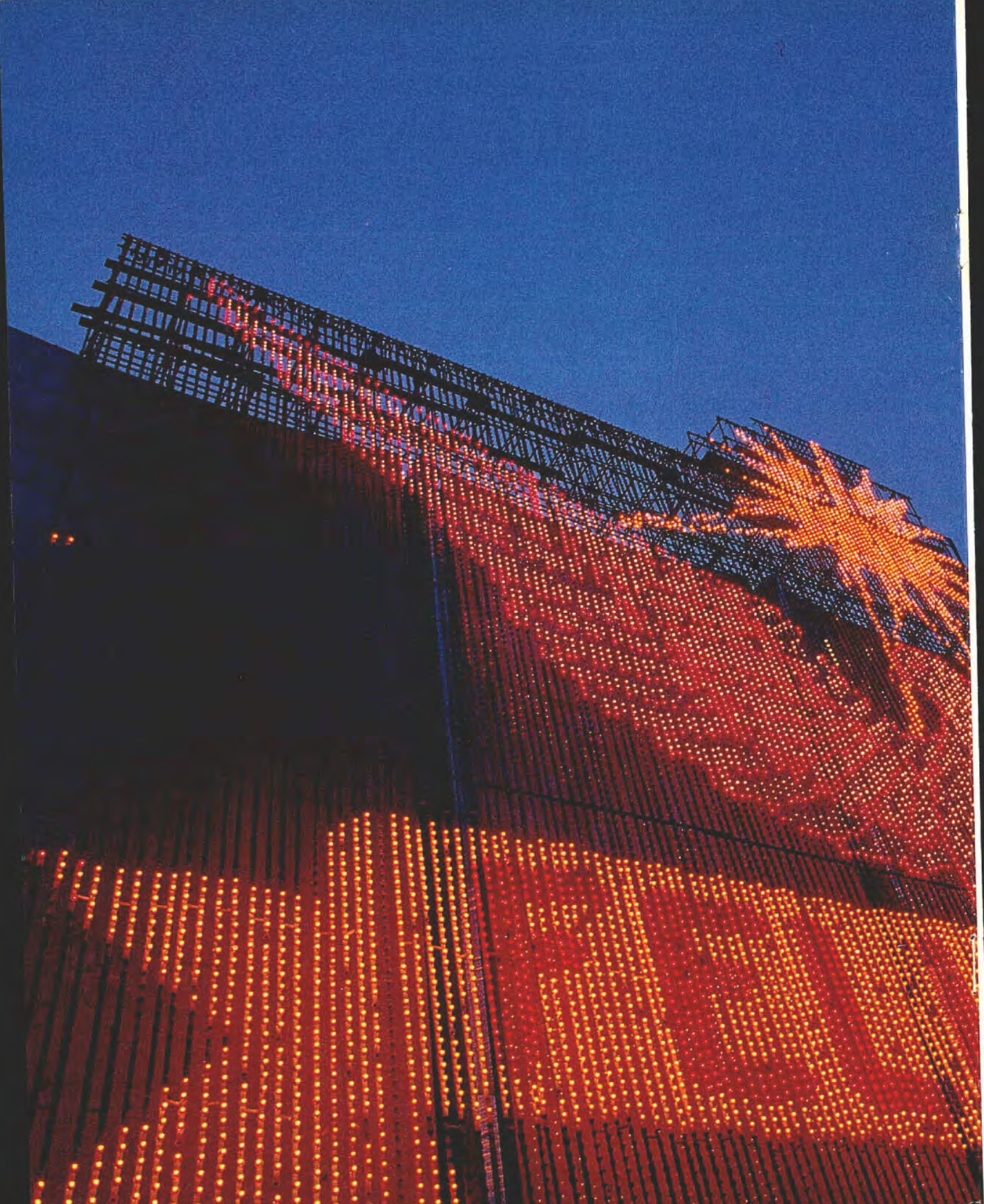
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CHILDHOOD MAGIC

Text: **Sonia Ortega**
Photos: **Félix Lorrio**



Every year, on the night of 5 January, the main streets of Spain's towns and cities are transformed by a vivid event which remains engraved forever in the childhood memory. Crowds fill the pavements, little ones occupying the front line, their faces aglow with anticipation, to see the passing parade. At last, three venerable figures in brightly coloured robes ride by on camels, horses or floats, waving and smiling at the thrilled children.

They are, of course, the Magi, better known as the Three Kings or Wise Men —Melchior, Gaspar and Balthasar— who traditionally, that very night, will be visiting every house to leave toys, gifts and even the odd chunk of coal, though no one ever sees them do so.

Curiously, this marvellous old tradition exists only in Spain.

When I was small, as Christmas approached, my family and I would move in to spend Christmas at the Segovia grandparents house. On the night of 24 December, Christmas Eve would be celebrated with the traditional roast turkey and then carol singing (*villancicos*) at Midnight Mass. On Christmas Day itself, still more family—aunts, uncles and cousins—would arrive for yet another vast meal.

With that, the great events of Christmas were over for the grown-ups, except for the excesses of New Year's Eve and the traditional eating of—or rather choking over—twelve grapes, one in time with each stroke of midnight, followed by a party and general revelry either at home or elsewhere.

For us, though, all this was just the apparently interminable build-up to the climax: *Reyes*, the day of the Kings, on 6 January. During the interim, we would buy the special letter. You could just write it on ordinary paper, but the cards they sold at the newsagent's were much prettier, with three little stamps already printed on them, each representing one of the Kings. Usually, the text went something like this: «Dear Kings, As I have been very good this year, I should like you to bring me...» and without further ado, one went on to add an endless list of toys. More altruistic children also asked for presents for their parents and brothers and sisters. When the list was too long, as it nearly always was, parents would explain that it would have to be cut down otherwise the Kings would never be able to manage everything. The letter had to be addressed to «Their Majesties the Kings of the Orient» and, miraculously, in those days before courier services were as common as they are today, the letters always reached them, and in time.

In the bigger cities, instead of posting the letter in the ordinary mail-box, you could go to the Royal Postman, a sort of Kings' envoy, who set himself up on a platform near toyshops and big department stores and, helped by pageboys, collected children's letters and handed out sweets.

The formality of the letter over, there were still days and days to go, and we spent the time playing, singing carols, throwing snowballs if there was snow about, and visiting the various Nativity Scenes (known in Spanish as *belenes*, or Bethlehems) set up all over Segovia. Our particular favourite was the one at the Oblate nuns' convent with moving figures

and real water in the river instead of just silver paper. We would stand and watch it open-mouthed, and though we visited it year after year, it never lost its magic.

We had our own *belén* at home, too, though not as spectacular as the nuns'. It featured the figures of the Three Kings mounted on camels in the distance, and as the days went by, it was our job to move them closer and closer to the stable containing Mary, Joseph, Baby Jesus, the ox and the ass.

We ticked off the days, and any time we went near a toyshop (there was a particularly good one near the Plaza Mayor) would press our noses against the glass and gaze at what we hoped to get.

December 28 was also a special day: the Day of the Holy Innocents. Like April Fools' Day in other countries, it was a day for playing tricks on people and we kept up the tradition with glee. Putting salt in the sugar bowl, sprinkling itching powder all over the house and pinning paper dolls to people's backs kept us busy all day.

Even so, throughout the holidays the grown-ups insisted that we should behave well since the Kings would know exactly what we were up to and would

leave coal instead of toys for any child who had been too naughty.

The old year was seen out, the new one ushered in. Children in other countries went back to school, but we were still on holiday.

THE PARADE

The fifth of January at last! Our excitement as the day wore on became almost



unbearable. The parade started at around seven in the evening, but we set off earlier to be sure of getting a good place. Segovia's parade was nothing special really, I suppose, but the important thing was that the Three Kings were there in the flesh. I can't remember if they rode camels or horses, but I do remember their splendid robes, brightly coloured capes trimmed with gold, and their crowns.

Melchior, with flowing white hair and beard, led the procession, followed by Gaspar —his hair and beard were brown— and last came Balthasar, the black king, beardless and with his head swathed in a great turban. A page walked in front of each of them (Balthasar's was matching black) holding the reins. Each animal was laden with large boxes wrapped in coloured paper —our presents! The Kings waved, threw sweets into the crowd and beamed round at everyone all along the parade route. Each child tended to have a favourite king.

Crowds fill the pavements, little ones occupying the front line, their faces aglow with anticipation, to see the passing parade.



Reactions to Balthasar were usually extreme: the colour of his skin, so strange to us then, frightened some children, while others thought him easily the best, with his lovely black face and flashing white teeth.

Sometimes, despite the bitter cold of Segovia in January, seeing them once was not enough and we would race ahead to see them again further along the route. Thrilled and exhausted, we would eventually trail back to our grandparents' house. There was a lot to do before bedtime: cleaning the shoes thoroughly and arranging a pair belonging to each member of the family out on the balcony. Then, in the dining room, we had to prepare a tray with three glasses and a bottle of anis or brandy and a dish full of *turrón* and marzipan (Spain's classic Christmas sweets) as a snack for the Kings. We remembered the camels too,



and left them a big bowl of water and another of straw.

With everything ready, we would go off to bed —willingly for once. We knew that we had to be sound asleep when the Kings arrived. They would come in by the balcony, guided by the shoes, would check that we were asleep and then leave the presents. Stopping for a little light refreshment, they would then creep away to get their work finished before dawn broke.

THE PRESENTS

By five or six in the morning, we were already up and about. Our bedroom gave directly onto the dining room, which was

where the Kings left their presents. Opening that door, we felt much as Ali Baba must have done when he said «Open Sesame»: it was amazing —everything we had asked for (or nearly everything) was there. The room seemed full of presents, the Kings had drunk their drinks and eaten the *turrón* and the camels had polished off the water and straw.

We would run and wake the grown-ups at once. They had presents too, though not a patch on ours —clothes, books, scent and that sort of thing. Ours were by far the best: dolls, cars, skates, paints... When we had explored the contents of the dining room, we remembered the shoes. The Kings would have left some little items there too. Then we would head for the *belén* and change the figures of the Kings on their camels for others which stood or knelt before Baby Jesus offering their gifts.

After breakfast, we would go off to our uncles and aunts' houses to take the presents that the Kings had left at our house for them and our cousins and to collect what they had left at their houses for us: it was a veritable orgy of present giving. On the way back, we would stop to buy the *roscón de Reyes* which was to be our pudding that day (see inset).

The whole afternoon was devoted to the new toys. The long wait had been well worth it and this was a day we had to make the most of. The next day was the last day of the holidays, and the following day we would be back at school. But the knowledge that all the new toys that the Kings had brought us were waiting for us at home made it all much easier to bear.

And so it went on, year after year, until some know-all —usually a school-mate or an older brother or sister— broke it to us that the Kings were really our parents. Though this seemed incredible at first, one somehow couldn't help putting two and two together and letting doubts gain ground. As time passed, one simply had to accept the truth and start enjoying the whole business in a different, far less intense way. Only when we are parents ourselves and become Kings in our turn do we manage to recapture something of the special magic of childhood.

MYSTERIOUS ORIGINS

Why it is the Magi, the Three Kings, the Wise Men of the East, that traditionally bring the presents in Spain as opposed to Papa Noël or Santa Claus is something of a mystery.

Obviously the phenomenon has its roots in the Gospels. St. Matthew describes how the Kings were guided by a star to Bethlehem where they offered the new-born child three gifts: gold, for he was a king; incense, for he was also a god; and myrrh for he was a man predestined to die (myrrh was used in the Middle East for embalming the dead). Although we take it for granted nowadays that there were three of them, it is not known as a hard fact how many there

Holy Roman Emperor, handed them over to the Bishop of Cologne. The Bishop had a simple church built to contain them, later to be transformed into the present-day monumental cathedral in which the relics are still kept in a glass urn on the High Altar.

Whether rooted in tradition or history, there is an undeniable logic behind attributing to the Three Kings the gift-giving role that exists in some form in nearly all cultures of the world. Even more so

around Murcia —Rincón de Seca, for example— this play is still performed in the main square every 5 January or on the previous Sunday, acted by villagers rigged out in eccentric costumes.

This is yet another example of how deeply rooted the tradition of the Three Kings is in Spanish lore, though little documented. The origins of the parade are better known, though varying versions exist. At least they all agree that it is a relatively recent tradition. One version is that the first parade was held in the last century in Alcoy (Alicante), a town famous for its lively Moors versus Christian fiestas.

Another maintains that it was in Seville, well-known as a creator and sustainer of popular fiestas, that the first parade was held, instigated by a member of the Seville Athenaeum, José María Izquierdo. Strolling about Seville on the night of January 5, 1917, he was approached by a small boy begging for money. Moved by the realisations that the child could expect no presents the next day, Izquierdo thought up an idea to provide toys for deprived children. He put forward the idea at the Athenaeum and the first parade was held the following year.

In his *Costumari catalán*, Joan Amades, compiler of local traditions, particularly of Catalonia, states that the traditional view is that the Kings were so pleased to have been able to give their gifts to the Infant Jesus that on their return they gave presents to everyone and it is this gesture which is imitated every year. He also mentions the figure of the «servant Gregori», an emissary of the Kings, who reports on children's behaviour throughout the year.

How strange, then, that in no other country with a strong Christian tradition —not even in Italy, for example, where the Kings feature in their famous Nativity Scenes— does this tradition exist. Not even in Latin America, where Spanish influence was so all-pervading, do the Three Kings appear in the role of present deliverers.

Despite the influence of the media which present the Spanish public with films and pictures of Papa Noël and Santa Claus with their long white beards and red outfits, the Three Kings remain inviolate. One might even say that they have become more firmly fixed than ever in the popular imagination over the last ten to twenty years, as villages and towns where there was previously no tradition of doing so have started holding their own *Reyes* parades. The magic still works.



The Christmas spirit also reaches the business quarters.

really were. St. Matthew speaks of them in the plural, and the mention of three gifts gave rise to the belief throughout Christendom that there were also three kings. Nevertheless, medieval tales from Armenia feature twelve kings and actually cite their names. It was the Venerable Bede, canonised 8C Anglo-Saxon theologian and scriptural commentator, who first gave validity to the names and physical descriptions of the Wise Men that are now so familiar to us.

Tradition has it that their remains were discovered by Saint Helena and transferred in the 5C first to Constantinople and later to Milan until, in 1164, Frederick I (Barbarossa), King of Germany and

when you consider that they took on an increasing importance for Christians during a long period of our history, particularly during the Middle Ages.

Indeed, the most ancient example of Spanish drama in existence, the *Auto de los Reyes Magos* (The Play of the Three Magi), dates from medieval times. Written in the 12C in the Toledan dialect of the period, it survives in fragmentary form —147 verses— and recounts the story as told in St. Matthew's Gospel of the Kings' journey to Bethlehem. Though it sticks closely to the standard text, it also includes details originating in traditions preserved in the apocryphal gospels.

In some villages of Spain, particularly

Roscón de Reyes

Spain's confectioners still reflect the events of the church calendar very closely. No religious festival is without its own typical sweet or cake. At Christmas, there is *turrón* and marzipan; on All Saints' Day, *buesos de santo* (saint's bones—little rolls of white marzipan), *panellets* and *buñuelos de viento* (tiny spherical fried eclairs); for Holy Week, *torrijas* (slices of bread soaked in wine or milk and then fried) and *pestiños* (crisp folded honey pancakes) ...

Reyes, of course, has its own speciality, known as *roscón de Reyes*. It is a ring of rich sweet bread, the surface encrusted with crystallised fruits and sprinkled with sugar. They come in all sizes, from individual to party-size for up to 15 or 20 people. They can be bought either in the basic model or stuffed with cream or another sweet filling, and em-

bedded in the bread itself, well hidden, are surprises such as tiny porcelain figures and key rings anything small that will withstand the heat of the oven.

The tradition of the *roscón* is well documented and dates back at least as far as the Middle Ages. In his book *El Carnaval*, Spanish anthropologist Julio Caro Baroja describes how in bygone days the *roscón* was



used to elect the «Bean King», a title which entitled its holder to certain rights for that day or even longer. «On the day of *Reyes*, a large cake or pastry or ring was made into which a bean was put before it was cooked. When the fiesta began, which was usually at night, the cake was cut up into as many pieces as there were children, and the one who got the bean in his piece was made king», recounts Baroja. At times, several beans were put in and the next to find one would be the «prince», or if it were a girl, the «queen».

In Navarre, though, the Bean King was appointed by the Three Kings themselves. The selected child was dressed up as a king and given money and wheat for his family and sometimes even an allowance for life.

Nowadays, finding the little figure which is the modern

substitute for the bean brings you good luck for the coming year, though in some families the one who finds it has to pay for the *roscón*. It's all a question of tradition.

Roscón de Reyes (Kings' Day Cake)

20 g pressed yeast
4 tablespoons warm milk
200 g sugar
1/2 kilo flour
3 whole eggs
1 egg, separated
1 teaspoon salt
1 tablespoon dark rum
1 tablespoon orange flower water (*agua de azahar*)
1 teaspoon grated orange rind
1 teaspoon grated lemon rind
100 g butter, softened
50 g almonds, blanched, skinned and slivered
candied fruits, orange peel, etc., for decoration (about 100 g).

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SPANISH CHOCOLATE

Back to the Future

Text: Luis Palacio

From the time of its discovery in the American colonies in the early 16C to the introduction of its industrial manufacture in the late 19C, chocolate was something typically Spanish. With centuries of tradition behind them, chocolate producers in Spain today can be confident that theirs is a top quality product. With an eye to the future, they are currently adopting a highly imaginative approach.



It is a traditional story in the northern Spanish region of Asturias that when Charles I visited Spain for the first time as its new monarch in 1517, he landed by mistake in the little Asturian village of Tazones, instead of on the Basque coast. The locals—thrilled and awestruck to be the first to encounter the new king—served him the most luxurious refreshment they had: a cup of chocolate. Like so many legends, this story may be completely apocryphal. Even so, the lack of precise information about when coca and chocolate were introduced into Spain makes it just possible that it might be true.

The summer of 1990—no question about the veracity of this story—saw the first wedding of a member of the Spanish Royal Family to be held since the restoration of the monarchy in 1975. It was celebrated in Majorca, and festivities, which lasted late into the night, were rounded off with guests' being served a cup of chocolate accompanied by Majorca's famous *ensaimada* pastries.

Between these two events lies the story of a product which Spain—through its ports, artisans and, later, manufacturers—can be thanked for having introduced into Europe. Having reached this side of the Atlantic, chocolate was to provide the basis of an industry which has probably given more pleasure to more people than any other.

FROM THE NEW WORLD TO SPAIN

Chocolate originated in Mexico. Chroniclers of the conquest of New Spain recount how, through their contact with the Aztec Indians and their food and customs, the Spanish conquistadors first sampled the drink which the natives called *tchocolatl*. But, except for the fact that they both share the same basic ingredient, cocoa, *tchocolatl* in its original form was very different from the chocolate we know today. *Tchocolatl* was a bitter, peppery beverage which the Aztecs drank during their religious celebrations, a foaming liquid which brimmed from golden goblets and which the first Spaniard to taste it found highly disagreeable.

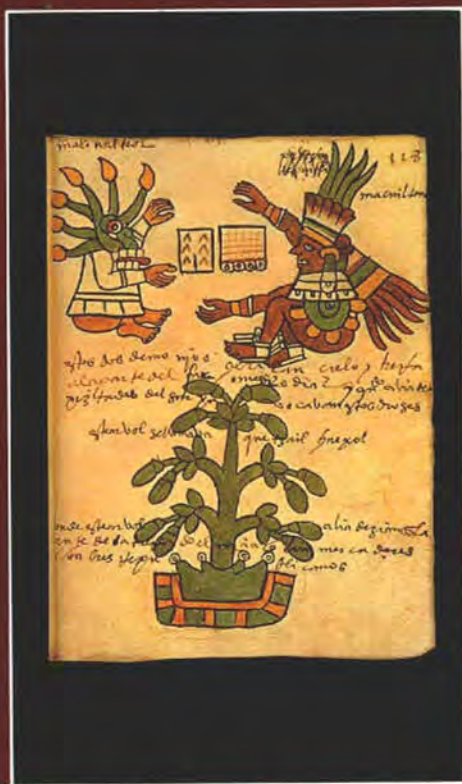
Nevertheless, they were to adopt and adapt it. Ironically, the Aztecs' holy beverage was transformed into something far more sybaritic by Spanish nuns in their convent at Oaxaca, or Guajaca. There, cocoa made its first moves in the direction of modern chocolate. Ground up and

mixed with sugar it became the basis of the sweet drink, far more acceptable to European taste, that was to create a sensation back in the Old World.

Although Christopher Columbus saw cocoa beans for the first time in 1502, during his fourth voyage to the New World (they were used as currency by the American Indians), it was to take a while for them to be sent back to Spain. Documents exist recording a shipment being made to Charles I in 1525.

STATE SECRET

Not only did Spain enjoy a monopoly of the trade in cocoa from the American colonies: it also managed to keep the for-



Cocoa tree, from a reproduction of a pre-Columbian codex. Museum of America, Madrid.

mula for making the new product secret for a whole century.

Of the story of chocolate during those hundred years, little is known except for the emergence of a great debate about whether it should be described as a food or a drink. This had its relevance for Roman Catholics for whom fasting was obligatory on certain days of the year. The question was taken to the highest authority, Pope Pius V, though even he seems to have been unable to issue a definitive



ruling on whether chocolate could technically be said to break the fast or not.

By the 17C, Spain was having to struggle to maintain its monopoly of trade with the Americas. Meanwhile, the Spanish monarchy was entering into closer contact with the other royal courts of Europe and these two facts in combination caused chocolate to become gradually more widely known and much in demand.

Some years earlier, in 1595, Florentine trader Antonio Carletti had taken the first cocoa to Italy. However, it was not really to take off outside Spain until it was served in the elegant Parisian setting of the wedding of Louis XIII to Anne of Austria, daughter of King Philip III of Spain, in 1615, after which it became all the rage among the French well-to-do. Interestingly, the French preferred a more liquid version than the Spanish who liked their hot chocolate as thick as possible.



Fragment from the Catalan ceramic tiles panel «La Xocolatada» (1720). Ceramic Museum, Barcelona.

was, where it came from and how it was prepared.

Chocolate also makes frequent appearances in the writing of foreign visitors to the Spain of that period. An anonymous traveller around Spain who published his observations in Amsterdam in 1700 (signing himself simply «M»), describes the Spanish as drinkers of chocolate in unimaginably large quantities.

Englishman Richard Ford is far more precise in his *Gatherings from Spain*, the book which records his experiences during a three-year stay in the country from 1830 on. According to Ford, chocolate «is for the Spanish what tea is for the English and coffee for the French. It is found nearly everywhere and is always excellent». He notes that it was always served in *jicaras*, little cups without handles, generally accompanied by toast or sponge-cake and washed down with a glass of water «to neutralise the bilious effects of this breakfast of the gods, as Linnaeus called chocolate».

BIRTH OF AN INDUSTRY

The oldest of Spain's current chocolate manufacturing companies is Cordoba's Hijos de Hipólito Cabrera, founded in 1760. But most of the manufacturers who make up the industry today date from the 19C. Among these are companies such as Alfredo Reig, Chocolates Torras, Trapa, Industrias Herminia, Chocolates Valor, Lacasa and Bombonera Vallisoletana.

While Spanish chocolate makers assimilated the techniques for improving the processing of cocoa and manufacturing chocolate developed within Spain, they also absorbed advances made in the rest of Europe after chocolate production had spread throughout the continent. Spain can claim the first mechanised manufacture of chocolate, achieved in Barcelona in 1777. By the 19C, efforts were being concentrated on refining the product. In 1875, Swiss chocolate maker Daniel Peter added milk, thus creating milk chocolate. German Johannes Van Houten had already developed a method of making cocoa butter which would later provide the basis of filled chocolates. Another Swiss, Amadeus Kohler, was the first to add dried fruit and nuts to chocolate bars.

During the 19th and the first decades of this century, technological interchange within the industry spread throughout Eu-

A GOLDEN AGE FAVOURITE

«...the most characteristic drink of this period (Spain's Golden Age —from the 16-17C) was unquestionably chocolate, which was drunk in all private houses». This quotation, from a history of Spanish food by Manuel Martínez Llopis, shows clearly how important chocolate had become by that time.

In its best-known form, as a drink, chocolate was a basic component of the *agasajo*, a snack that was served to guests and usually included crystallised fruits, little sponge cakes, marzipan and the almond-based sweet known in Spain as *turrón*.

In 1631, the first known treatise on the nature and properties of chocolate (entitled *Curioso tratado de la naturaleza y calidad del chocolate*) was published by an Andalusian doctor, Alonso Colmenero de Ledesma, describing what chocolate



Mexicans poured chocolate from one vessel to another, to obtain a foamy chocolate. Post-Columbian codex from the Museum of America, Madrid.

Medicinal properties?

Surprisingly, chocolate and medicine maintained strong links for many centuries. Twenty years after the publication of Doctor Alonso Colmenero de Ledesma's publication of his treatise on the properties of chocolate in 1631 (see main article), another doctor, Francisco Hernández, devoted part of his *Rerum Medicarum Novae Hispaniae Thesaurus* to the same subject.

In those early days, the rich brownness of chocolate seems to have inspired confidence in its beneficial effects on all sorts of ailments, including the rather all-embracing «organic debility». In 1687, a French doctor, Nicolas de Blegny, prescribed it as a treatment for «stomach pain, fevers, nervous ailments and bilious problems». Even as late as the mid-19C, the *Enciclopedia Hispano Americana* (Latin American Encyclopedia) made a clear distinction between nutritive and medicinal chocolate, classifying the latter as a «febrifuge, vermifuge, purgative and aphrodisiac».

Scientific advance now permits us to identify the properties of chocolate with far greater precision. We now know that it contains 1,005 calories per kilo, and that cocoa and chocolate provide carbohydrates, vitamin B, minerals (including phosphorus, iron and potassium), and fats, though it has no cholesterol. Its theobromine and caffeine content acts as a stimulant on both the nervous and muscular systems, while its readily absorbed carbohydrates and fats make it an important energy-booster.

Despite the major shift in eating habits towards health foods over the last couple of decades, chocolate has remained a firm favourite and has resisted all attempts at «diet» versions. Confirmed chocolate eaters just know that all good things are either sinful or fattening.

The first of these tendencies has resulted in some Spanish companies' concentrating entirely on very specific market segments such as powdered cocoa (one of them is a world leader in this field), chocolate bars, filled chocolates and chocolate sweets.

The move towards integration is typified by initiatives such as the formation of Chocospain, a consortium of manufacturing companies whose capital is 100% Spanish and which have joined forces to meet the challenge of foreign markets. «Chocospain offers a complete range of chocolate products, from cocoa powder to chocolate sweets, bars and filled chocolates. For certain types of buyer, what we have to offer is an attractive alternative to the risks involved in working with big manufacturers», says Miguel Barcenilla.

rope and reached Spain, which imported methods and machinery. Meanwhile, some of the principal European manufacturers established themselves in Spain.

SPAIN'S CHOCOLATE INDUSTRY TODAY

Spain's manufacturers of chocolate and its by-products are currently engaged in modernising their productive structure and marketing policy to attune themselves to present-day demand.

At present, there are fifty chocolate manufacturers in Spain, not counting those whose output is entirely hand-made and, by definition, small-scale. Of the companies which qualify as modern, just under half have production figures of over 1,000 tonnes.

The atomisation of Spain's chocolate sector is one of its salient characteristics in comparison with other European countries whose sectors are made up of fewer, larger entities. «Given this situation», explains Miguel Barcenilla, manager of Spain's exporters' consortium Chocospain, «there are two discernible tendencies within the sector at the moment—specialisation and integration.»

El Indio, in Madrid, is one of the very few shops left which still toasts its own cocoa beans.



M. LUISA ASSENS



M. LUISA ASSENS



AS THE SUN SET SLOWLY
BEHIND THE OLD TOWN,
WE SHARED A COOL,
FRAGRANT PENEDES WINE.

WE'D SPENT THE DAY
WANDERING THROUGH THE
VINEYARDS IN THE
MOUNTAINS OF THE PENEDES
REGION NEAR BARCELONA.
NOW, AS WE RELAXED,
WE BEGAN TO REALISE
HOW THEY GAINED THEIR
REPUTATION AS SOME
OF THE WORLD'S FINEST WINE
MAKERS.

WE'D CHOSEN A PALE,
YET FRUITY PENEDES WHITE
WINE WITH A LOVELY,
DELICATE BOUQUET. LATER,
WE CHOSE ONE OF THE
SUPERB PENEDES REDS, WHICH
ARE SMOOTH FULL-BODIED
WINES, GOOD ENOUGH TO
ACCOMPANY JUST
ABOUT ANY DISH, ANYWHERE.



W I N E S F O R T H E
B E S T T A B L E S .

WINES FROM SPAIN.
66 CHILTERN STREET, LONDON W1M 1PR.



*Restaurante La Torreta
Barcelona Murray Lanou '89*

THE CHOCOLATERIA Late Night Special

Chocolate, which started off as a drink for the well-off classes, soon became accessible to all and sundry, as this observation on Madrid from the late 17C shows: «Chocolate ...has become so widespread that there is hardly a street without one, two or three stalls where it is made and sold...»

The modern-day equivalents of those stalls are the *chocolaterías*, specialised establishments which often serve nothing but hot chocolate by the cup. There is usually at least one in all Spain's bigger towns.

Chocolaterías owe much of their success to the late-night habits of the Spanish. After hours of moving from one nocturnal haunt to another, hot chocolate with *churros* (crisp golden sticks of fried dough) are considered just the job to round off the night before heading for bed as dawn breaks. The less resilient have them for breakfast or at tea-time.

In the heyday of the theatre, it was usual to stop off for a cup of chocolate after the show. This was the origin of Madrid's *Chocolatería San Ginés*, opened in 1890 just across from what used to be the *Eslava Theatre*. Actors and audience alike could be found there after the performance. Though the *Eslava's* curtain fell for the last time several years ago, you can still eat *chocolate con churros* at the marble-topped tables of the recently restored *San Ginés*.

One of Spain's oldest *chocolaterías* is the *Can Joan S'Aigo* in *Palma de Mallorca*, which dates from 1700. It is still customary for the entire Municipal Corporation to assemble there for a celebratory cup of chocolate on the the feast-day of the local patron saint, *San Sebastián*.

Though there are very few left, you can still find shops making their own genuine handmade chocolate. *El Indio*, in *Madrid*, is one of them. Established in 1847, it still toasts its own cocoa beans and mixes its own chocolate paste—you can watch it being done.

Here is a list of some of the best *chocolaterías* in four of Spain's major cities.

Barcelona

La Gijonenca, Rambla de Catalunya, 35
Petrilxol, Petrilxol, 11

In both of these, the classic thing to ask for is a *chocolate con suizo*. Though in the rest of Spain a *suizo* is a type of pastry, here it means cream. Though you will be offered a range of pastries with your *chocolate con suizo*, you are unlikely to find *churros* which are not as popular in *Catalonia* as in other parts of the country.

Madrid

Café Comercial, Glorieta de Bilbao
Café Granja Ruiz, RRuiz, 11
Café del Nuncio, Segovia, 9
Chocolatería Nike, Juan Montalvo, 4
El Calentito, Jacometrezo, 15
San Ginés, Pasaje de San Ginés, 5

Seville

Chocolatería Virgen de los Reyes, Luis Montoto, 131
Chocolatería Virgen de Luján, Virgen de Luján, 41

Valencia

The traditional combination in *Valencia* is chocolate with *buñuelos* (tiny spherical fritters) rather than *churros*, especially during the city's major fiesta, *Las Fallas*, on 19 March.

Chocolatería Santa Catalina, Plaza de Santa Catalina

Daniel

(in *Alboraya*, 2 km out of the city)
El Siglo, Plaza de Santa Catalina.

M.ª LUISA ASSENS



Chocolate with churros for breakfast, at tea-time or as dawn breaks is a very Spanish custom.

Even so, though Spanish chocolate exports are increasing year by year, manufacturers are concentrating their efforts on the domestic market which is increasingly competitive and for which total production—including cocoa powder, bars, spreads and semi-manufactured products—exceeded 126,000 tonnes in 1988, according to the trade magazine *Alimarket*. Per head consumption that year was 3.8 kg—relatively low compared with France's 5-plus kg and the UK's 8 kg.

Spanish consumers, partly because of the nation's long chocolate tradition and partly because of the strict regulations which have governed manufacture, are used to a very high quality product.

One of the significant features of the domestic market is the fact that the high quality home product is having to fight to maintain its share of the market against incursions by the big multinationals.

Spanish consumers, partly because of the nation's long chocolate tradition and partly because of the strict regulations which have governed manufacture, are used to a very high quality product. While the rest of Europe produced chocolate *tout court*, there were two types in Spain—standard and *extrafino*, a kind of super-quality category which was higher in cocoa content by about 30%. Discerning chocolate consumers still recognise today that certain Spanish brands mean top quality. In the opinion of *Chocospain's* manager, «in the area of processed raw material, there are some Spanish companies who have nothing to learn from the top international names. The challenge presently facing Spanish manufacturers is, unquestionably, marketing their product. Meanwhile, they are revealing a considerable degree of creativity in developing new products and modifying others: this is emerging as one of the major areas of potential for the future».

Cooking with chocolate

Most of us eat our chocolate straight from the wrapper or chocolate box. If we use it in the kitchen, it is generally for a special occasion dessert.

Yet many traditional Spanish recipes use it to very distinctive effect in savoury dishes —meat and even fish. It features particularly in the cuisine of Catalonia, always in the form of dark chocolate and usually in combination with nuts (hazel or almond). One classic example is the Costa Brava dish known as *mar y montaña* (Sea and Mountain) which contains lobster and chicken —the name refers to the origin of the main ingredients. Though the addition of chocolate to this sort of dish sounds risky, the results are surprisingly delicious.

Recipes

Catalan-style prawns (*Gambas a la catalana*)

Serves 4
20 prawns
25 g butter
2 squares dark chocolate, grated
1 glass home-made tomato sauce
1 large onion, grated
1 glass white wine
1 liqueur glass brandy
1 bowl cooked white rice
olive oil, salt, freshly ground black pepper

Quickly fry the peeled prawns in the butter and 4 tablespoons oil. Add the brandy, flambé until the flame dies down then remove the prawns and set aside. In the same oil, gently fry the onion and when it has softened add the tomato sauce, 4 or 5 prawn heads, the wine and the chocolate. Season with salt and pepper and allow to cook gently for 30 minutes. Pass the mixture through a fine sieve, pressing hard, and mix the sauce with the prawns. Reheat for a few minutes and serve with rice.

Recipe from «*Comer y Beber*» magazine.

Chicken with lobster (*Pollo con langosta*)

Serves 4
1 chicken plus its liver

1 lobster
1 large onion, grated
1/4 kg ripe tomatoes, peeled, deseeded and chopped
1 clove garlic
1 small glass maderised white wine
1 liqueur glass brandy
30 g clark chocolate



Chicken and lobster, a Catalan dish where the chocolate gives a very distinctive effect.

20 g toasted almonds and hazelnuts
150 ml (3/4 glass) olive oil
a few strands saffron
bay leaf, thyme, oregano, parsley, salt and black pepper

Cut the boiled lobster in half and reserve the liquid it produces. Cut the cleaned chicken into 8 pieces and season lightly with salt and pepper. Heat the oil in a large, flameproof, earthenware casserole and cook the chicken pieces with the liver until browned. Remove the chicken and set aside. Now add the onion and herbs to the casserole and when the onion is just beginning to colour, add the lobster. Fry for a few minutes then add the brandy and flambé. Add the tomatoes and cook gently for 15 minutes. Return the chicken to the dish, add the wine and the lobster liquid then put on a lid, turn the heat down very low, and cook for 30 minutes more. About 5 minutes before cooking time is up, add a mixture made by crushing the saffron,

garlic, almonds, hazelnuts, chicken liver and grated chocolate (a pestle and mortar are ideal for this). Serve hot, sprinkled with chopped parsley and croutons.

Recipe from
«*Comer y Beber*» magazine.

Partridge in chocolate flavoured sauce (*Perdiz con chocolate*)

4 partridge, or other game bird, split in half
Coarse salt
Freshly ground pepper
3 tablespoons olive oil
2 cloves garlic, minced
1 onion, chopped
1 tablespoon flour
2 tablespoons vinegar
1/2 cup dry white wine
1/2 cup chicken broth
2 bay leaves
2 cloves
1 teaspoon grated bitter chocolate

Allow the partridge to sit, uncovered or lightly covered, in the refrigerator for 2-3 days. This helps to tenderize the meat.

Sprinkle the split partridge on both sides with salt and pepper. Heat the oil in a deep casserole and brown the birds well. Add the garlic and onion and continue cooking until the onion is wilted. Stir in the flour. Add the vinegar, wine, broth, salt, pepper, bay leaves,

and cloves. Cover and simmer 45 minutes or until tender, skin side down. Remove the birds to a warm platter. Add the chocolate to the sauce and stir until dissolved. Return the birds to the casserole and cook, covered, 10 minutes more.

Recipe from the book «*The Foods and Wines of Spain*» by Penelope Casas.

Spanish hot chocolate (*Chocolate a la taza*)

Spanish hot chocolate is at its best with *churros* —fritters made by piping flour and water dough through a nozzle into hot oil to form sticks or loops. This is the classic combination eaten at breakfast, teatime or as a dawn snack to round off a night on the town. As well as being delicious, *churros* are just right for dunking into hot chocolate, but biscuits and other pastries taste equally good with it.

In Spain, genuine hot chocolate is made with bars of chocolate which contain a little flour which thickens the drink, but it can also be made by adding flour to dark chocolate or by bringing the liquid to the boil several times until it thickens. The authentic version is made with water, though nowadays there is a tendency to make it with milk or a mixture of the two.

For one cup:
40 g dark chocolate
1 cup milk or water
sugar
1/2 teaspoon flour

Grate the chocolate and mix it in a small saucepan with the milk or water. Heat, stirring continuously with a wooden spoon until it boils. Remove from the heat, add the flour, beat vigorously until it is thoroughly mixed in and bring back to the boil so that the liquid thickens. If you prefer not to add flour, bring to the boil three times more. Add sugar to taste, stirring it in over the heat, and serve the chocolate very hot.

THE VALLE DE ARAN

HEAD IN THE CLOUDS, FEET ON THE GROUND

Text: **Hawys Pritchard**

Until the Viella Tunnel was built in 1948, the tiny Valle de Arán, tucked high up in the Catalan Pyrenees, was often cut off from the rest of Spain for months at a stretch. It has since become the site of one of the Pyrenees' most up-market ski-resorts — Baqueira Beret — a magnet for weekend skiers from nearby France, Barcelona, and even Madrid. Curiously, the invasion of the smart set into a rural enclave where life has been tough for centuries but which has enjoyed virtual independence by way of compensation works well and is one of the valley's many charms.



The valley has many apsed Romanesque churches, dating from the 12C and 13C, with beautiful exterior details, like Salardu's church.

The 1989/90 skiing season was, I was warned, disastrously short on snow. Never having strapped foot to ski in my life, this caused me little concern as I set off to explore the Valle de Arán in the first weekend in March. Indeed, as things turned out, it meant that I was treated to a kaleidoscopic experience of the valley... but more of this later.

HISTORICALLY PRIVILEGED

The Valle de Arán is in the north west of the province of Lerida, and sits high up in the Catalan Pyrenees. Its chief town, Viella, at 974 m (3,200 feet), is overlooked by peaks which tower up to around 3,000 m (10,000 feet). There is evidence of settlement here dating back to Roman times, and though the history books

show that the valley was coveted territory, changing hands several times from the 12C on, it seems always to have enjoyed a fair degree of autonomy — one of the compensations of geographical inaccessibility. In return for recognising the sovereignty of King Alfonso of Aragon in the 12C, the valley was conceded certain jurisdictional rights and privileges. In 1283, it was conquered by the French, whose domination was to last until 1312. In what seems a delightfully simple and enlightened process, though there must have been more to it than meets the modern eye, the valley carried out a public opinion poll in 1313, voting to re-join Aragon. In recognition of this display of loyalty, Aragon's Jaime II issued a charter confirming the valley's privileges, some of which it still enjoys. It was Jaime who divided up the valley into Lower, Middle and Upper Arán, with their respective «capitals» in Bossost, Viella and Salardú — an arrangement which still persists. Later, in 1810, Napoleon was to incorporate the Valley into the French département of Haute Garonne, though it was to return definitively to Spanish hands in 1815.





The valley's long history has been one of self-sufficiency, in both cultural and material terms. Until a tunnel was built in 1948, the tiny Valle de Arán, tucked high up in the Catalan Pyrenees, was often cut off from the rest of Spain for months.

A road over the Bonaigua Pass, built in 1924, was the first step in opening up the valley to the outside world, though it was not until the building of the five kilometre-long Viella Tunnel in 1948 (and particularly after its improvement in the mid-60s) that the effects on its economic life became significant.

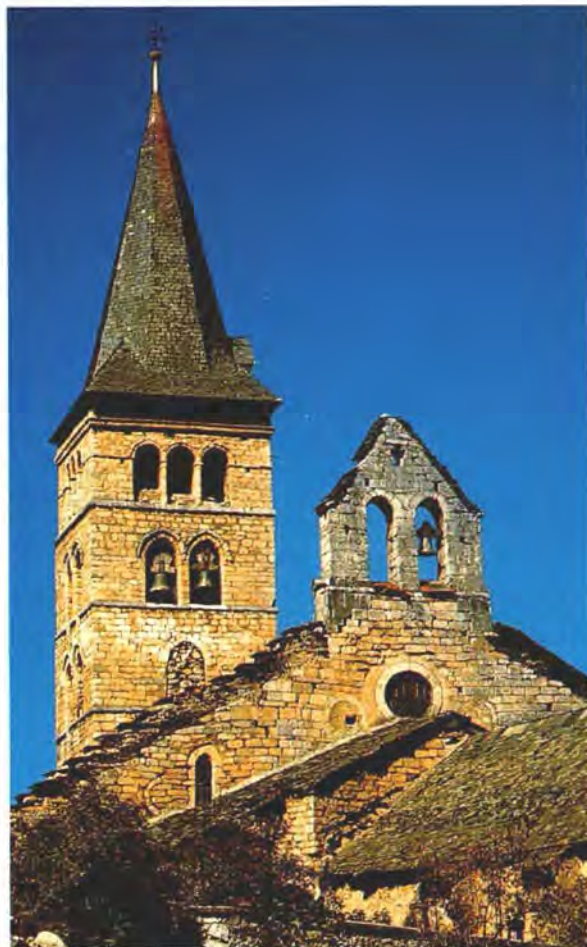
Despite spells of «foreign» input, the valley's long history has essentially been one of self-sufficiency, in both cultural and material terms, and this shows in many aspects of local life, such as attitudes and food. Today, the valley has 5413 inhabitants, a high proportion of whom—and not only the elderly—speak Aranese, the local dialect. While it has much in common with Catalan, it is a fascinating language in its own right. The word for «yes» in Aranese is «oc», revealing it to belong to the Languedoc linguistic family. There is great local pride in the language and an awareness of the importance of keeping it alive. Nattily designed stickers in shop windows announce that Aranese is spoken, and road signs and so on appear not only in Spanish and Catalan but also in Aranese—not as daunting to foreign visitors as it sounds.

HITTING THE ROAD

My companion and I drove to the Catalan Pyrenees from Madrid. The key points along the road are Zaragoza and Lerida, and from Zaragoza on we started to become aware of a certain cultural shift as we approached Catalonia. The fact of joining a Euro-motorway, the E4, was one factor. Stopping for a breather at a motorway service station, even the most committed philistine would have noticed the gourmet food counter and the leaflets announcing that the restaurant was specialising in Italian food that particular fortnight (the previous one having been dedicated to Basque food and the next to Aragonese). The trip was already taking on a gastronomic tone,

and as we approached Lerida and saw that the signs also gave its Catalan equivalent, Lleida, a linguistic one as well.

After Lerida, we left the Euro-road, and headed north through pear-growing country, the landscape and road becoming more and more rural as we drove on. So rural, in fact, that gastronomic pretensions began to give way to panic that we might not find any lunch at all. Spotting at last a roadside cafe with two



lorries parked outside, we didn't hesitate for a moment. Little did we know as we stepped through the unpromising plastic-strip curtain of the *Portal del Pirineo* (Gateway to the Pyrenees) that we were in for one of the two top gastronomic treats of the whole trip. Tina Turner favourites belted out in the bar, and were still fairly much in evidence in the restaurant area beyond. There, the lorry drivers were already tucking in. From our formica table, I drank in the decor, an eclectic mixture of girly ca-

The valley's churches are small, as befits the communities they were built to serve, and sturdy, despite the apparent fragility of their pointed slate-clad steeples.

ARTIES PARADOR

The Valle de Arán, though tiny, boasts two national paradors, just a quarter of an hour's drive from each other: Viella's, purpose-built to deal with tourists in large numbers, and the smaller more intimate Parador in the little village of Arties just up the valley towards Baqueira Beret ski station.

Arties parador glories in the full title of Parador Don Gaspar de Portolà. Don Gaspar, whose mansion forms part of the hotel today, achieved fame as an explorer and colonist of the Americas in the 18C. He discovered the site and then founded the town of Monterrey, in the bay of San Francisco. In the course of his illustrious career in the New World, he became Governor of both Lower California and of Puebla de los Angeles (Mexico)—a far cry from his native Pyrenean valley where, understandably, he is considered a local hero. A medieval tower, a 17C chapel and various fine pieces of furniture and paintings survive from his mansion, which forms the nucleus of this otherwise modern parador (built in two stages in 1967 and 1978). Except for a low-beamed hall, which is used as a dining-room on special occasions such as weddings and conventions, the old part is currently not in use but is soon to be rehabilitated and incorporated into the rest of the hotel.

MODERN COMFORTS

The atmosphere in the modern part is quite different. The outside of the building, with its steeply pitched slate roof, dormer windows, and wooden shutters fits beautifully into the village, the medieval tower lending historical tone. As one steps into the reception hall, the overall impression is of light and space. Golden pine surfaces and polished slate floors create just the right balance between rusticity and elegance, so that one can imagine stomping



Don Gaspar de Portolá, a local hero, gives his name to the Arties Parador. His ancient house forms part of the hotel today.

OUT TO LUNCH

The parador chain's general policy is to feature local food on their menus as well as more generically Spanish and international dishes. Mr. Valmayor explained that nowadays, even in the hardest winters, the valley is never cut off from the outside world long enough for supplies ever to run short. Arties parador's menu includes several local dishes, the most popular being a (for me) dauntingly hearty hot-pot known as *olla aranesa*. The house *vin ordinaire*, served in earthenware jugs, is a fruity red from Conca de Tremp.

I stayed to lunch and ordered a warm salad of king prawns and baby octopus, to be followed by a dish from the multilingual local specialities list where it appeared in English as «trout by the hot stone». Well, who could resist it? As I waited I sampled the generous aperitifs of *pan con tomate* (tomato-rubbed bread), *fuet* sausage, black olives and stuffed red peppers in squid sauce. My first course was stylishly presented and delicious. Unfortunately my trout, though receiving top marks for drama (it arrived sizzling on, rather than by, an extremely hot slate) was very overdone. Hot slates must be even more difficult to control than electric cookers, I imagine. I forgave all, though, when the charming maitre served me brandy snaps and tiny chocolate mousses on the house with my coffee.

All in all, Arties parador lives up to what its outside appearance suggests. Cosy without a hint of kitsch, utterly comfortable and with charming staff, this is just the place to recover from city stress. Just looking out of the window helps you get life in perspective.

Parador Don Gaspar de Portolá
25599 Arties (Lerida)
Tel.: (73) 64 08 01

Aranese hot-pot ***(Olla aranesa)***

Serves 6

- 1 lamb hock
- 1 ham bone
- 1 chicken
- 1 pig's ear and snout



in after a heavy day's skiing or gliding out of one's room for a stylish candle-lit dinner with equal ease. A huge open hearth with a log fire is the focal point of the ground floor lounge which shares vast picture windows with another open-hearthed lounge/bar/games area on the floor below. Both look out onto a valley landscape that can vary from sunlit green to sparkling white to swirling snow. This same atmosphere carries through to the bedrooms, where pine, bright fabrics and modern paintings strike just the right note —not that easy when you consider that this hotel caters for a clientele of winter skiers, summer holiday-makers and year-round escapist.

The parador's thirty-eight rooms, two suites, conference facilities, two dining rooms, bar and cafeteria are presided over by manager Cándido Valmayor, an imposing mustachioed figure who turned out to be a mine of information and perceptive observations about the Valley. I put this down to the fact that though originally from maritime Galicia over in the north-west, he is now firmly settled in the Valle de Arán having married a local lady. This means that he can apply an outsider's objectivity to the insights that being an honorary Aranesa-by-marriage allow: I enjoyed a fascinating chat with him about local food and customs.

1 piece fat bacon
 1 whole onion stuck with 4 cloves
 2 leeks
 2 sticks celery
 4 medium carrots
 4 medium potatoes
 1 small white cabbage
 1 head garlic
 2 *longaniza* sausages (any spicy pork sausage will do)
 chick peas (ready soaked)
 vermicelli or broken up spaghetti

For the meat-ball:

1/2 kg minced pork, bread-crumbs, chopped garlic and parsley, and beaten egg.

In a large stew pan, place the lamb hock, ham bone, chicken, ear, snout, bacon, garlic (unpeeled) chick peas and onion and add cold water to cover. Add salt and black pepper and bring to the boil. Skim the surface, turn down the heat and allow to cook for half an hour. Meanwhile, cut the celery and leeks into pieces, the potatoes into cubes, the carrots into rings and slice up the cabbage. Add all these to the pot, bring back to the boil and simmer gently for another half hour. Meanwhile, mix together the meatball ingredients, adding enough beaten egg to bind and forming the mixture into one large ball. Add this to the pot, along with the sausages. Bring back to the boil, add the vermicelli and cook for another half hour. Remove all the meaty ingredients and cut up according to the number of people to be served, then return them to the pot. In principle, the hot-pot is now ready, but it is generally held to taste much better if you let it stand and serve the following day.

Civet of venison
(Civet de isard)

Serves 6

1 1/2 kg venison, cut into cubes
 1 large onion
 1 stick celery
 1 leek
 2 carrots
 1 head garlic
 red wine
 black pepper corns, juniper berries and a bay leaf
 olive oil

Preparations for this dish start two days in advance. Place the meat in a

large casserole with all the other ingredients (cut up where appropriate), except for the leeks and the celery, and add red wine to cover. Leave to marinate for two days, then remove and blot the meat, coat it in flour and brown gently in olive oil. Pour the marinade through a sieve and add the liquid to the meat, along with the cleaned leek and celery stick, tied together. Simmer gently for 3 to 4 hours. Serve very hot with croutons and white rice.

Sweet crêpes
(Pasteres, or pescajus)

Serves 6

1 l milk



500 g flour
 200 g caster sugar
 3 whole eggs plus 1 extra yolk
 3 coffee spoons vanilla-flavoured sugar
 200 g melted butter
 1 liqueur glass anis (or any sweet liqueur)

Sieve the flour into a large bowl and mix in the beaten eggs, the melted butter, the caster sugar and the liqueur. Gradually stir in the milk to form a fairly liquid batter. You can add 1/2 l beer —the yeast lightens the texture. Grease a small, heavy frying pan with oiled kitchen paper and heat thoroughly. Pour in just enough batter at a time to cover the bottom so that the crêpes turn out as thin as possible,

turning each one as soon as the underside is done. Sprinkle with vanilla sugar and roll up, or use a filling of your choice.

Celebration punch
(Vin cau)

Serves 20

5 litres full-bodied red wine
 3 glasses brandy
 3 glasses rum
 250 g sugar
 200 g dried figs
 200 seedless raisins
 2 apples
 6 coffee beans

First, core the apples, cut them into rings and seal them quickly on either side on a lightly greased hot-plate or frying pan. Now pour the wine into a suitably large receptacle and heat vigorously. Just before it comes to the boil, add the brandy and rum and turn down the heat. Add the figs, raisins, apple rings and sugar, then flambé the mixture until the flames die down naturally. Turn off the heat, add the coffee beans and allow the punch to stand for 5 minutes before serving.

In the Valle de Arán, this punch is served as welcoming gesture on special occasions —a tradition which dates back many centuries and is still kept up today.

The outside of the Parador, with its steeply pitched slate roof, dormer windows and wooden shutters fits beautifully into the village.



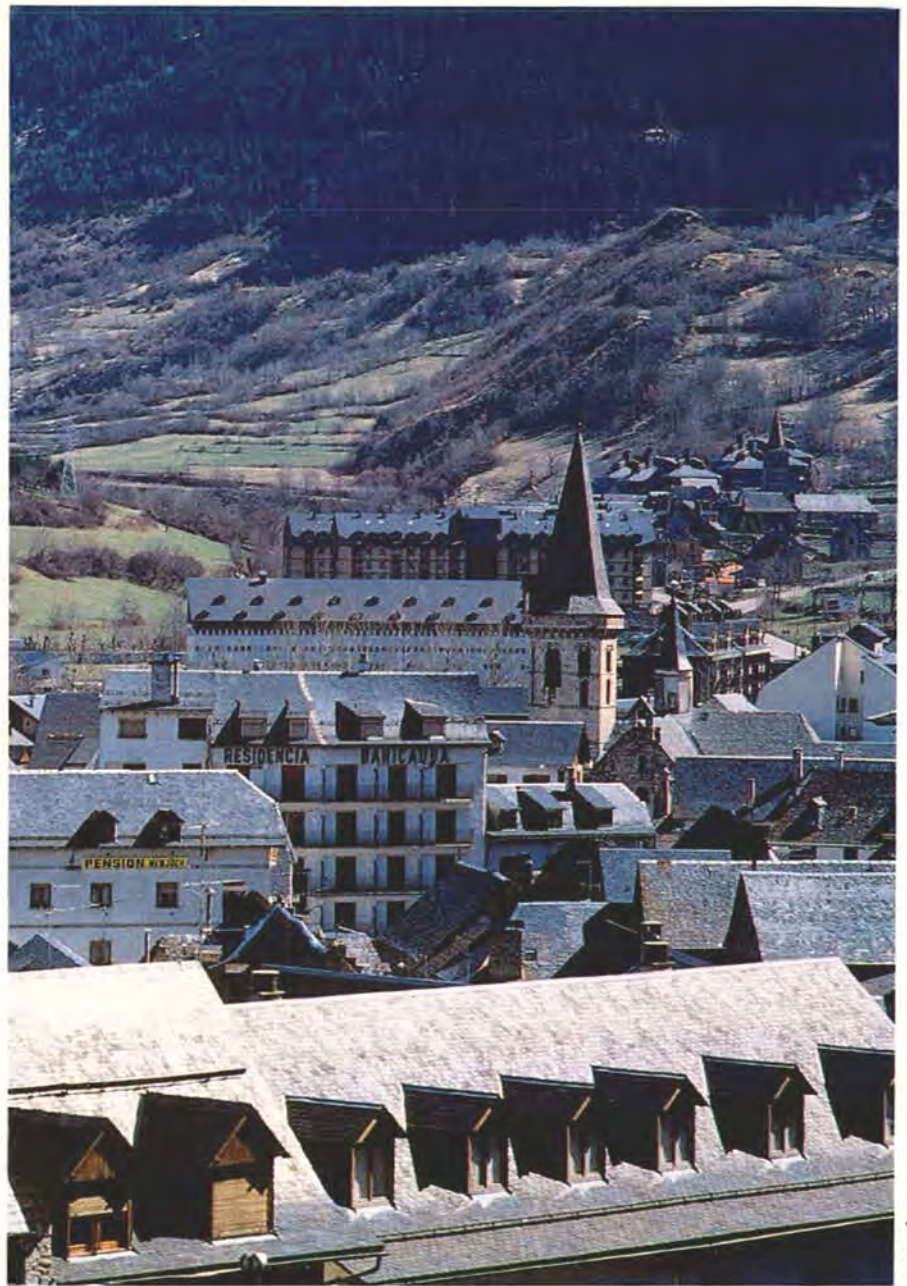
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lendars, amber glass light fittings, a stuffed boar's head mounted on the wall and, in the centre of the room, a vast raised brick hearth on which an open wood fire glowed. Sizzling gently over it on a gridiron were serried ranks of aubergines, their delicious smell filling the room, while arranged around the fire, waiting their turn, were dishes of artichokes and huge red peppers. This method of cooking is called *a la brasa*.

The spirits soared, helped by the charm of the young girl who spread our table with a paper cloth and served us a welcome tot of purple local *vino corriente*. What a shame, she said, the *escalivada* wasn't ready yet (this is a classic Catalan dish of red peppers, aubergine and onion cooked *a la brasa* and dressed with oil). We asked if we could just have some of the aubergines. Rising to this eccentric request, she selected the best from the fireplace, disappeared into the kitchen and within minutes served us one of the most delicious starters I have ever eaten: freshly roasted aubergine dressed with oil and sprinkled with chopped garlic and parsley. For the main dish we were offered anything *a la brasa* —rabbit, quail, steak... We both plumped for quail and followed it up with *crema catalana*—the delicious Catalan version of *crème brûlée*. I've said it before, and I'll say it again, when it comes to food, good posh and good peasant are barely distinguishable.

BEYOND THE TUNNEL

It was a revived pair that approached the Viella Tunnel an hour or so later. Having driven through crisp, cold sunshine all day, it seemed magical that a few token snowflakes should choose to fall just then. Though one cannot help marvelling at the human endeavour involved in chipping away five kilometres' worth of solid rock, the tunnel itself is not a thing of



TURSPAÑA

beauty. What lies beyond makes up for that: the road winds down into the self-contained world of the Valle de Arán —green when we arrived, but, as we were to see the following day, at other times pure white.

The first curve of the road as it descends into the valley embraces the National Parador of Viella (there are two paradors in the valley) which was where we were to be based for the next couple of days. This is one of Spain's modern paradors which nevertheless respects local building materials —stone, wood and slate. Linked to the main building is a conical, glass-sided building

which turns out to be a huge sitting-room with a central log-burning fireplace and panoramic (in the true sense of the word) views over the garden (with swimming-pool for summer use) and the whole valley beyond. Our own comfortable room had french windows (double-glazed against the Pyrenean winter) opening onto a balcony where one could sit out and survey the steep-sided valley beneath, its floor dotted with little villages each with its own tiny pointed-steepled church. Breathing in, one got the impression that Pyrenean air reaches parts of one that ordinary air does not.

Viella, the valley's capital is a little town. Though apartment blocks have appeared, the original stone and slate town is still very much discernible.

The staff at reception had told us they were expecting a quiet weekend, though snow was on the way. And just as we sat down to the on-the-house chilled sherry and anchovies on tomato-rubbed toast which started off that night's dinner, the cry went up «Nieva —It's snowing!». Sure enough, flakes could be seen swirling in the lamplight on the balcony beyond the french windows. As if by magic, people (Barcelonans, I was informed by my Spanish companion) began to arrive in the hitherto sparsely populated dining room. Standing in the conical *salón* later, it was like being inside one of those glass snowstorm domes that one so loved as a child.

OUT INTO THE SNOW

The curtains opened next morning on the valley in its white mode, sparkling under a brilliant blue sky. Some of our fellow-guests at breakfast were clearly off for a serious day's skiing (there was enough snow on the highest slopes), already dressed in the high-tech sub-layers of their ski outfits and arranging the preparation of their picnic lunches with the staff. Paradors go in for a self-service «international» breakfast which achieves a sort of gastronomic esperanto, providing their foreign guests with things they

The interior of Casa Irene is wood-lined with creamy curtains at the shuttered windows and snowy linen on the tables.

CASA IRENE

Haute Cuisine

Arties, 1,140 m (3,740 feet) up in the Catalan Pyrenees is a little village of some four hundred inhabitants. It boasts two 12C Romanesque churches, a charming parador, and one of the best restaurants in Spain.

A coveted entry in the *Guide Michelin*, two recipes quoted in Penelope Casas' excellent *The Foods and Wines of Spain...* Casa Irene has, unquestionably, made it. The explanation is serendipity. Not only is Arties a mere snowball's throw away from the smart ski-station of Baqueira Beret (haunt —among others— of the Spanish Royal family), it also just happens to be the home of a naturally gifted cook, Irene España.

Irene España is one of those people whose name suits her perfectly —a novelist could be proud of having created it to suit her character. Daughter of a French mother and Spanish father, she has inherited from them more than good looks and an impeccable dress sense. Her approach to food is clearly something she was brought up with, not acquired later in life, and the same could be said of the boundless common sense that seems to emanate from this charming woman.

I discovered all this with delight, since I had expected a prima donna. Instead, as I stepped out of an icy winter night and into the glowing interior of Casa Irene where I was to have dinner, I was met by a sweet smile and easy manner which told me immediately that this was going to be all right after all. My companion and I were sat at a gently-lit round table and served with on-the-house brown rolls with anchovy butter and a glass of pink cava, echoing the rosy glow that had been my initial impression on entering. I leaned back and surveyed the scene. The restau-

rant is wood-lined with creamy lace curtains at the shuttered windows and snowy linen on the tables. Along one wall, long rectangular tables with high-backed benches create a booth effect; these accommodate sizeable groups while the round tables dotted about are used for couples and smaller parties. Our fellow diners ranged from a party of French weekenders (the border is barely an hour's drive away) dressed in designer jeans and jerseys, to a rather shy young Spanish couple sensibly clad against the freezing temperatures outside. Irene glided about, sitting down for a chat at tables occupied by regulars (she is equally at home in French and Spanish) yet meanwhile keeping an eagle eye on the food and the service.

DINNER FOR (AT LEAST) TWO

By now, the rosy glow had spread to my cheeks and I felt up to studying the menu. It featured three fixed price menus, moving progressively up-scale in content and price, and each beginning with a range of unspecified starters. Irene herself came to take our order. Casting a doubtful eye over us (my companion is built along the lines of a stick-insect, and I myself was dressed in slimming black), she expressed the opinion that we didn't look as if we were «*de mucho comen*» (big eaters). «Appearances are deceptive», I claimed blithely, believing it at the time. We chose our main courses —partridge with cabbage rolls, and rabbit with kohlrabi and mustard sauce, respectively, to be accompanied by the house red, a Rioja from Bodegas Franco Españolas.

The first of the starters appeared from the kitchen —a little partridge each, and a sizeable earthenware pot of excellent game paté zested with crunchy black



FELIX LLOVEL



Irene España, her son, and also chef, Andreu and her daughter-in-law, María José

pepper corns. We tucked into these with gusto (dinner is always so late in Spain), and thought the next dish to appear an excellent contrast: a vivid salad of escarole, red cabbage, beetroot, tomato, blue cheese and walnuts. The main course would surely be next. But no. Feather-light spinach-filled crêpes were followed by a delicious onion soup with port. By the time our main courses arrived, despite their delicate proportions and presentation, we could do little more than toy with them.

IRENE'S PHILOSOPHY

It had all been utterly delicious, but I knew at that moment that it would be at least a week before I could eat another crumb. Irene slid into a chair and despite an «I-told-you-so» look at the remains on our plates, chatted amicably. There is something irresistible about genuine food lovers when they talk about their subject: the way they take for granted that it's worth the effort of buying in from the best sources —fish from the Basque coast, game from a supplier in France, local vegetables... Though Irene is clearly a woman of the world, she has chosen to deploy her skills at home —quite literally,

for she was brought up in the house adjoining the restaurant. And she has passed on her enthusiasm to her son Andreu: he and his wife are now collaborators in Casa Irene. While fame must be satisfying, she seems to have her priorities very clearly sorted out. The prices she charges are risibly low compared with what you would pay for comparable quality in Madrid or London. And if she chose to, she could charge much more in Arties —well-heeled potential clients abound and she can count King Juan Carlos and Queen Sofia among her satisfied customers. As we chatted, it became obvious that she feels a loyalty to the Valle de Arán that amounts almost to a mission. If I understood it correctly, it is to ensure that people appreciate it for what it is, namely more than just the picturesque setting for a posh ski resort. She loves the valley's natural beauty, quite different in summer than in winter, and wants more people to know about it.

HOTEL VALARTIES

She has done her bit to promote this by opening a small three-star hotel, the Hotel Valartiés, which adjoins Casa Irene (guests eat from the same kitchen) and is open

all year round. I explored the hotel before leaving, and loved the bedrooms and suites with their sloping pine ceilings and country fabrics. Modern conveniences include air-conditioning, TV, and very stylish bathrooms, though Irene seemed to feel that the garden with its own stretch of river is just as important an attraction.

She had told us about the hotel while we were still at the table, and as we were about to go off and view it I happened to mention that I had meant to try the delicious-sounding ice cream whose recipe appears in Penelope Casas' book, but that I would not be eating again for another week, etc. etc. «Oh but you must!», she cried and within seconds, a plate bearing a home-made cone of prune ice-cream appeared decorated with fresh fruit and crème chantilly Readers, it was bliss.

Casa Irene
Mayor, 3
Arties (Lerida)
Tel.: (73) 64 09 00

FELIX LLOVEL

Recipes

Grouper with sea-urchin sauce (Mero con salsa de erizos de mar)

Serves 4

1 kg grouper steaks
1/2 kg chopped onion
1/4 l white wine
10 sea urchins
1/2 dl fresh tomato juice
1/4 l single cream
1/4 l fish stock
100 g butter
salt and freshly ground black pepper

Melt the butter in a broad, shallow pan, salt and pepper the fish steaks and brown them quickly on either side without allowing to cook. Remove the fish and set aside, then cook the onion gently in the same butter until completely soft. Add the white wine and the fish stock to the pan and allow to reduce. Add the cream and reduce again. Meanwhile, remove the orange ovaries from the sea urchins. Stir these into the reduced sauce along with the tomato juice and add the grouper steaks, cooking gently until the fish is just done.

Partridge with ginger (Perdiz al jengibre)

Serves 1

1 partridge
1 rasher streaky bacon

1/2 l white wine
1 chopped shallot
50 g butter
salt, pepper and powdered ginger
game or chicken stock

Pluck and clean the partridge, then salt and pepper it and sprinkle with a little powdered ginger. Place the bacon rasher over the breast and tie with string. Melt the butter in a small oven dish and brown the partridge all over, then roast for 15 minutes in the oven, preheated to 200 degrees C (392° F). Remove the bird from the dish, cut away the breasts and the legs and set them aside in an earthenware dish. Return the carcass to the original oven dish and add the shallot, frying gently until golden. Add the wine and allow to reduce. Now add a little stock and reduce again. When the sauce has reached a rich consistency, pour it through a sieve over the partridge pieces. Heat in the oven for 5 minutes before serving.

Chocolate nut cake

(Tarta de chocolate con nueces)

Serves 6

500 g finely chopped walnuts
200 g finely chopped hazelnuts
280 g caster sugar
18 eggs
1 glass brandy
250 g bitter chocolate

For the filling:

500 g bitter chocolate
500 g whipping cream
1 glass dark rum

Place the egg yolks, the brandy and half the sugar in the mixer and beat thoroughly. Separately, beat the egg whites with the rest of the sugar until stiff and fold into the yolk mixture. Now fold in the chopped nuts. Butter and flour a large tin (a spring tin is best) and pour in the mixture, spreading gently with a spatula. Bake in the oven, preheated to 160 degrees C (320° F). When the meringue is firm, take it out of the oven and allow to cool before removing from the tin.

Meanwhile, prepare the filling. Whip the cream. Melt 500 g chocolate in a *bain marie*, stir in the rum and when the chocolate has cooled slightly, add to the cream. Cut the meringue in half horizontally and fill. Melt the remaining 250 g chocolate (as above) with a little butter and pour over the top.

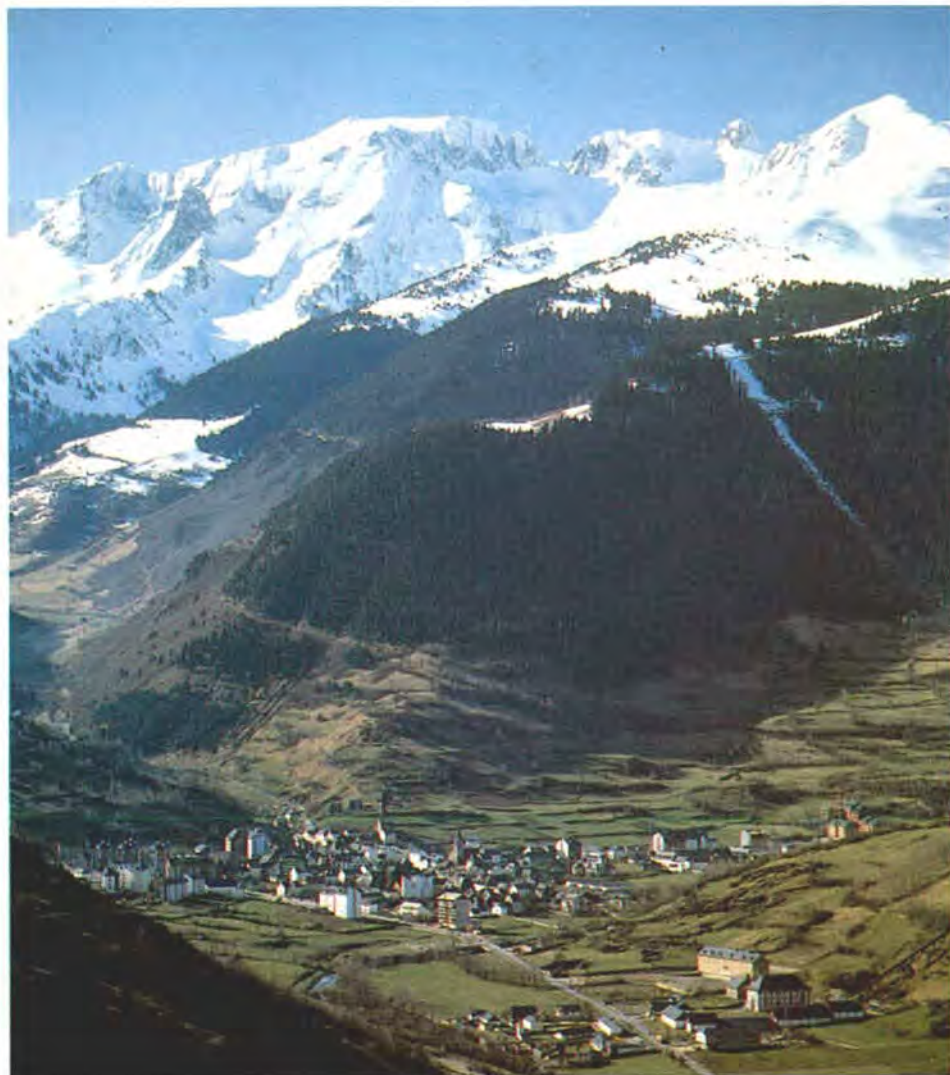
Skiing for sport is a relatively recent phenomenon here; however, it has been a summer retreat for people from hotter parts of Spain and France for much longer.

are used to, though not quite in that form or combination. There was, though, delicious *pan con tomate*, thick slices of good country bread rubbed with cut tomato. This is a classic throughout Catalonia and its savoury sweetness makes it the perfect breakfast for my taste.

Having been an avid reader of fashion magazines since the age of four, I knew that the thing to do in a snow-and-sun situation was to dress on the layer principle. Even so after half an hour of walking around Viella just below the Parador, my hands and feet were frozen and my nose an icy cone. Meanwhile, local ladies were bustling about in cross-over pinnies with black cardigans on top, shopping, sweeping the pavement in front of their houses and generally chatting. «¡Hace fresquito!» («A bit chilly!») one of

them called to her neighbour, proving yet again the eternal truth that everything is relative.

Viella, situated at the midpoint of the valley, is a charming little town. Though apartment blocks and the odd «entertainment venue» have appeared, the original stone and slate town is still very much discernible. Because of the relative lack of snow that weekend, there was only the occasional lumbering form in those dreadful fake-fur space-boots, and this perhaps allowed us a clearer glimpse of Viella as it must once have been. It still has classic old shops which sell a bit of everything, side by side with modern ones selling tourist gifts and ski-wear. One of these had incorporated old wooden skis and sticks into its window display of fluorescent space-suits, and that



BAQUEIRA BERET

Baqueira/Beret ski station is unrivalled in the Spanish Pyrenees on all counts, including the breathtaking beauty of its setting and the skilful planning which has gone into designing the resort's modern nucleus.

Last year, the station celebrated the 25th anniversary of the inauguration of its first chairlift. Over the last quarter century, each season has seen the introduction of new lifts, new pistes of all categories, all types of auxiliary services and the evolution of a very lively après-ski scene.

In Baqueira/Beret's lovely setting, the intermediate level skier is in his element, though beginners and experts are also catered for.

Baqueira/Beret's double-barrelled name is explained by the fact that it is composed of two centres, linked both by lifts and by road. The main centre of the two is Baqueira which, at 1,500 metre level, contains all the resort hotels, apartments, restaurants, shops, discos and the like, as well as the focuses of night-life activity. Beret has all the usual sporting facilities —ski-hire, medical care etc.— as well as cafeterias, but no residential complex.

Skiers head for Baqueira/Beret from all over Spain, though particularly from Madrid and Barcelona, as well as from nearby France. Among its après ski attractions are the many local restaurants, both in the resort itself and in the little villages of the



- 3 kindergartens, with children's snow park
- 2 slalom stadia
- 7 km. (4.3 miles) cross-country ski circuit
- Ski school with over 120 instructors

Accommodation

- Hotel Montarto (4 star). Tel.: (73) 64 50 75
- Hotel Tuc Blanc (4 star). Tel.: (73) 64 51 50
- Hotel Val de Ruda (2 star). Tel.: (73) 64 52 58
- Apartamentos Baqueira. Tel.: (73) 64 59 69
- Apartamentos Multipropiedad. Tel. (73) 64 50 03
- Apartamentos Edelweiss.

Tel.: (73) 64 53 10

- Apartamentos Incasa. Tel.: (73) 64 58 26

Accommodation is also available nearby. Viella has several hotels of various categories, including a lovely National Parador, as does Arties (see inset), and Salardú, Betrán, Casau, Bossost and Escunhau all have accommodation to offer.

Valle de Arán, such as Arties, Viella and Salardú, serving the valley's traditional hearty cuisine. Baqueira/Beret even has its own radio station, Radio Arán, giving the latest information about what goes on within the resort.

Baqueira/Beret in figures

- Upper slopes: 2,500 m (8,200 feet)
- Lower slopes: 1,500 m (4,920 feet)
- 22 ski-lifts, with a capacity of 24,255 skiers per hour
- 700 (1,729 acres) hectares of skiable area
- 43 pistes of all categories
- 6 on-piste restaurants and cafeterias

Baqueira/Beret Ski Resort

Apartado 60
25530 Viella (Lérida)
Tel.: (73) 64 40 25
Fax: (73) 64 58 84

seemed to sum up the tone of the town rather neatly. Viella has its own ski-station, Tucca, though it was not operating that season.

We decided to drive on to the more famous ski-station of Baqueira at the end of the valley and gradually explore our way backwards. Baqueira, purpose-built as a ski-resort and celebrating the 25th anniversary of its inauguration at the time of my visit, is pleasantly designed and offers a vast range of facilities (see inset). Driving up beyond the nucleus of apartment blocks, shops, information office, ski-lifts and so on, we rose

higher and higher into a landscape of pure blue and white. Daring to go no further because of the icy road, we stepped out into what for me was a mystical experience. So this is what skiers get addicted to. I felt like the Queen of the World—a psychological as well as a physical high. And one was nowhere near the top—all around us, peaks soared up and up. Somewhere up there is the modest source of the mighty Garonne which flows gently through the Valle de Arán to debouch, 650 kilometres (400 miles) from its origin, into the Atlantic at Bordeaux.

LOCAL HERITAGE

But below us lay the valley, waiting to be explored. The fact that it still looks unspoiled despite a lot of new building is quite a feat. Several of the people I interviewed and chatted to during the trip attributed much of the credit for this to the CIT, the local Centre for Tourist Initiatives, which has insisted on the application of strict planning control. Traditional local domestic architecture is a clear product of the climate: steeply pitched roofs with overhanging eaves and wooden balconies tucked beneath them not only shrug

off the snow but also provide warm, dry storage lofts within; low ceilings, thick stone walls and small windows with wooden shutters make the most of indoor heat. In most cases, modern buildings have done their best to keep in tune, though Viella's municipal architect is quoted in a local magazine as calling for stricter controls, both of quantity and quality. He feels that too many of the urbanites who build mountain retreats here are parodying the authentic style and turning out houses that look like setting for a nativity scene.

The valley still has many lovely old original houses, but its true architectural gems are the apsed Romanesque churches, small, as befits the communities they were built to serve, and sturdy, despite the apparent fragility of their pointed slate-clad steeples, to withstand the rigours of the Pyrenean climate. Dating from the 12C and 13C, many of these churches still preserve beautiful exterior details, their porticoes elaborately carved with fantastic creatures and decorative motifs: Salardú and Bossost are particularly impressive, though each village has its own treasures.

Viella's Folk Museum, though small, is impeccably laid out and run by a very articulate and well-informed curator. A mine of information about local history and its wider context, she speaks Aranese as her first language. The exhibits brought home to one just what geographical isolation meant in the past. The Valle de Arán was essentially a livestock-rearing community and among the museum's fascinating exhibits were traditional woollen garments, some of finely-woven cloth, cheese-making implements and other domestic utensils, tools, baskets and so on, all made in the valley from local resources.

TOWARDS THE BORDER

From Viella, we now followed the Garonne on its way

to France. The snow was melting rapidly in the bright sunshine, and I began to see evidence of what local people had been telling me, namely that the Valle de Arán is as much a summer resort as a winter one, if not more. Surprisingly, skiing for sport is a relatively recent phenomenon here introduced from France some forty years ago. However, it has been a summer retreat for people from hotter parts of Spain and France for much longer. The summer vis-

itors are rather different from the winter clientele, it seems, and tend to be people who like to get away from it all, hiking up to the lakes in the mountains, camping, fishing, collecting wild mushrooms and exploring the area on foot or on horseback. As we drove along in the sunshine towards Bossost we passed riding schools and restaurants with riverside terraces which, though now closed for the winter would be in full swing from mid-July to mid-September.



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The river is much wider in Bossost, and the tree-lined avenue which runs alongside it is already suggestive of France, just half an hour's drive away. Across the street, a row of souvenir shops aimed at French visitors popping over the border for a quick outing offered tourist trinkets

of the *Viva España* variety. Drawing a veil over this depressing sight, we sought out Bossost's justly famous church. Dating from the 12C, it is an extraordinary, higgledy-piggledy building, its detached belfry standing next to the entrance. The capitals topping the pillars of its portico are among the finest in the whole of the Valle de Arán.

The fact that access to France has always been easier and that it presumably offered more enticing employment

prospects than Spain at certain periods means that French influence in the valley has been considerable. This is noticeable in the local food, which is rich in patés, civets, crêpes... the sort of thing we associate with French country cooking. Essentially, though, they reflect the valley's natural food resources. These include a wide variety of game, fish, wild mushrooms (such as *rovellons* and *ceps*), fruits (apples, strawberries, blackberries, bilberries). There used also to be a cheese-making cooperative in Bossost, but this has now closed down, the tourist trade presumably being more lucrative. The local game patés, thin *fuet* sausages and fruit liqueurs are easy to find throughout the valley, and for me are the valley's «best buys».

But no-one remotely inter-

ested in food could visit the Valle de Arán without becoming aware of the classic local dish, *olla aranesa*, or Aranese hot-pot. This hearty stew uses lamb, pork, sausages, pulses and vegetables and is designed not only to make full use of available resources but also to provide the considerable calorific content needed to withstand the tough local climate in winter. It has now taken on the status of an institution, and some visitors seem to feel that their visit would not be complete without tackling it.

EATING OUT

The emergence of Baqueira as an up-market ski-resort (the Spanish Royal Family ski there) has brought prosperity to the Valle de Arán which, while making life easier for the locals in many ways, has created new demands. While not previously famous for its food (many parts of Catalonia have been for centuries), the valley now has several good, stylish restaurants aimed at a discerning clientele. Though many enterprising restaurateurs have been attract-

ed here from elsewhere, it seems only right and proper that the doyenne of them all—Irene España of *Casa Irene*—should be a local woman. *Casa Irene* has achieved the coveted accolade of featuring in the Guide Michelin, and deserves an article to itself, which it gets (see page 24). This was where my other top gastronomic treat occurred.

How have the people of the Valle de Arán coped so calmly with the influx of outsiders, generally better-off and more worldly-wise than themselves? Clues lie in their evident pride in their valley and its language and a strong sense of identity firmly engrained through centuries of virtual independence. They know the virtues of what they have to offer and whilst happy to share it and benefit from doing so, they clearly have no intention of selling out.

GOURMETS CLUB V SHOW

Madrid 11th, 12th, 13th, and 14th of May, 1991
II WINE FORUM

As in other years, the V Show will be the meeting point for best gastronomic products from Spain and abroad, high-quality goods produced by both craft and industrial techniques.

The Gourmets Club V Show has found it necessary to extend the area needed to house the exhibition. It will be held simultaneously in the Convention Hall and in another pavillion annexed of the Corporation of Madrid, both of which are to be found in the enclosures of the Casa de Campo.

At the same time, the II Wine Forum will be held with the participation of great personalities.

98% OF PROFESSIONAL VISITORS

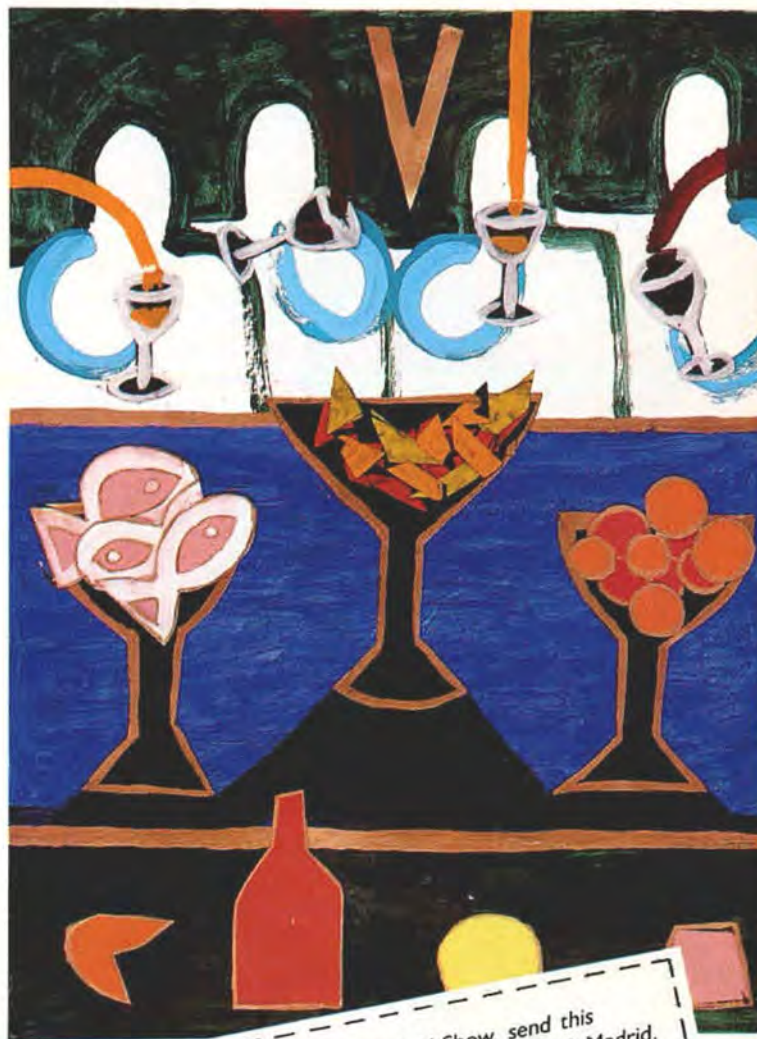
In 1990, 180 exhibitors participated and more than 15.000 people visited the Show, 98% of which were professionals (owners and managers of the best restaurants, hotels, bars and gastronomic shops in Spain, as well as purchasing managers from the big supermarkets and chains of select food stores).

SELECTION OF PRODUCTS TO BE EXHIBITED

As in former editions, the Organizing Committee will maintain a rigorous quality control of the products to be exhibited.

Products to be exhibited:

- Wines, spirits and liquors.
- Sweets, chocolates, biscuits, etc.
- Condiments, spices, oils and vinegars.
- Aperitives and beers.
- Cheeses and perishable products.
- Preserves, vegetables, fish and meat.
- Smoked products, caviar, etc.
- Pork products.
- Patés, foie-gras and duck and goose products.
- Tableware (dinner services, glassware, tablecloths, trolleys, and accessories).
- Various (kitchen utensils, gastronomic publications, computers, etc.)



For further information about the Gourmets Club V Show, send this coupon to Progourmet, S.A. Calle Arturo Soria, 329, 2º C. 28033 Madrid. (Spain). Tel.: (91) 767 24 99. Fax: (91) 767 27 10.

Firm

Address

Telephone

Fax

Person to be contacted and post held in the firm



María Isabel Mijares' twenty years of experience in the wine world have turned her into an authority on the subject. An expert taster and oenologist, she is also secretary of the International Union of Winetasters and acts as technical adviser to the United Nations. As if this were not impressive enough, France recently elected her International Oenological Personality of the Year. Mijares has forged her own niche in a traditionally male preserve, bringing to it a particular sensitivity to the subtleties of a god wine and a facility for communicating them.

She knows the international wine scene through and through, and here gives her views on what the near future holds for Spanish wine.

SPANISH WINE IN THE YEAR 2000

Text: **María Isabel Mijares**

P. SANCHO-MATA

Attempting to predict what the twenty first century holds for Spanish wine might seem doomed to inaccuracy, particularly at a time when wine-drinking is undergoing a world crisis.

But if we cast our minds back over what has been happening in Spanish viticulture and viniculture over the last ten years, the question can actually be considered in quite precise terms.

The economics of wine can be considered in three stages:

1. Growing the grapes.
2. Producing, elaborating and obtaining various types of wine.
3. Selling them.

The last ten years have seen incredible advances, especially at the second stage. The improvements achieved have been significant and genuinely vital. A large number of bodegas which were totally outdated and antiquated have modernised their equipment to meet modern-day demand. They have made all the necessary adjustments to be able to apply the new technology called for in producing the sort of wines that today's consumer wants. They include modern systems for receiving the harvested grapes, for

P. SANCHO-MATA



Spain's vineyards are starting to see replanting with new varieties and a more rational approach, using rootstocks more suitable for their particular soils.



crushing and pressing, fermentation vats with total temperature control, filtering and bottling methods, and so on.

Traditional old materials such as earthenware and cement were useful and appropriate in their day, but have now been substituted by the far more practical stainless steel and epoxy resin clad iron.

Many of our wines achieved the quality target and even surpassed it in some cases, but it still remains to bring them to the attention of the new century's consumers.

P. SANCHEZ-MATA



QUALITY IS THE TARGET

The basic motive behind all this has been to produce better quality wines. Wine-drinking, currently plummeting alarmingly, is now concentrated on medium to top of the range wines, leaving no room for vins ordinaires. This is why the bodegas are having to upgrade themselves.

At the first, grape-growing stage, there have also been significant changes, albeit less notable. Spain's vineyards, the majority of which are very old, are starting to see replanting with new varieties and a more rational approach, using rootstocks more suitable for their particular soils. Experiments are also being carried out with new vine varieties more in tune with the sort of wine today's markets demand. Even so, the changes in viticulture have been less significant than those in the oenological area.

The third, and in my opinion, trickiest, area is a particularly critical one at the moment: commercialisation. Spain's traditional markets are, to some degree, saturated. New outlets and new consumers must therefore be found, and there are still plenty. But the main changes that need to be made are in marketing and sales methods which though once adequate, no longer are.

Many of our wines have achieved the quality target and even surpassed it in some cases, but it still remains to bring them to the attention of the new century's consumers.

And this is surely the challenge facing Spain's wine-producers for the year 2000: making consumers aware of their product and getting it to them.

P. SANCHEZ-MATA

P. SANCHEZ-MATA



A large number of bodegas which were totally outdated and antiquated have modernised their equipment to meet modern-day demand.

Prestige has no age



Brandy **GRAN DUQUE D'ALBA**

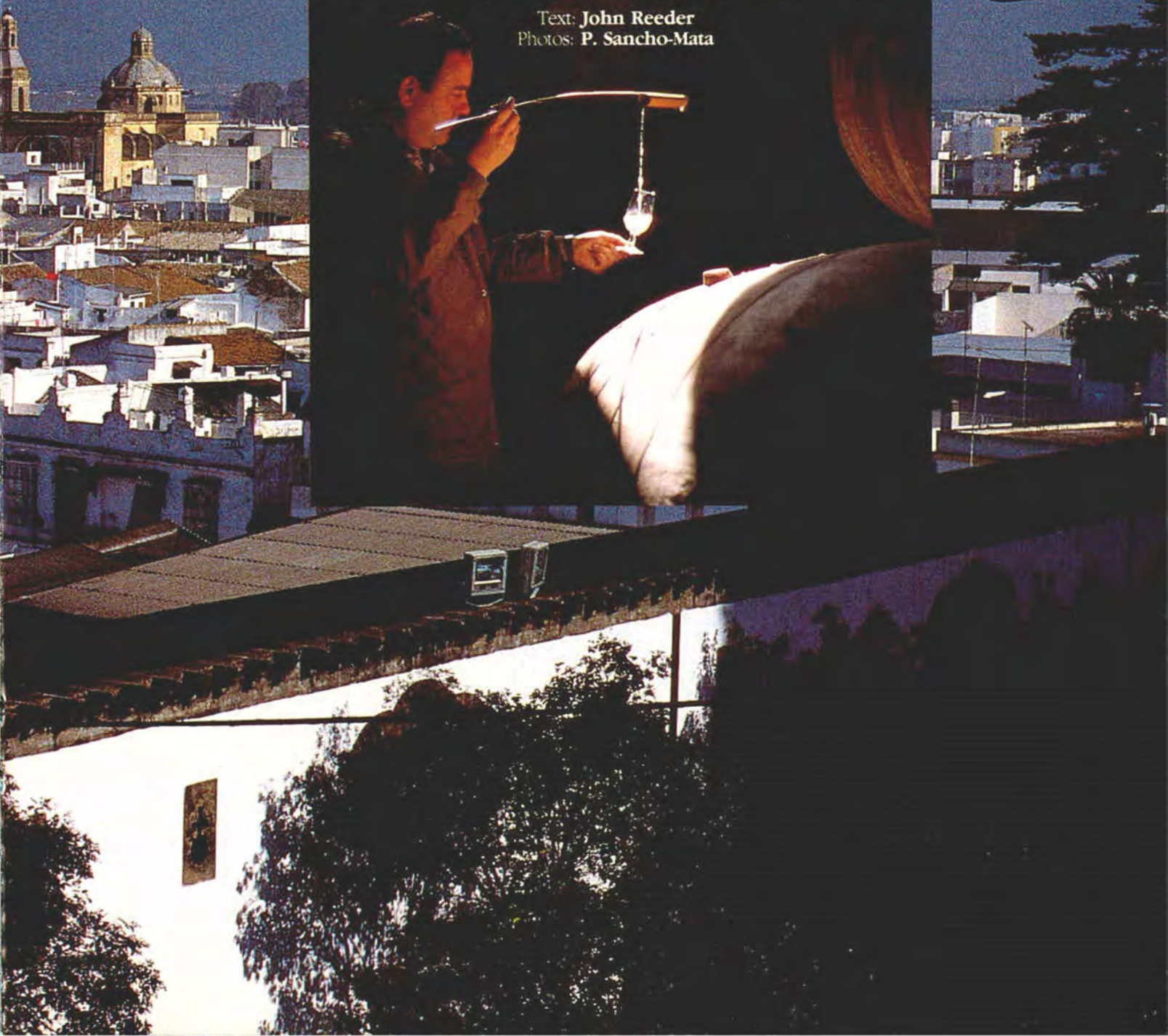




MANZANILLA DE SANLUCAR

A VERY PARTICULAR PLEASURE

Text: John Reeder
Photos: P. Sancho-Mata



Andalusians say that Manzanilla de Sanlúcar is the most fino of all the finos, the subtlest and most delicate of all *aperitif* sherries. Grown only in the *bodegas* in and around the old southern port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda, manzanilla is one of the world's most individual and prized wines: pale strawgold, light and dry on the palate, with just a tang of saltiness from the breezes off the Atlantic, and a pleasingly bitterish almondly aftertaste, manzanilla is that rarest of things in this increasingly standardised world of ours, a very particular pleasure.

Where does this unique gem amongst wines come from and what makes it so special? In southernmost Spain, on the Andalusian coast, just a stone's throw from Africa, lies the old Atlantic port of Sanlúcar de Barrameda. Situated at the mouth of the river Guadalquivir which runs down from Se-

ville to the sea, the port faces across the estuary towards Doñana, Europe's largest nature reserve.

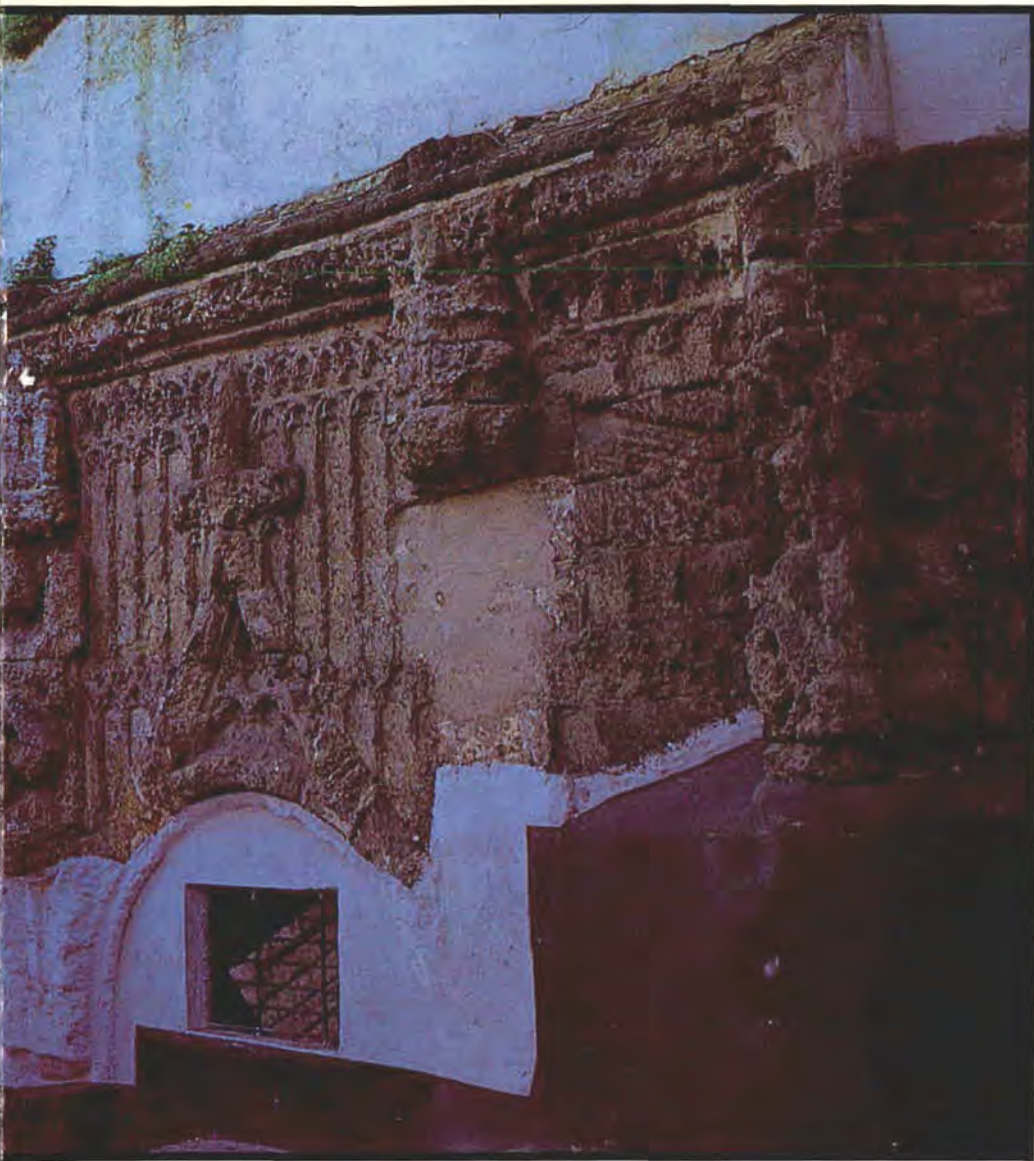
Sanlúcar de Barrameda is a small unhurried town with narrow streets of clean whitewashed houses, each with its balcony, houses built around cool, fresh, tiled courtyards which offer shade and refuge from the heat of a summer afternoon. Unhurried, perhaps even a little sleepy, like the main square of the town with its sauntering passers-by, its huge-trunked palm trees with bark like the texture of elephant's skin, and its leisurely little cafes. Sitting outside one of these relaxed cafes in the square in the sunshine of an early February morning just before lunch, it seemed as if half the town were there enjoying a manzanilla and a plate of olives.

Appearances can be deceptive, however. Dotted about the town are large high-walled buildings where the comings and



goings and the bustle of activity are constant: the more than a dozen wineries where manzanilla de Sanlúcar is made. High, cool, vaulted *bodegas*, where the rigours of a hot Andalusian summer are tempered by the freshness of the sea breezes from the nearby Atlantic, full of tier upon tier of oak casks. Here in the manzanilla *bodegas* the rhythm of tasks to be completed is seemingly without end: fermentation processes to be watched over, *soleras* to be replenished, maturing wines to be tested and blended, nurtured and cared for, barrels to be repaired, an impeccable cleanliness to be maintained, cases of the finished wine to be dispatched to various parts of the globe.

In this complex and serious business of the making of Sanlúcar's unique wine are concentrated the accumulated centuries-old traditions and skills of its winemen. Unhurried, yes, because the production and maturing of fine wine cannot be hurried; anything but sleepy. Rather is it a world of ceaseless vigilance and effort.



The flor, literally the flower of the yeast, is a living organism which is continually renewing itself. By some miraculous process which chemists are still trying to explain, the flor establishes a protective covering over the wine.



Manzanilla de Sanlúcar, a variety of fino, the pale dry aperitif sherry or possibly, fino sherry is a variety of manzanilla. Be that as it may, and without entering into questions of historical precedent, manzanilla de Sanlúcar is indeed produced and aged in essentially the same way as fino, but with some significant differences. Perhaps at this point it will be useful to refresh our memories as to the way in which fino —sherry develops.

THAT MYSTERIOUS FLOWER

It will be recalled how in the spring following the second fermentation of the fino, while the young, year wine is lying in oak casks, a whitish film of yeast appears from nowhere to cover its surface. This is the flor, literally the flower of the yeast, a living organism which is continually renewing itself. The flor, by some miraculous process which chemists are still trying to explain, establishes a protective covering over the wine, which appears, amongst other things, to slow down and control the natural oxidising process all wines go through as they mature through contact with the air. Both manzanilla and fino styles of sherry are wines matured completely under the flor, wines which undergo what is known as the *crianza de flor*, an ageing process which is deliberately prolonged for years. They are the only known cases of white wines with an average life from three to eight or more years in oak casks, without the wines becoming, either oxidised or maderised but keeping fresh, light and





The solera system involves the ageing of manzanilla in rows or scales of oak casks.

clean on nose and palate, although fully mature.

As has been said there is as yet no complete scientific explanation for the action of the *flor* and no known way of artificially reproducing it. The Jerez, Puerto de Santa Maria and Sanlúcar de Barrameda region of the Andalusian province of Cadiz in southern Spain is the only area in the world where this *flor* of natural yeasts appears spontaneously on the free surface of the wines. It seems to be the product of microclimatic conditions specific to the region, and even there, there are districts where the *flor* does not grow so well because they are too hot or too dry. There are even *bodegas* where capriciously the *flor* of yeasts grows at one end of the building but not at the other!

Normally this *flor* thins or even dies off during the summer and winter to reappear the following spring, but in Sanlúcar where the extremes of temperature are mitigated by the mild humidity of the Atlantic breezes the *flor* never dies, forming a constant all-the-year-round protection for the wine, prolonging the *crianza de flor* almost indefinitely. This produces the mira-

cle of seven and eight year old manzanillas such as Barbadillo's *Eva* of Bodegas Pérez Megía's *Alegría* which conserve all the freshness, the aromas and the lightness of a young wine, while simultaneously offering the harmony, balance and complexity of a fully matured wine.

If the wines were left only in one cask this film of yeasts which is the *flor* would eventually die off and cease to protect the wine. In order, therefore, to stimulate the *flor* to constantly renew itself, the Sanlúcar and Jerez wine-makers evolved a system at the end of the eighteenth century by which the younger wines were continually being blended in with the older wines. This system, known as *criaderas* and *solera*

or more simply as the *solera* system, involves the ageing of fino, manzanilla and the style of sherry wines in rows or scales of oak casks, known as butts, and the constant moving of younger wine along the scales to blend into the butts of older wine, thus refreshing and replenishing them at the same time as renewing and stimulating in the case of fino and manzanilla the growth of the *flor*.

SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCES

Until now we have spoken of manzanillas and finos as undergoing similar ageing processes. What is it then which makes manzanilla, in the opinion of many, the prince of finos, what distinguishes it from its cousins produced further along the coast at the Puerto de Santa Maria, or inland, in Jerez? The answer lies in minor, but significant differences in the vinification and wine-ageing traditions of Sanlúcar, and its privileged position and microclimate. Firstly the white Palomino grapes in Sanlúcar are picked a week or so earlier than further inland in the Jerez vineyards. This





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The particular ageing method used for manzanilla requires that the butt be left partially empty to allow for the evolution of the yeasty film known as flor. To extract samples of wine from the butt, the bodegueros therefore needed a special implement. This is how the caña came into being—a version of jerez's venencia. A caña is made of a single piece of very thin hollow cane and allows the wine to be extracted cleanly, without any of the surface flor.

means they are lower in sugar content and higher in acidity, and is one of the reasons for the refreshing touch of sharpness in a good manzanilla. Then secondly as we have already remarked, the fresh sea breezes, the higher levels of humidity of the Sanlúcar port area, and the less extreme temperature range all seem to contribute towards providing an ideal microclimate for the *flor*, which grows all year round, preserving constantly the legendary freshness and delicacy of manzanilla. Thirdly there are considerably more scales in a

manzanilla *solera* than in a *fino solera*. The wine is moved more quickly along the scale from butt to butt, thus refreshing the butts constant-

ly and small amounts are more frequently drawn off for bottling than in a *fino solera*. It will also be observed that the casks of maturing manzanilla are kept emptier than their *fino* counterparts, allowing a larger surface area of protective *flor*.

Of all these factors of paramount and indeed determining importance is the specific microclimate of Sanlúcar de Barrameda. This can be judged from the fact that if a butt of manzanilla is taken from Sanlúcar to Jerez it will develop as *fino*, without the characteristic delicacy and distinctive tangy, aromatic saltiness so typical of a good manzanilla.

Previously, manzanilla had a reputation as a delicate wine which travelled badly. Originally made only for national consumption it is only in relatively recent years that it has been bottled for export markets. Improved vinification techniques have led to a far more stable product and faster and more efficient transport systems mean that a fresh bottle of manzanilla now reaches the tables of ever more of the world's dis-

cerning wine drinkers in optimum condition. Ideally, if you are ever in Seville, wander slowly down the valley of the Guadalquivir to Sanlúcar, and there on the beach where the fishing boats are drawn up on the sand, stop off at one of the little tiled restaurants—permit me to recommend Bigote's—for a plate of sea crayfish, perhaps a lobster or a fry of mixed locally caught fish, washed down with a bottle or so of manzanilla*. Failing that of course you could always pop down to your local winemercant and get in a case or two anyway.

* **A word of warning.** Beware of ordering a manzanilla in other regions of Spain, in Madrid or Barcelona for example, where you will invariably be brought a camomile tea, a sovereign herbal restorative for disorders of the digestive tract, also known in Spanish as manzanilla. Outside of Andalusia always use the longer name—manzanilla de Sanlúcar—, explain that it is the wine you want, not the tea, and you are less likely to be disappointed.

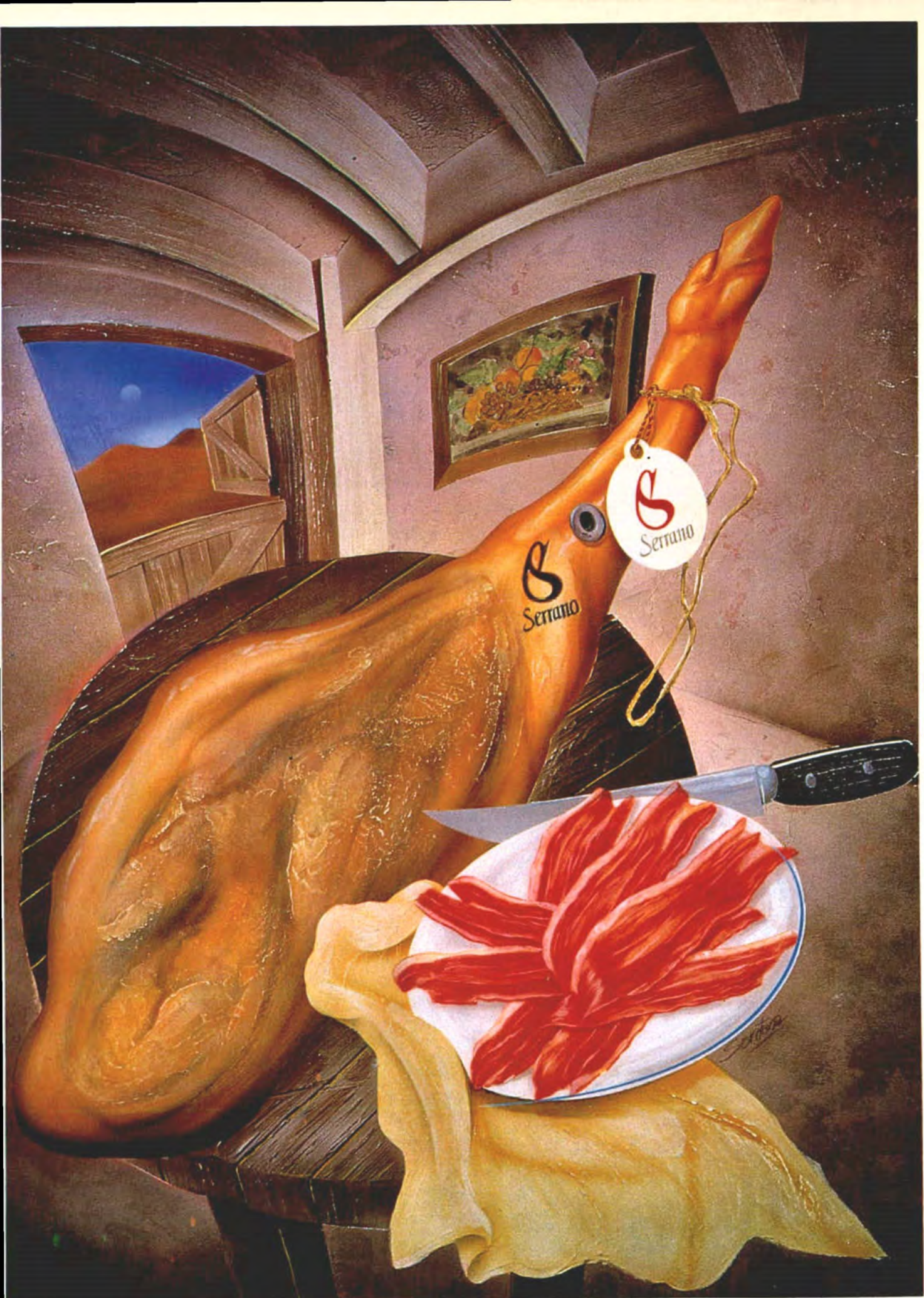




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A C H E E S E

C**A****L**

Always on the move in search of better grazing grounds for their sheep, the shepherds from the Roncal valley discovered the secret of making one of the most distinctive Spanish cheeses centuries ago. The story of Roncal cheese is one of exodus — a story marked by the seasonal migration of man and animal.

Text: Enric Canut
Still Life: Menchu Artime
Photo: A. de Benito

**ON THE MOVE**



PABLO NEUSTADT / SOBREMESA

The Pyrenees mountains, with peaks reaching up as high as three thousands metres, form an impressive mass stretching from the Bay of Biscay off the Atlantic Ocean to the Costa Brava on the Mediterranean Sea. Even though this imposing mountain range acts as a natural border between France and Spain, the peoples on each side have, for centuries, shared many things in common, some of which survive to this day. Cultural anthropologists use the term «mountain culture» to refer to this set of similar cultural characteristics determined by factors implicit in a mountain environment. This is not to say, however, that there are no differences. The rugged terrain, physical isolation, and the events of history have all helped to leave a special mark on each of the individual communities.

In the westernmost zone coinciding with the Basque and Navarran Autonomous Communities (historically known as the Basque Country or Euskal Herria), we find open valleys with moderate slopes and a climate strongly influenced by the nearness of the Atlantic Ocean. Short, gently rolling rivers, shaded over by the leafy greens of beech, oak, and pine trees, flow through meadows and pas-

Rasa sheep produce a high quality milk rich in fat. Because they essentially graze in the wild, their milk has a wonderful smell and flavour.

tures. In the spring, high up where the rivers sprout the winter snows melt into a multitude of brooks and streams which excitedly find their way to lower ground, bringing water and life to the open pastures where semi-wild horses, cows, and sheep leisurely graze until the first snows fall again. Winter pushes them on in their annual exodus to grazing grounds on the flat, peaceful plains resting at the foothills of the Pyrenees.

A VERY SPECIAL VALLEY

The Roncal valley, crossed from north to south by the Esca river, is one of these Navarran valleys. It is home to seven towns, which centuries ago joined together to form a political unit to communally govern the valley, its mountains and pas-

ture lands. The ruling Valley Council not only regulated the use of the summer alpine pastures but also set the dates for going up and coming down from these pastures (July and September, respectively) and for the beginning and end of the seasonal migration to other grazing grounds. Thanks to a privilege the Roncalians were granted way back in the early Middle Ages, they could graze their sheep seven months of the year from October 15 to May 15 in the royal lands in southern Navarre known as Bârdenas Reales.

Life for the Roncalian, or better yet, for the Roncalian shepherd was a continual coming and going with long stretches of time away from home, family, and friends. A shepherd would spend eight months of the year — whether it be down below in the Bârdenas in the winter or high up in the mountains in the summer — living alone, only accompanied by his sheep and the occasional contact with other shepherds. It was a hard life, which people immersed in an ancient, timeless culture were willing to accept; it was a way of life which modern times have pushed aside to be displayed in museum showcases. But the seasonal migration of more than 100,000 sheep



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PABLO NEUSTADT / SOBREMESA

The Roncal valley is home to seven towns, which centuries ago joined together to form a political unit to communally govern the valley, its mountains and pasture lands.

must have been a spectacular sight... thousands of sheep making their way over hill and mountain, led on by shepherds and shepherd boys across imaginary highways amidst baaing and barking, shattering the quiet stillness of the countryside.

A CHEESE AS GOOD AS MONEY

Records dating as far back as the thirteenth century reveal the importance of the valley's large and small livestock industry. The economy of the Roncal valley, like that of other Pyrenean valleys, was based on self-sufficiency and the exportation of the limited surplus generated by forestal and pastoral activities: timber, firewood, wool, meat, cheese, draught horses and lambs. The sale of cheese was a good way for shepherds to supplement their salary or to round off the income from the sale of sheep. Along with pork, cheese was the principal source of protein in the rural diet and so it was always a good bartering item. In the winter months in the Bardenas, shepherds would trade it for wine, cloth, oil, etc. to take back home every spring.

Roncal cheese — one of the most prized and expensive on the Spanish

market — has the flavour of a mountain culture while at the same time it is very much its own. It is made from raw sheep's milk and is moderately to fully cured with the minimum time being three months. Cheese-making goes on from December to July when the ewes lamb. In the past, the lambing season started before Christmas, a season when suckling lamb would bring in an especially good price. Cheese would then be made during the subsequent, short milking period. Another group of lambs was born in March in time to be sold for Easter before shepherds started the approximately week-long trip back home. Every evening along the way, they would milk the ewes and make the cheese before dinnertime in order to move out early the next day with the cheeses already salted and bound up in molds. Once they

were back in the valley, the milking season would last all through spring and sometimes well into summer to the end of July when man and animal climbed up to higher pastures where the choicest and tastiest grasses could be found. Everyone agreed that the cheeses made here were the most delicious. When the Valley Council authorized the ascent to the *puertos*, the highest mountain passes bordering with France, the sheep were no longer milked. They were allowed to roam freely under the watchful eye of the shepherd, who lived in stone shelters built into the nooks and crannies of the mountainside. This was man and animals' only vacation from such a hard, nomadic life. Here in these alpine pastures shepherds could leisurely enjoy the outdoors, the sun, and the conversation with fellow shepherds from France and Aragón. Meanwhile, cows, horses, and sheep wandered about, chewing the cud and following their hormonal impulses. Below in the valley, the pantries in each of the houses eagerly awaited the return of the cheeses taken up to mature in the fresh, humid mountain air — cheeses which were safe from the fateful hot, dry wind which could blow in from the south and spoil them beyond repair.

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PABLO NEUSTADT / SOBREMESA

Life for the Roncalian shepherd was a continual coming and going with long stretches of time away from home, family and friends.

THE SECRET OF A GOOD CHEESE

The process for making Roncal cheese is similar to that used in making Basque cheeses like Idiazábal and Urbasa, and other mountain cheeses like those produced in Serrat in the Catalonian Pyrenees and in the neighbouring valleys of Anso and Hecho in Huesca. The cheese is made from warm fresh milk still at the sheep's body temperature (35 to 37°C). The milk comes from *Rasa* sheep, a variety which, although not very large, holds up well in extreme weather conditions. *Rasa* sheep produce a high quality milk rich in fat, but the amount of milk they produce is relatively small. Because they essentially graze in the wild, their milk has a wonderful smell and flavour. Once the milk has been obtained, an animal curdling agent is then added and the milk is left to curdle for at least an hour, thus allowing time to do its work. The goal is a compact curd which has not formed too rapidly. Once the curd has formed, it is then cut up into tiny bits until it has a mush-like consistency. The next step is to drain off the whey and to his end, the curd is sometimes slightly reheated. The curd is then shaped by hand as more whey continues to be released.

It is then placed in a flexible, beechwood rectangular mold called a *xiera*, which has two halves which fold together to form an interior cylinder whose diameter can be adjusted according to the size of the cheese being made (generally 1.5 kilograms and up). Next, the cheese is punctured with wooden needles and mechanically compacted so as to extract the last drops of whey trapped in the interior. This helps to produce a firm, compact, eyeless cheese. The smooth, air-tight, brownish-black rind is formed by placing the cheese on a wooden board which has been warmed up over a fire and pouring hot water over the cheese. The last step is to rub the top and bottom of the cheese with salt over a period of a couple days while it remains in the *xiera*. And then, it is up to time and nature to decide if each step has been done just right.

This is the way Roncal cheese has been artisanally made for centuries. Today, however, it is getting harder and harder to find shepherds who still make cheese in this way, and so, the supply of artisanally-made Roncal cheese is limited. In response to the gradual dying out of the pastoral system, a cheese factory was set up in 1974 in the town of Roncal with the support of the Navarran regional authorities. In 1981 the first Denomination of Origin for Spanish cheese was created and awarded to Roncal cheese. The continued artisanal production and the recent industrial production, regulated by the Denomination of Origin Regulatory Board, are the keys to the future of Roncal cheese. This hardy cheese — rich in fat and slightly piquant — whose unique personality your taste buds never forget is one of the most prized gastronomic treasures among the rich variety of Navarran products.

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article first appeared in Spain Gourmetour No. 10 as part of another article about the Roncal Valley. We repeat it here for its relevance to the sequence on Spanish Denomination of Origin cheeses begun in issue No. 17.

A black and white advertisement for Montecillo wine. The central focus is a wine glass filled with red wine, with a bottle of wine behind it. The bottle's neck and cork are visible, and the cork has a gold seal. The background is dark, making the glass and bottle stand out. The text 'Scarce resource.' is written in a large, white, serif font across the middle of the image. In the bottom left, there is a paragraph of text and the brand name 'BODEGAS MONTECILLO, THE PRIDE OF RIOJA.' In the bottom right, there is a detailed view of the wine label, which is ornate and features the brand name 'MONTECILLO' and 'VIÑA MONTY' in large letters, along with 'GRAN RESERVA' and 'Rioja' in a cursive script. The label also includes 'DENOMINACION DE ORIGEN', 'Embotellado por BODEGAS MONTECILLO, S.A.', 'CASA FUNDADA EN 1874', and 'FUENMAYOR - LA RIOJA, ESPAÑA'.

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MUJJOL SHIKRAN CAVIAR BY COMPUTER

Text: **Sonia Ortega**
Photos: **Eurocaviar**

Within living memory, sturgeon could be fished from the Guadalquivir, the great tidal river on which the city of Seville stands. The sturgeon have now disappeared, and the days when genuine caviar (although in very small quantities) was made from their eggs have now passed into the realms of nostalgia. But a few years ago, a Spanish company called Eurocaviar started producing its own special «caviar». Its qualities are such that it can even be used in cooking.

The venture began in the early 1970s, when a Spanish food technologist, José González Vicente, started experimenting to produce something as like caviar as possible — in a different quality league from the usual run-of-the-mill substitutes — at an affordable price, as opposed to the astronomically expensive genuine article from Russia and Iran.

Years of solo research achieved the results he was aiming for and in 1983 production began on an industrial scale at the Eurocaviar factory in Murcia, a province of Spain famous for its fresh fruit and vegetables. The new product was given the name of Mujjol Shikran.

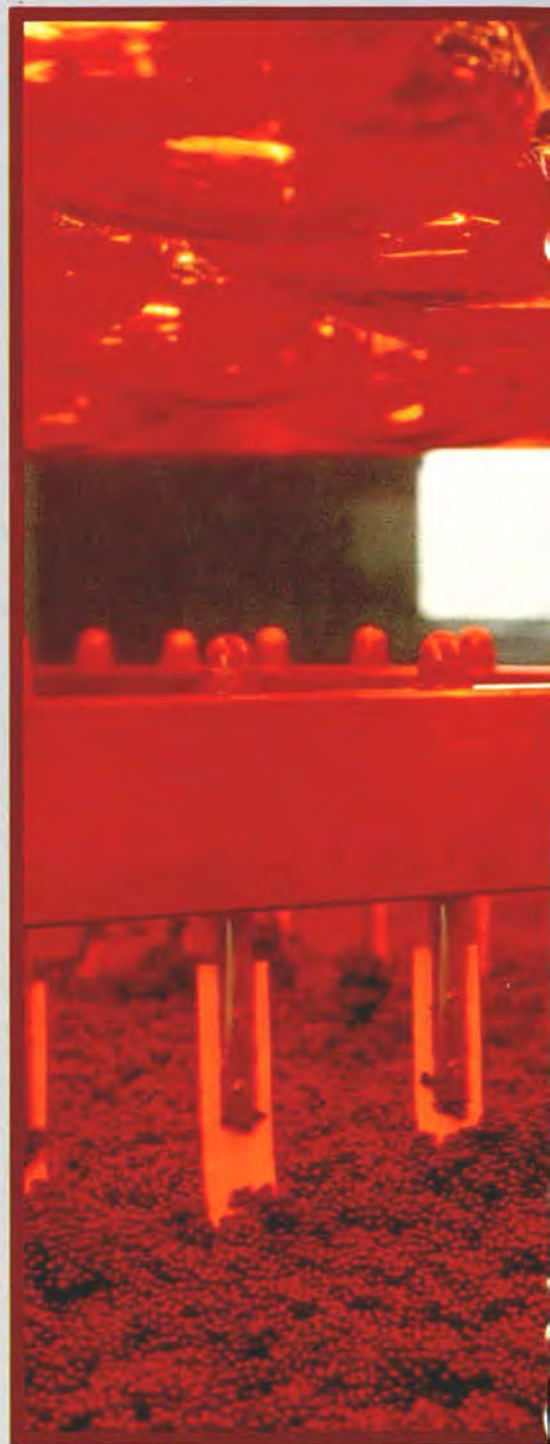
The area of the Mediterranean off the

coast not far from Murcia is rich in grey mullet, a fish whose roe has been appreciated for over two thousand years. Simply sun-dried, they are a great favourite in this part of Spain. Grey mullet eggs, though fresh rather than dried, are what provide the basic ingredient (about 40%) of Mujjol Shikran, in conjunction with herring and salmon eggs.

Eighty per cent of the raw material for the end product is bought within Spain and the rest is imported. In both cases, the eggs reach Eurocaviar deep frozen. After defrosting, the process of transforming them into Mujjol Shikran begins.

SECRET MACHINE

The alchemical formula consists of mixing together the three types of eggs, chilled, to form a thick paste which is then thinned with water. The paste then passes through a machine which is the key to the whole process and is a closely guarded secret. Though Joaquín García, Eurocaviar's manager, prefers not to exaggerate the element of mystery, the fact is that no one apart from the company's employees knows how the machine works.





After converting the roe paste into little balls, these are then processed at high temperatures reached by infrared rays so that intensive oxidation occurs. The oxidation is what gives Mujjol Shikran its blackish-brown colour without having to resort to the artificial colourants.



«We've had lots of foreign interest in our production method, especially from the Japanese», he comments, «but I've always refused to demonstrate our equipment — that would be just asking for competition. Obviously, one day a competitor is bound to appear but by then we hope to be firmly established as market leaders».

What the secret machine does is to convert the roe paste into little balls of about the same size as genuine sturgeon eggs, which are then processed at high temperatures so that intensive oxidation occurs. The oxidation is what gives Mujjol Shikran its blackish-brown colour without having to resort to the artificial colourants used in the usual caviar substitutes, based on lumpfish roe. It also means that Mujjol Shikran can be used in cooking since it stands up well to high temperatures, but more of that later.

After the oxidation stage, salt and citric acid are added and the balls are left to stabilise for 24 hours. The next step is carried out by reducing machines which dry the balls: the loss of water results in a reduction in size and a concentration of flavour. To ensure that flavour is as homo-

geneous as possible, over 200,000 flavour test results, depending on the duration of shorter drying process controlled by robot are stored on computer.

IMPECCABLE HYGIENE

The Eurocaviar factory, with its hatted, masked and gloved workers, is reminiscent of a laboratory or operating theatre. For Joaquín García, hygiene cannot be carried too far. «Mujjol Shikran is a semi-serve; but we are proud to say that we have never received the slightest complaint on the state of conservation of our product».

This is unsurprising. In addition to complying with all the EEC health and hy-

Eurocaviar currently produces more than 80 tonnes a year, of which 20-25% is exported to Europe and America.

giene requirements, at Eurocaviar they take additional measures such as sterilising the jars before and after packing. Only post-packing sterilisation is actually legally required.

Once in its jars, Mujjol Shikran spends two weeks in "quarantine" in a cool storage room. After this period, every batch is tested. This additional precaution means that any imperfect vacuum seal can be detected.

Since it launched itself on the Spanish market in 1984, Eurocaviar has gone progressively up in the world. It currently produces more than 80 tonnes a year, of which 20-25% is exported to Italy, France, the Benelux Countries, the United States, Canada, Finland, Greece and, more recently, Germany. This international success has been achieved not so much by advertising, on which very little has been spent indeed, but by representation at international food fairs, starting with the biggest, Anuga and Sial.

In Spain, around 40% of the caviar substitute consumed is Eurocaviar, a percentage which, in time, it hopes to increase along with exports until the Murcia facto-



Grey mullet eggs are what provide the basic ingredient (about 40%) of Mujjol Shikran, in conjunction with herring and salmon eggs. The alchemical formula consists of mixing together the three types of eggs, to form a thick paste. Then, a very special machine and a very modern technology, developed by Eurocaviar, produce Mujjol Shikran. During all the process an impeccable standard of hygiene is observed.

ry is working at its full capacity of 200 tonnes a year.

GOODBYE CANAPE

What is it that makes Mujjol Shikran so much more like genuine caviar than the traditional substitutes? For a start, its gelatinous appearance and, more important still, its flavour, which many claim is almost as good as the real thing. Nonetheless, Eurocaviar's manager opts for caution: «Mujjol Shikran is not caviar, and it therefore tastes different. I really don't hold with comparing "Murcian caviar" with Russian or Iranian — that would be pretentious. What I will say is that at various tastings, Mujjol Shikran has been very well received, better than salmon eggs, for example. If you consider that in conjunction with its very competitive price — about 50 dollars a kilo — and its versatility in cooking, it's a very special product indeed».

Making Mujjol Shikran suitable for cooking has been one of the challenges tackled by Eurocaviar: «Up until now» — says Joaquín García — «caviar and cav-

iar substitutes have not been used in cooking for two very simple reasons. If you are paying 1,000 dollars a kilo for genuine caviar, you naturally tend to eat it just as it comes. It would be unthinkable to add it to a recipe. Lumpfish caviar, on the other hand, contains colourants and is also very fragile so that if you cook with it the eggs break up and discolour in the heat».

This is not a problem with Mujjol Shikran, which can withstand temperatures of just over 100 degrees C (212 F) while retaining its flavour and texture intact.

Its flavour combines well with many others, except for meat, so how you use it is really a question of imagination. To start you off, Eurocaviar has produced a little recipe book with suggestions for pas-

Its very competitive price and its versatility in cooking make Mujjol Shikran a very special product.

ta, fish and salad dishes among others. Mujjol Shikran seems to inspire housewives as well as professional cooks. A competition organised by Eurocaviar last year for the best recipes using its product met with an enthusiastic response: in just two weeks, over four hundred recipes were submitted by housewives and amateur cooks from all over Spain.

On a professional level, many restaurants feature «Murcian caviar» on their menus. And not only in Spain: in Rome, there are several restaurants which serve a very successful combination of pasta with Mujjol Shikran.

García, hugely enthusiastic about his personal crusade has his sights set very clearly: «We have to get our caviar accepted to the point where its versatility in the kitchen is recognised. It's exciting to see that we are getting there gradually, thanks largely to word of mouth recommendations by satisfied consumers».

So Murcia has taken over where the Guadalquivir left off, and modern technology means that sybaritic eating is no longer the exclusive province of the very rich.

Recipes

Baked potatoes with Mujjol caviar (*Patatas asadas al caviar Mujjol*)

Serves 4:

4 medium potatoes
Hollandaise or mayonnaise sauce
120 g jar Mujjol caviar

Scrub the potatoes, cut in half lengthways without peeling and bake in the oven. When they are done, make a hollow in the centre of each half and fill with a mixture of the selected sauce and Mujjol caviar. Top with a layer of caviar and serve on a bed of fresh shredded salad vegetables.

Mujjol Sbikaran rice salad (*Ensalada de arroz Mujjol Sbikaran*)

Serves 4:

200 g rice
1 medium green pepper
3 medium-sized firm red tomatoes
1/2 dl extra virgin olive oil
120 g jar Mujjol caviar

Peel the tomatoes and then dice them and the green pepper. Place in a bowl, add the olive oil and the caviar and mix well. Meanwhile, boil the rice and cool it under the cold tap. Drain thoroughly and add to the bowl, mixing in well. Arrange on a serving dish with a garnish of your choice and chill before serving.

Spaghetti with Mujjol (*Espaguetis al Mujjol*)

Serves 4:

400 g spaghetti
40 g finely chopped onion
1/2 dl extra virgin olive oil
1 tsp chopped parsley
1 small glass dry white wine
120 g jar Mujjol caviar
1 pinch white pepper

In a large pan, fry the onion gently in the oil until completely soft then add the parsley and a few moments later, the Mujjol and a little pepper. Pour over the wine and allow to evaporate. Meanwhile, cook the spaghetti in plenty of boiling salted water until just *al dente*, drain thoroughly (reserve a little of the water) and add to the pan, mixing well so that it is thoroughly coated. If the mixture looks dry, add a little of the spaghetti water. Serve very hot.

Potato blinis with cream and caviar (*Blinis de patatas con crema y caviar*)

Serves 4:

1 kg potatoes, boiled very soft
1 egg
1/4 l single cream
1/2 l plain yoghurt
120 g jar Mujjol caviar
oil and salt

Whizz the potatoes in the blender with the egg and salt to make a smooth purée. Lightly oil a small frying pan, heat well and ladle in enough potato purée to form a pancake (or blini) about 1/2 cm thick. Fry on either side until golden. Mix together the cream and yoghurt and serve each blini very hot with some



Making Mujjol Sbikaran suitable for cooking has been one of the challenges tackled by Eurocaviar. It can withstand high temperatures while retaining its flavour and texture intact.

of the creamy mixture poured over it and topped with a generous helping of Mujjol caviar.

Thousand egg omelettes (*Tortillas mil huevos*)

Serves 4:

8 eggs
120 g jar Mujjol caviar
1 tbsp chopped parsley
20 g butter
salt to taste

Beat the eggs in a bowl together with half the jar of Mujjol and a pinch of salt. Make and fold four individual omelettes, arrange on a serving dish, then slash each omelette and fill the opening with the rest of the caviar. Serve surrounded by hot vegetables dressed with butter.

Salmon with Mujjol sauce (*Salmón con salsa al Mujjol*)

Serves 4:

4 salmon steaks
120 g jar Mujjol caviar
1 lemon
1 tsp mustard
1/2 dl olive oil
1 tbsp chopped parsley
20 g finely chopped onion
salt & white pepper to taste

In a bowl, place the juice of the lemon, the mustard, the parsley and the onion and mix together in the blender. Now add the Mujjol, season to taste, and stir until thoroughly mixed.

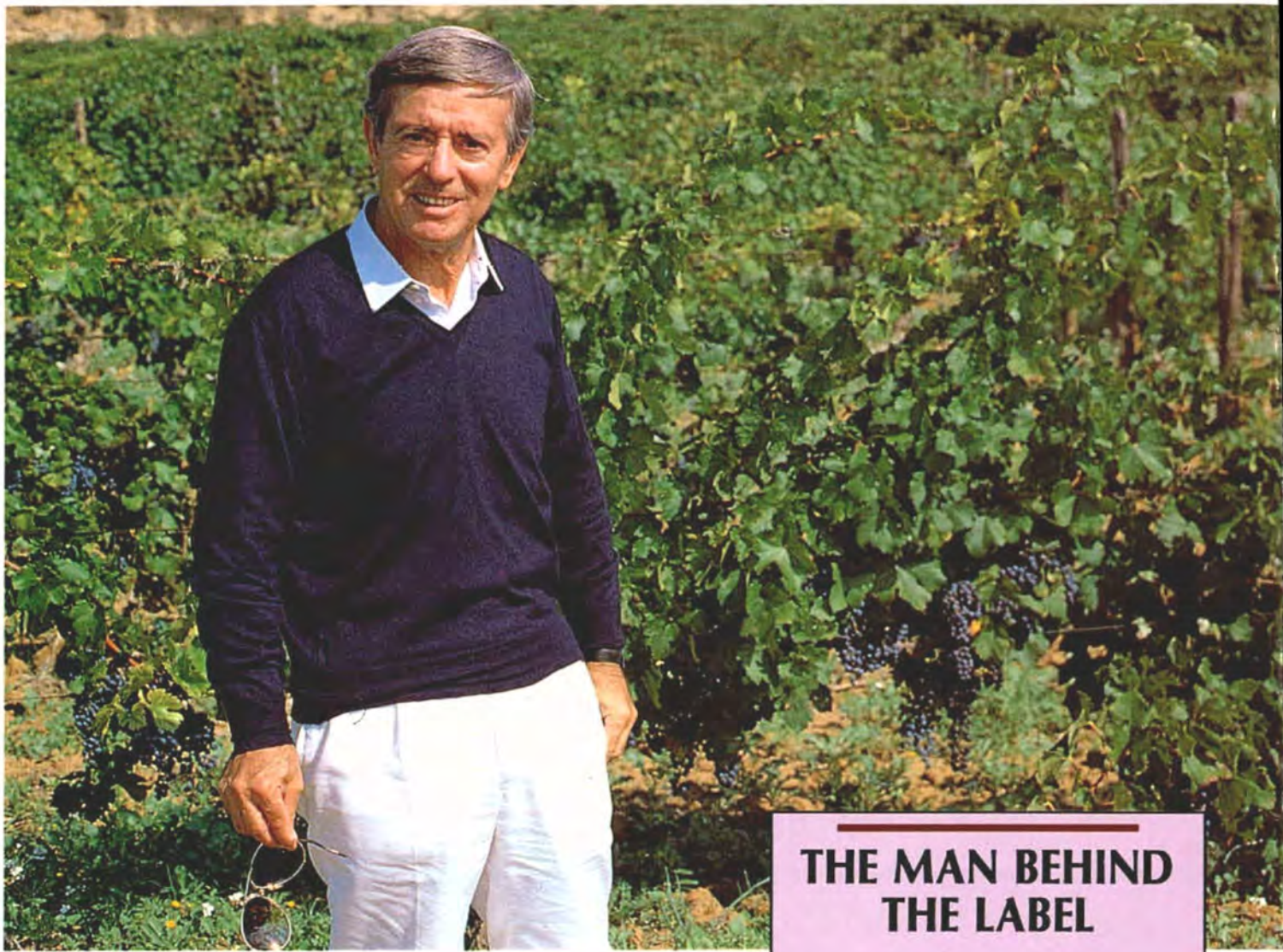
Poach the salmon gently in salted water until just done, arrange on a serving dish and pour the sauce over the top, surrounding with hot vegetables.

This sauce is also excellent with other poached fish.

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THE MAN BEHIND
THE LABEL

Certain big names spring to mind when one thinks of the wine region of Penedés: Torres, Freixenet, Codorníu... Meanwhile, one of the pioneers in establishing this area of Catalonia as a source of world-class quality wines seems to have opted for the role of *éminence grise*. I visited Jean León at his bodega in Plà del Penedés, not far from the region's wine capital, Vilafranca, to find out more about the man behind one of Spain's most upmarket labels.

JEAN
LEON

Text: Hawys Pritchard
Photos: P. Sancho-Mata

BEST OF THE BUNCH (IV)



Jean León's is the only château bodega in the area totally self-sufficient in grapes. He has never bought in a kilo of grapes from anyone, though he does sell his own if they're not up to standard.

I had heard a rumour that there was no such person as Jean León, the theory being that it was a carefully chosen brand name—two neat monosyllables with hints of French connections that looked good on a label. It was with some satisfaction, therefore, that I shook the hand of the middle-aged man who met me at Barcelona airport and was introduced by his bodega manager as Jean León. A slim, boyish figure with lots of steel grey hair, dressed with understated chic—navy cashmere jersey, white slacks and trainers—he has one of those faces that is illuminated when he smiles, something that initially it took him a while to do.

We zipped along the motorway heading south out of Barcelona, with manager Luis Tellechea at the wheel, turning off into the green, gently undulating landscape of vineyards and fruit-trees, typical of the Medio Penedés. This used also to be a paper-producing area, and we passed one old paper-mill standing on a tributary of the River Noia, now transformed into the picturesque bodega where Freixenet's Segura Viudas cava is produced. Wine, especially cava, is the biggest source of employment hereabouts and the boom has turned this into one of the most prosperous areas in Spain. Patches of exposed reddish soil showed where fruit trees were being cleared to make way for more vineyards, so the future is obviously seen with some optimism.

CHATEAU LEON

Turning off again onto a narrow unsurfaced road, we had reached Plá del Penedés and Jean León's domain, and were driving through the picture on his label—a 1983 plantation of Chardonnay with a lovely old farmhouse in the background, its stone the colour of toast in the September sunshine. Behind the farmhouse stands the bodega—not a building of beauty from the outside, as Jean was the first to point out, though impeccably neat and efficient within. He has plans for improving the external aesthetics. He has lots of plans, in fact, but more of that later.

Out in the hot sunshine, we surveyed the scene: 158 hectares of neatly parallel rows of vines against the backdrop of a wooded hillside from which, I was told, you can see the Mediterranean on a clear day. Some of the wooded area is being cleared to make room for more vines. Only «noble» varieties are grown here, primarily Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon

with Cabernet Franc and Merlot in much smaller proportions: the red varieties occupy seventy five per cent of the total area under vine. The vines are trained along wires with broad avenues between so that harvesting is as quick and clean as possible. Grapes reach the bodega within fifteen minutes of being picked: the pickers were working in the Merlot plantation that day and small loads of beautiful fresh grapes—small this year but very healthy and delicious—were constantly being fed in through the trapdoor leading to the destalking machine. In an area where large growers' cooperatives thrive, Jean León's is the only *château* bodega, totally self-sufficient in grapes. «I have never brought in a kilo of grapes from anyone, though I do sell my own if they're not up to standard. I'm something of a perfectionist, you know.» I was beginning to gather that.

This image of a lion, carved in an old door is the same that appears on some labels of Jean León's wines. In fact, León means lion in Spanish.



Inside the bodega building I was taken past huge gleaming stainless steel tanks («all new») and the bottling line, down into the vault where hundreds upon hundreds of barrels stretched into the distance in that hallowed musty atmosphere of wine cellars that never fails to thrill. More thrilling still was placing my ear to the bung-hole of one of the barrels and actually hearing the Chardonnay fermenting within. León's is the only bodega in Spain using this process. It goes on to mature in oak and then further in the bottle. I was instructed to stick my finger in and smell it. «You can already tell how the wine is going to turn out—mmmm, promising—almond, vanilla...» The 88-89 Cabernet was also down here. It spends two years in the barrel and four years in the bottle before being released. Jean León is a firm believer in bottle-ageing: «There are a million bottles under our feet, not counting this year's», he explained as we emerged onto ground level. These are the wines that,

when asked what he makes, León describes as «a white and a red». Understatement is one of his fortes, as I discovered in the course of our conversation. We had been switching from Spanish to English and back again as we chatted, and I was intrigued by the fact that his Spanish was liberally sprinkled with Anglicisms, many of his sentences starting with «so», as in «so, *me vine a España*». All was revealed. Jean León lives in California, paying four visits annually to his Spanish bodega at key points in the wine year. The rest of the time he spends running his four restaurants in and around Beverly Hills. And Hollywood is where his own story belongs.

FAMOUS NAMES

Contrary to popular belief, he has not returned to his native Catalonia: he is not Catalan at all, but from Santander up on the northern coast. Nor is he from a wine-producing family—his only childhood experience of wine was getting very sick on Moscatel in his uncle's wine-cellar at the age of nine. «How did you get involved in wine in the first place, then?» I asked. He shifted from one impeccably white trainer to another. «I really don't want to show off», he protested modestly. «Oh, go on», I urged. «If you insist», he replied, and proceeded to tell a tale worthy of one of those film-scripts that has producers scouring the acting profession for look-alikes.

Here are the highlights, León moved from Spain to New York with his family as a boy in 1948 and later served in the US army. By 1953, he was a taxi-driver in Hollywood. Dropping a fare one night at a smart restaurant, it occurred to him that being a waiter might not be such a bad alternative. He asked for a job and a few days later was rung up and asked to help out: it was Thanksgiving Day, the restaurant was full to overflowing and they were short-staffed. He worked his first stint at La Villa Capri dressed in his taxi-driving outfit—fortunately black and white. The restaurant was owned by four partners, two of whom were Marilyn Monroe's current husband, Joe DiMaggio, and Frank Sinatra. León worked for Sinatra both at his restaurant and home from 1953 to 56 when Sinatra «took against Spain—the Ava Gardner business, you know». By this time, though, León was planning to open a restaurant of his own with James Dean. He can't mean *the* James Dean, I thought, but sure enough: «Do you know the one I mean? He made quite a well-known film called *Rebel Without a...*» I gulped and nodded. The day before they were due to open, Dean was killed in the legendary car crash. Jean went ahead anyway and opened up La Scala in Beverly Hills, where his experience and clientele at the Capri stood him in good stead. He now owns three other restaurants (Italian and French, not Span-

ish) in Burbank, Brentwood and Malibu (California).

PIONEER PLANTATIONS

So what is he doing making wine back in Spain? It was President Kennedy, actually, a frequent customer and a lover of French wine as opposed to Californian, that started Jean León thinking about going into wine himself. Beginning in 1961, he considered various vineyards in California's Napa Valley, Italy and France, but hitches of one sort and another got in the way in each case. He was frankly dubious about Spain, looked at La Rioja and decided against it. Then fate intervened. While on holiday with his wife and children on the Catalan coast, he learned that the Penedés had been famous as a wine-producing area since Roman times. Seeing a «Vineyard For Sale» sign while out to lunch one day, he made enquiries. The canny agent took him by a circuitous route up to the hillside

Only noble varieties are grown here, primarily Chardonnay and Cabernet Sauvignon: the red varieties occupy 75% of the total area under vine.

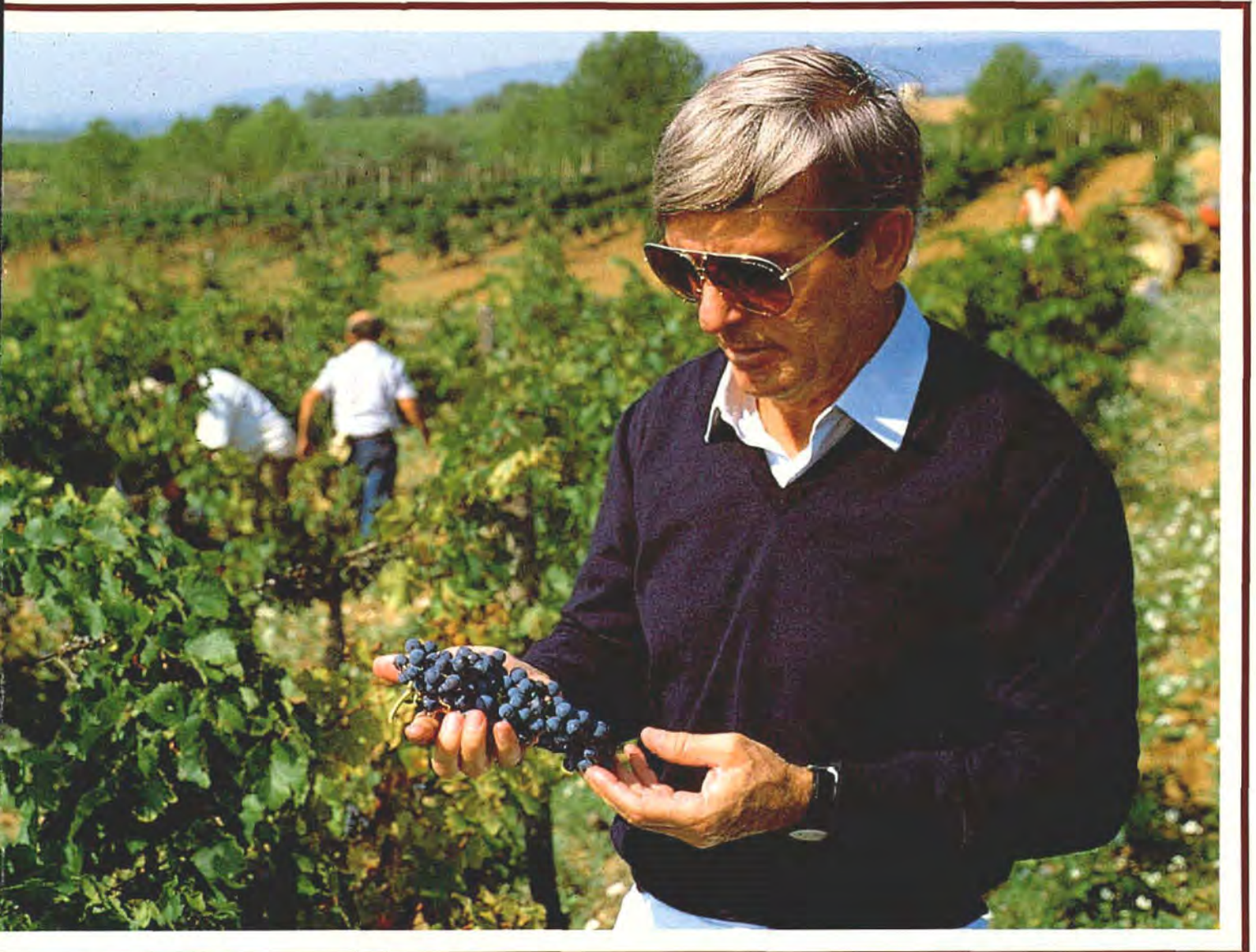


Inside the bodega building there are huge and new gleaming stainless steel tanks and a bottling line.

from which you can look down over the whole vineyard and to the sea beyond, and León bought it on the spot. Only later did he discover that the land was divided up among 97 tenants who had to be individually bought out.

Back in the States, he enrolled for a crash course in oenology at the University of California's department at Davis. By 1963, he had cleared his Spanish vineyard of its existing local grapes and, with his Davis professor as consultant, replanted it exclusively with noble imported varieties,

thus pioneering a movement that was to earn the Penedés its reputation as the instigator of Spain's «new wines». (The climate of the Medio Penedés is comparable in its cooler areas with Bordeaux and in its warmer areas with parts of the Napa Valley.) He denies that his wines are geared to Californian palates, though his original market was the US. His chief customer is now Spain, with England and Germany not far behind, and the US and Canada next, though his distribution is virtually worldwide.



RIGHT-HAND MEN

León has obviously not achieved all this single-handed. Madrid-trained oenologist Jaime Rovira has been with him for well over twenty years, attuned to his ideas from the start. Time has shown how successfully he has put them into practice. The bodega's other key figure is Barcelonan Luis Tellechea. With a degree in industrial engineering and experience in multi-national business, he joined the company as manager in 1980. He is responsible for all aspects of the business not directly related to viticulture, though he is also involved, with Rovira and León, in all major policy decisions in that area. As well as managing the day-to-day running of the bodega, Tellechea has opened up several new markets for Jean León's wines over the last ten years. He also acts as the company's ambassador, with a stand at the five big fairs—Bordeaux, Tokyo, Kensington, Cologne and Paris—every year. His public relations function is a vital one, since Jean León advertises very little.

«What about publicity?» I asked. «We don't go in much for that sort of thing», Jean explained. «Word gets around. I think that the fact that ours was the only Spanish wine served at Reagan's two inaugural parties in Washington in 81 helped, don't you Luis?» Luis replied with one of those eloquent Spanish gestures, shrugging the left shoulder slightly and raising one eyebrow. Understatement is clearly catching.

FUTURE PLANS

And what about the future? Jean León's plans include extending the vineyard, planting more Merlot («for smoothness, it counteracts the tannin»), turning the toast-coloured farmhouse into a wine museum, and building himself a house up on that very spot on the hillside with views of the Mediterranean. Are his son and daughter, thirty-two year old Jean and twenty-nine year old Gigi (currently in the food business in the States), likely to carry on the Jean León enterprise? He likes to think so.

With lunch in nearby Vilafranca, we drank a golden oaky Chardonnay and a rich, dry '78 Cabernet Sauvignon («It needs another three years or so») served by a waiter as if he were handling the Holy Grail, while Jean helped cut up a recalcitrant carré of lamb with practised ease. Jean León's initial diffidence had soon evaporated, revealing him to be a man of considerable charm, enthusiasm and, one suspects, grit. He is also an excellent raconteur, though mind you he has plenty to *raconter* about. He has clearly seen life and decided what he wants out of it—the best. He is not interested in personal celebrity (hence the *éminence grise* approach) but is proud of what he has achieved in wine. At a time when Spain was still lumbered with its plonk image, he had the clarity of vision to be innovative, the daring to aim for the top of the market and the acumen to recognise talent in the men who were to help him get there. His wines have earned the respect of the cognoscenti, and price-wise are on a par with the legendary Vega Sicilia.

ALONG THE ROUTE OF THE WHITE TOWNS DISCOVERING THE OTHER ANDALUSIA

Text and Photos: Suzanne Murphy



Motoring inland from the cosmopolitan beachside playgrounds of the Costa del Sol and Costa de la Luz, away from the highrises, noise and congestion of Torremolinos and Malaga, «los pueblos blancos», the charming white towns of southern Spain, nestle among the undulating contours of the Cadiz and Ronda mountain ranges quietly awaiting discovery.



If these pristine hilltop hamlets have been all but ignored by foreign travellers of recent years in their rush for a dose of dazzling Andalusian sand and sea, such was not always the case. For more than seven hundred years, in fact, these strategically perched villages with their mazes of winding streets, ruined castles and medieval churches were highly-prized trophies in the fierce on-going battle between Christian and Moor for possession of this mythical, magical land of milk and honey.

Today the lucky visitor can comfortably tour these nowpeaceful enclaves over a well-marked network of roads, known as the route of the white towns, as they crisscross the coastal provinces of Cadiz, Malaga and Granada, offering glimpses into this sun-drenched region, its colourful traditions and gregarious inhabitants. Several such spots, within easy striking distance of both the Atlantic and Mediterranean coasts, are perfect for day-long forays, but travellers can easily locate themselves inland as well, following established, uncrowded circuits for a wider overview of this unique area.

ARCOS DE LA FRONTERA

Centrally located Arcos de la Frontera, about 82 km (51 miles) from its provincial capital of Cadiz, is often cited as the most typical of these white fortress towns and over the years has become a favourite exploration base, offering several fine options for overnight stays. Like numerous other villages along the route, this highland centre of 30,000 inhabitants bears the Spanish appendage *«de la frontera»* or of the frontier, proclaiming the precarious position it once occupied on Moslem Spain's northernmost border during medieval times, although the Moors referred to the stronghold as Medina Arkosch.

Dramatically perched high atop a massive outcropping and flanked on three sides by steep granite cliffs, Arcos quietly dominates the vast Guadalete river delta more than 107 m. (350 feet) below with its fields of wheat, sugarbeet and cotton, its olive groves and splendid *cortijos*, the immense, aristocratic estates where herds of sheep and horses still graze contentedly.

Although the Romans inhabited many of these sierra sites centuries before, it was the Moors who gave the villages the architectural stamp which defines them to this day. The spare cubist lines of tile-roofed, whitewashed buildings delicately etched with wrought iron window grilles and balconies are classic examples of an ageless Moslem tradition along with the free-form layout of the towns themselves. Clustered in a random design around a central *alcázar* or fortified palace, they create a shady network of cobbled alley-

ways spilling forth onto sunny, geranium-filled *plazoletas* and lovely open spaces with splendid views of surrounding countryside.

Near Arco's summit in the old Arab quarter, however, few other vestiges of the centuries-long Moorish occupation remain. Superimposed over the ruined castles and mosques of the caliphs and emirs, the palaces, cathedrals and convents of their Christian conquerors proudly command attention. They include the beautifully preserved Gothic façade of the

ing the flower-filled pots which adorn their cool, interior patios. Following a protracted afternoon meal, people still enjoy a siesta and late into the evening, adults and children linger for hours on doorsteps to chat with neighbours.

Come springtime, the town's solemn Holy Week procession with its hooded penitents sounds an official opening note to the season's calendar of festivals and other regional events. Recognised as among the country's best, Arco's Easter activities are capped with joyous Sunday



Dramatically perched high atop a massive outcropping and flanked on three sides by steep granite cliffs, Arcos de la Frontera (right, below) dominates the Guadalete river.

Conde del Aguila's palace, the 15th century Plateresque Church of Santa María de la Asunción and the Church of San Pedro with its angular Baroque belltower.

A leisurely stroll through its colourful tangle of backstreets, barely accessible to vehicle traffic, is the best way to discover the special charms of this resplendent white town where the currents of life flow in accordance with age-old customs. Weekday mornings find sturdy housewives, long poles in hand, busily whitewashing house exteriors, knitting or tend-

celebrations when a fighting bull, known as the Toro del Aleluya, is let loose to career at will through the empty streets. Then as May approaches, community churches resound to the excited squeals of youngsters arriving for Sunday First Communion services and so it goes, spring through fall.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF AL-ANDALUS

Following in the footsteps of the Phoenicians, Greeks and Romans, Arab armies





Secondary roads and scenic routes wind through valleys of fertile farmland to secluded stretches of hill country covered with silvertinged olives and oaks.

and their Berber converts swept into southern Spain from North Africa in 711, routing the Visigoths at the famous Battle of Guadalete and establishing their own magnificent capital at Cordoba. Then, as the rest of Europe languished in the stagnant backwaters of the Dark Ages, the Moors reigned in grandeur over the glittering Golden Age of al-Andalus, a unique era in which the sciences, art, literature and philosophy took root and flourished.

Still, the highly prized territory of al-Andalus was to know few periods of extended peace under the more than seven centuries of Moorish domination. As early as 722, Christian forces from the north were able to achieve a dramatic victory over their archenemies at Covadonga, a symbolic battle which was to mark the beginning of what is commonly known as the *Reconquista*, or Reconquest of Spain.

Slowly at first and later with increased momentum, the Islamic kingdom began unravelling as Christian kings

marched their armies on Toledo, Zaragoza and Cordoba itself in 1236, followed by Valencia and Seville. Although the Moors countered forcefully with Berber reinforcements, by the end of the 13th century only the provinces of Granada, Malaga and part of Cadiz remained under their sway. Throughout this era the fortified white towns of La Frontera on the demarcation line between two opposing

worlds, passed repeatedly from one side to another like pawns in a deadly game of chess.

With the fall of the Kingdom of Granada in 1492 to the Catholic Monarchs, Isabella and Ferdinand, Spain began its drive towards political and religious unity and the sierra fortresses were at last permanently incorporated by the crown of Castile. Meanwhile, those Moors not converted to Christianity or driven into North African exile sought refuge in remote mountain villages from which they continued to launch sporadic revolts until their final expulsion in 1609.

Today, with the upheavals of a war-torn past far behind, the white towns of the Andalusian sierra endure with grace and serenity far from the fast-track, big city life. Branching off crowded main thoroughfares, excellent secondary roads and scenic routes wind through valleys of fertile farmland to secluded stretches of hill country covered with silvertinged olive groves and oak, continuing their climb to



As May approaches, community churches resound to the excited squeals of youngsters arriving for Sunday First Communion services.



Zahara de la Sierra, crowned by an ancient castle is among the most picturesque of the pueblos blancos. Its rocky crag with its commanding view was always in dispute.

still loftier heights where pine and rare Spanish fir thrive.

ZAHARA DE LA SIERRA

Now and again along the journey, a blinding white village suddenly appears around the bend clinging tenaciously to a mountainside and crowned by an ancient, crumbling castle. Zahara de la Sierra with its charming central square, Roman fortress and 16th century belltower is among the most picturesque of these towns. Alfonso the Wise and the Sultan of Morocco did battle here for possession of the rocky crag with its commanding view onto the surrounding lowlands, but the Moors held firm until the late 15th century when a decisive Christian victory left the entire region under control of the Marquis of Cadiz.

Zahara's warren of spotless cobblestone streets is fronted by simple whitewashed homes often adorned with the crests of noble families. Traces

of their Arab ancestry are still to be observed in glimpses of private, inner courtyards and heavy, studded doors garnished with the brass hand of Fatima knockers once believed to ward off the Evil Eye. Also in evidence on medieval residences are the wooden, shutter-like grilles known as *celosías*. These coverings are yet another ancient legacy, originally designed to allow the sheltered Moorish

women a bird's-eye view onto the street without being noticed.

GRAZALEMA

Climbing the tortuous road to tiny Grazalema through the rugged landscape of the Sierra del Pinar, it's easy to understand how Spain earned its reputation as Europe's second most mountainous country. One of the rainiest corners in Spain, this region provides the perfect environment for numerous varieties of birds and animals such as the wild boar as well as a rare Spanish fir known as the *pinsapo*, which grows up to 30 m. (100 feet) in and around the humid boundaries of nearby Parque Natural de Grazalema.

During the last century, this peaceful hamlet of 2,500 with its flowering central square, made a dubious name for itself as haven for some of the hill country's most notorious *bandoleros*, desperate highwaymen, swathed in wool



A leisurely stroll through their streets is the best way to discover the special charms of these white towns where the currents of life flow in accordance with age-old customs.



The cubist lines of tile-roofed, whitewashed buildings with wrought iron grilles are classic examples of a Muslim tradition.

blankets and armed with blunderbusses, who swooped down from the sierra's untamed heights to prey on passing stagecoaches. Those romantic figures are but a lingering memory to be celebrated in song and story, but Grazalema's handsome, handwoven blankets can still be had at bargain prices from the workshops of village men.

IMPREGNABLE RONDA

While neighbouring Ronda, poised in the midst of the rugged Serranía de Ronda range, is not always included in the official list of white towns, it has proven a consistent favourite with artists, writers and other wanderers for well over a century (see *Spain Gourmetour*, n." 6). A ravishing town of 33,000 with impeccable ancient connections, Ronda began life as a Roman settlement and its impregnable position atop a rocky crag rising 122 m (400 feet) above the Guadalquivir river made it an invaluable stronghold for the Moors as well, who held on until 1485.

A yawning gorge fringed by cliff-hanging, open-air cafes, divides the

original walled town known as *La Ciudad* from its newer, more pedestrian sections. A setting for the movie version of Bizet's *Carmen*, this old quarter with its jumble of houses and ruined Arab castle is among the area's loveliest. Of special note are the pristine façades of its majestic ancestral homes, a harmonious mix of Oriental and European with their Moorish grilled windows and classic Renaissance doorways, exemplified by the striking Casa de Mondragón, a converted Arab palace which once served as

summer residence to the Catholic Monarchs.

Leaving behind the Gothic convents, palaces and peaceful squares of the old town over spectacular Puente Nuevo or New Bridge built in 1761, other sites attract including Ronda's famous Plaza de Toros, among the country's oldest. In fact, the art of bullfighting itself is said to have begun here with the famous 18th century *matador* and native son, Pedro Romero. Today, bullfights are held in its Neoclassical ring just once a year during the town's September celebrations.

Mystery, myth and the magic of Mediterranean light await the visitor to the dozens of other Moorish villages along the «ruta de los pueblos blancos». Tiny, tidy chalk-white towns like Vejer de la Frontera not far from the Atlantic coast; bustling Ubrique, originally a Phoenician settlement and now a prosperous leathermaking centre, sun-washed Casares on the Costa del Sol, sleepy Algodonales with its expansive plaza punctuated by a Baroque church and the architectural marvel, Setenil de las Bodegas, nestling in the folds of overhanging rock formations skirting the lazy Guadalquivir river.



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LARIOS

A HISTORY OF SPAIN



Throughout the Middle Ages, for almost eight hundred years, much of Spain was under the control of Muslim invaders. The economy and culture of their southern Caliphate flourished to such a degree that its capital, Cordoba, became the most important city in the whole of western Europe. Muslims, Jews and Christians lived in

UNDER harmony for centuries, despite their religious differences and the ongoing struggle to reconquer territory from the Arabs.

The Arabs entered the Iberian Peninsula through Andalusia and it was there that they were to establish their most prestigious and glittering seats of power. They retained their hold there until finally ousted from Spain many centuries later, and Andalusia is where the

ISLAMIC finest relics of their culture are still to be found. Many thousands of Muslims from various coun-

tries still feel nostalgia for this land of their forefathers. It is tempting to see the fact that rich oil sheikhs have chosen to build palaces in choice locations along the Andalusian coast, particularly Marbella, as an example of this. Meanwhile, Andalusian influence is still evident

RULE throughout the culture of the Arab world, as in certain styles of architecture and in a North African musical genre still known as *andalusi*.

Similarly, though there is a tendency to consider the Christian monarchs (the final victors in the centuries-long struggle known as the Reconquest) as the shapers of modern-day Spain, many of its characteristics — both physical and spiritual — are unmistakably Arab.

It is also easy to trace back other characteristics, such as hospitality, agricultural skills (seen at their best in the very areas colonised by the Muslims), certain eating habits and aspects of the «national character» to the Arabs. The Spanish language, though a direct descendant of Latin like the other members of the Romance family to which it belongs, is rich in words of Arabic origin and its map is scattered with features which still retain the names given them by the Arab conquerors: countless towns and cities bear names which include the Arabic component



ORONOZ

Text: **Jesús Torbado**

Alcalá or *Medina* (meaning city), and rivers such as the Guadiana and the Guadalquivir (this latter derived from *Uad el-Kebir*, meaning Great River) retain the Arabic word *uad*.

The period of occupation lasted so long (from 711 to 1492) that mutual cultural assimilation was inevitable, particularly given that despite sustained efforts on the part of the Christians to oust the Infidel, these were outweighed by long periods of peaceful coexistence in many areas of Spain. Links between the Spanish and their former Islamic rulers remained close during the centuries following the liberation.

Though it is convenient when describing this period of history (particularly in a brief resumé) to speak of the two Spains, the Christian and the Muslim, the fact is that they overlapped to a considerable degree. Caliphs and emirs married the daughters of Christian monarchs, these same monarchs at times lent their services to Moorish kingdoms against other Christian kings, even such apparently unswerving Christians as the troops of the legendary leader. El Cid lent their services on occasion to Arab monarchs. There were also many Christians who, for one reason or another, lived under Arab rule, and vice versa. This phenomenon gave rise to two quintessentially Spanish architectural styles, the Mozarab (evolved by Christian craftsmen working in Moorish-occupied territory) and the Mudéjar (the work of Moors in Christian territory).

The Patio de los Leones in the Alhambra of Granada: a masterpiece of Moorish architecture.

AN INDEPENDENT MUSLIM KINGDOM

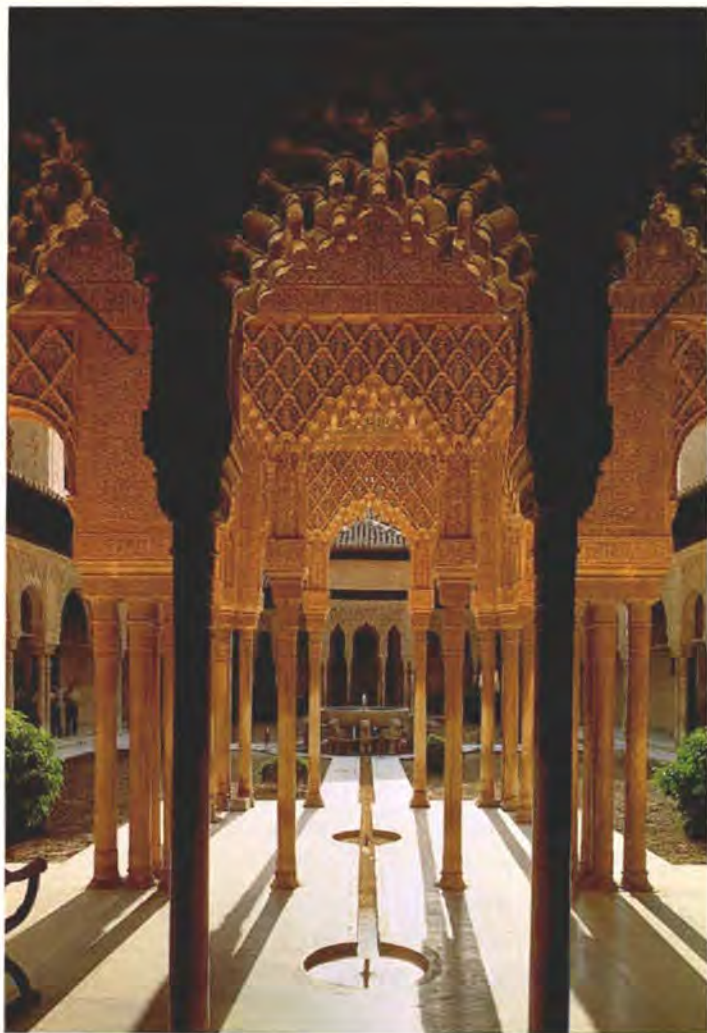
Though these invaders tend to be referred to generically as Moors or Arabs, it should be realised that the initial contingents were predominantly Berbers from North Africa, recent victims themselves of invasions by Arabs and Syrians, and mostly still members of the Jewish religion. The Berbers had often worked in alliance with the Visigothic rulers of Spain, whose domain extended as far as certain North African cities, such as Ceuta. Rival Visigothic factions were not averse to enlisting support from wherever possible and it was not uncommon to call on troops from the other side of the Straits of Gibraltar.

Thus, Tariq in 710 and, in the following year, Muza could not be said to have been treading new ground. Tariq landed at the southernmost point of Spain, an event still remembered in the name of the little town of Tarifa which today, buffeted as it is by the strong cross-winds between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, has become a magnet for wind-surfers from all over Europe. The arrival of General Tariq with his Berber troops was, however, to be more significant. Not content with having achieved the original objective of helping one Visigothic faction to defeat a pretender to their throne, Tariq forged on northwards rather than returning to Africa. By 714, almost the entire Iberian Peninsula had been conquered by the Muslims, who proceeded to extend their dominion into the south of France until checked, at Poitiers, in 732.

From 711 to 756, Spain was an emirate dependency of the caliphate of Damascus, with Cordoba as its capital. This was a period of continuous clashes between Syrians, Yemenis and Berbers and of dynastic rivalries in Syria itself. In 756, after several civil wars and a major uprising of Berbers who believed themselves discriminated against despite their superiority in terms of numbers, the first Umayyad emir, Abd al-Rahman I, took power. One of the few Umayyads to escape the appalling carnage which the Abbasids wrought in Syria in the course of destroying the most powerful dynasty in the Middle East, he transformed Spain into an independent emirate. Ab al-Rahman landed at Almuñecar (Granada), one of present-day Spain's most productive fruit-growing areas, and despite his youth (he was only 26), succeeded in subduing opposing factions in Cordoba.

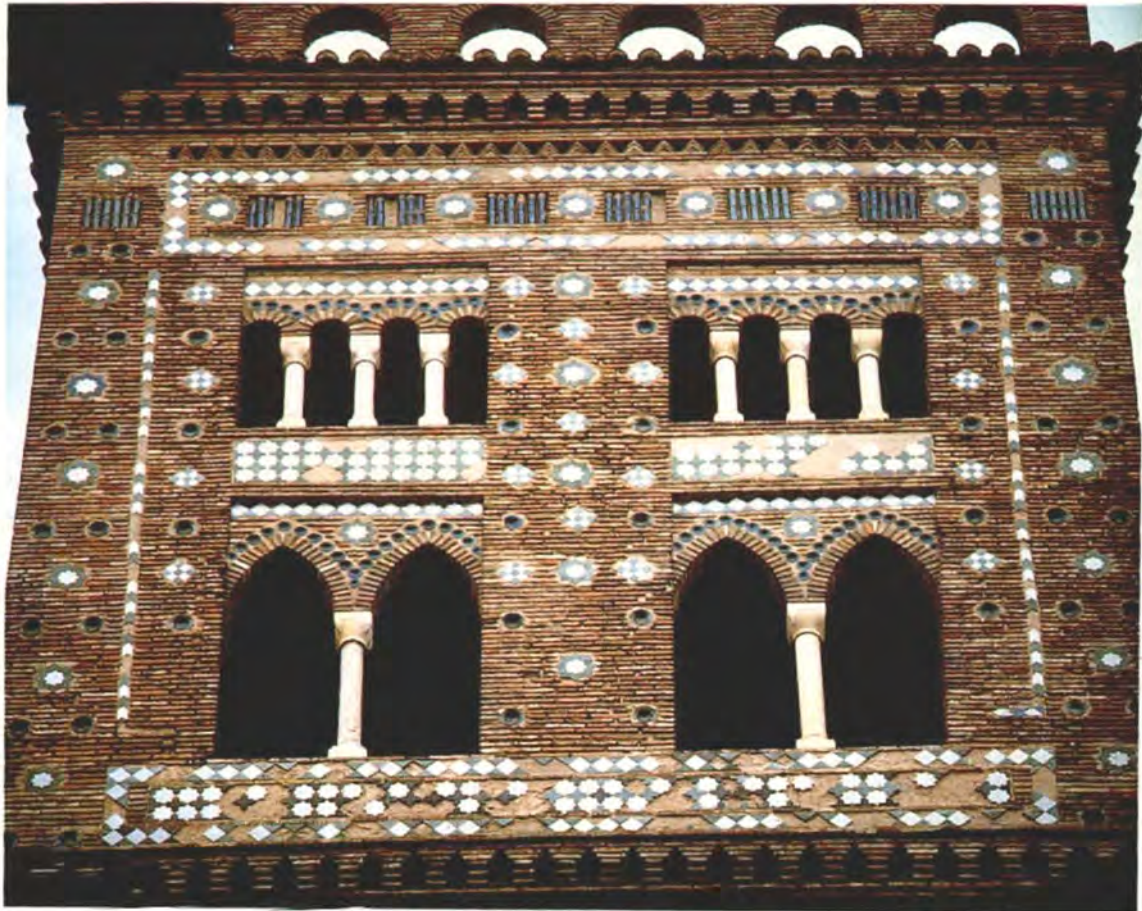
The nomadic heritage of the invaders had not equipped them with an architectural tradition of their own. Nevertheless, they had absorbed much from the cultures with which they had come in contact in the course of their travels, particularly the Persian. In 784, the emir built a fortified residential palace in Cordoba, incorporating military barracks. Only a few ruins remain today of what was the first stage in the gradual transformation of Cordoba into the most sophisticated and important city in the whole of the West. In 912, Cordoba became the capital of a caliphate independent of Baghdad, with Abd al-Rahman III as its caliph, and this saw an end to any vestige of political or religious dependency on the Arabs who controlled the Middle East, though relations were to remain friendly.

The city was the first in Europe to be equipped with street lighting, a sewage system, public fountains, and so on. With a population of half a million inhabitants, it had 50 hospitals (a concept introduced into Europe from the East), 300 public baths (at a time when the Christians of the north were still largely unwashed), 60 schools, 20 public libraries and



ORONOZ

The most original examples of Mudéjar art are the towers of Teruel, clad in ceramic tiling.



TURISPAÑA

over a thousand mosques. On the site of the former Visigothic cathedral of San Vicente, Abd al-Rahman I had initiated the building of a vast mosque which, despite the fact that a Christian cathedral was incorporated into it centuries later, is still one of the most important Muslim temples in the world.

Contemporary chroniclers were hugely impressed by the magnificence of Cordoba, as, later, they would also be by Granada (see *Spain Gourmetour*, No. 18 and 9, respectively): many of their detailed descriptions have survived. Over a period of forty years, the first caliph built a sumptuous palace, known as Medina Azahra on the outskirts of the city for one of his favourite mistresses, al-Zahra. Such was the wealth of the emirs and caliphs of Cordoba that it would better be described as a palace city: its original splendour can still be readily imagined from the ruins which survive today.

ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL WEALTH

The focus of Arab power in Spain was established in what had been, since before the time of the Romans, the wealthiest, most cultured and sophisticated area of the Peninsula —Andalusia. Historian Sánchez Albormoz points out that the sophistication of the Hispano-Islamic cities (with Cordoba and Seville at their head) was quite divorced from the rurality which predominated throughout Europe. They carried out large-scale trade with the Middle East through the ports of Andalusia, particularly Almeria. They already deployed a gold-based economy, seven hundred years before the concept was adopted by the Christians of the north. It is estimated that in 949 alone, between four and eight tons of gold were minted, with the total for the nearly fifty-year-long

reign of the first great caliph, Abd al-Rahman III, reaching into many hundreds of tons. The prestige of Cordoba was unrivalled in the known world.

The economy was sustained by various rationally-run industries and agriculture, which was exploited to the full by the application of the Arabs' famed skill with water. They introduced systems of irrigation and water storage which are still in use today, as well as the water-wheel and other mechanical devices. The great horticultural areas of Valencia and Murcia, today major exporters of fresh produce to the rest of the EEC, owe their success to their initial harnessing by the Arabs. Other sources of wealth were large-scale cultivation of textile and dye producing plants, and mulberries for use in silk-worm breeding, while plen-

Even under Islamic rule, the Jews continued to play an important role. The synagogue of Sta. Maria La Blanca, in Toledo, has survived from that period.



FELIX LORRICO

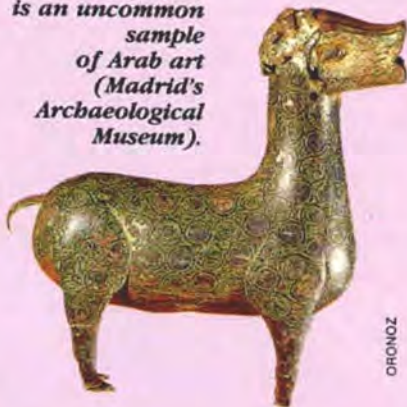
MEMENTOES

MUSLIM SPAIN

Despite the destruction wrought by several centuries of constant warfare and subsequently by the passage of time, Spain still retains many tangible reminders of the period of Islamic occupation. The layout of the historic quarters of cities such as Malaga and Seville is typically Moorish, and there is also a rich heritage of religious, civic and military buildings throughout Spain. Nevertheless, there are no examples of Arab painting or sculpture since these art forms were forbidden by Koranic law.

First period: The most noteworthy building dating from the period of the Emirate and Caliphate of Cordoba is the city's mosque, built in part with Visigothic materials and famous for its double arches supported on a veritable forest of columns. The ornate *mibrab* (the prayer-niche in the wall facing Mecca) is generally recognised as a gem of Moorish art. The mosque in Toledo (today's Cristo de la Iyz church) and the Cordoban palaces of Medina Azahara and Alamuriya also date from this early period.

This bronze deer (s. X), is an uncommon sample of Arab art (Madrid's Archaeological Museum).



ORONOZ

Second period: In the independent *taifa* kingdoms which came into being from 1031 on, the use of decorative plasterwork in architecture became increasingly elaborate: fine examples survive in La Aljaferia in Saragossa. The defensive citadels of Malaga and Almeria, which still stand, are also from this period.

Third period: The Almoravids, their principles firmly opposed to the refinement of the Caliphate and the *taifas*, shared little of their artistic sensibility. The pillar (as opposed to the column) and the horseshoe arch are typical features of their style. The Almohads, on the other hand, made Seville their artistic capital. Remains of their Great Mosque still survive on the site currently occupied by the Cathedral, chief among them the *Patio de los Naranjos* (Courtyard of the Orange Trees) and the famous Giralda Tower, originally (1164) a minaret and considered a masterpiece of Muslim tower-building. Parts of the Alcazar (Royal Palace) and of the Torre del Oro (Tower of Gold) also date from this period, as does the Espan-taperras Tower of Badajoz.

Fourth period: Though by the time of the founding of the Nasrid dynasty in Granada the Arab presence in Spain was well into its decline, this period produced one of the masterpieces of Moorish architecture anywhere in the world: the fortress and palace complex known as the Alhambra, built mostly during the 14C, alongside a summer villa known as the Generalife. One of the Alhambra's principal courts, the *Patio de los Leones*, so called because of its central fountain supported by twelve marble lions, reveals profound oriental influence.

The whole of Spain is dotted with Arab-built castles, bridges, fortresses (as in Carnona), city walls, underground water-tanks (Caceres), remains of mosques and civic buildings. Smaller-scale relics include decorative objects, particularly bronze and ivory pieces (there are important ones in Madrid's

Archaeological Museum), a casket in the possession of Pamplona Cathedral, urns (Malaga and Granada), vividly decorated glazed tiles (still a typically Spanish craft), and coffered ceilings, which have survived in many Spanish churches and civic buildings (University of Salamanca).

Mudéjar art: This typically Spanish style evolved between the 12C and 15C. It was developed by or under the influence of Arab craftsmen working in Christian territories. The most original examples are the towers of Teruel, clad in ceramic tiling, and others in the Province of Saragossa

(Utebo, Daroca, Calatayud) and early churches in the «brick Romanesque» style in the provinces of Leon, Avila and Segovia. The most outstanding ones are the two 12C churches in Sahagun (Leon). The style is believed to have originated in Toledo after its conquest: Toledo's two surviving synagogues are classic examples of it. It was then to spread predominantly into the kingdoms of Leon, Castile and Aragón.

It reached Andalusia later, extending throughout the country until it eventually gave way to the influence of the Renaissance: examples include the Palace of Tordesillas (Valladolid), the Monastery of Santa María Real de las Huelgas in Burgos (originally a summer palace of the kings of Castile), Seville's Alcazar and many more.



ORONOZ

Ivory can (s. X), coming from Zamora cathedral (Madrid's Archaeological Museum).

tiful wool provided the basis of a thriving textile industry. In addition to the traditional source of wealth, mining, new industries prospered such as embossed leather (known as *cordobán*, and still an important craft in Cordoba), furs, furniture, glassware (thanks to the invention of crystal by poet and alchemist Ibn Firnas), pottery, parchment and even paper in Jativa (Valencia) from the 10C on, mosaics, perfume, copper and so on. These products were exported not only to the Christian area of Spain which was lagging far behind its Islamic counterpart, but also to the Carolingian kingdom of central Europe, to North Africa and the Middle East.

In parallel to this economic prosperity, art and culture flourished with equal vigour to a degree that was to benefit the whole of Europe. During its zenith, from the 9-13C, Islamic Spain was characterised by its atmosphere of liberty and tolerance. The Muslim invaders did not impose their faith on their conquered subjects, though this smacks as much of business acumen as broad mindedness in that special taxes were levied on declared Christians. Yet many did convert to Islam, for both economic and social reasons: peasants who had hitherto worked the land for their Visigothic overlords were now given the opportunity to become tenant farmers. Except for periods when new



The mosque of Cordoba is unique and famous for its double arches supported on a veritable forest of columns.

ORONCZ

groups of North African invaders took control and imposed their religious fanaticism, the Caliphate of Cordoba could almost have been described as agnostic. The effects of this worked both ways, to such an extent that the Arabs themselves ignored the Koranic prohibition against drinking wine outright and even eulogised its pleasures in verse.

The seats of Islamic power were also seats of learning where philosophy, medicine, astronomy, mathematics and poetry attained levels of sophistication far in advance of Europe. The wisdom of other cultures was explored through translation and al-Hakam, successor to Abd al-Rahman I, is known to have amassed a library of over four hundred thousand volumes. This phenomenon of the royal court as a focus of culture would be perpetuated when central power became dispersed into lesser independent kingdom states known as *taifas*. Many illustrious and highly influential Hispano-Muslim figures emerged in various fields of learning: Madrid-born Abuscasim Maslama in mathematics and astronomy; Avicena, Abul Quasim, Avenzcar and Avenroes in medicine; al-Hakam, ar-Ramadi and the king of Seville, al-Mutamid, in poetry; Azarquiel and abenragel in astronomy, and hundreds more scientists, thinkers and scholars.

Almeria Alcazaba is a good example of the defensive citadels which still stand from that period.

THE JEWS

In both Muslim and Christian territories, the Jews continued to play an important role, some of them already

long-established in Spain and other more recent arrivals attracted by the economic prosperity of certain of its regions. Many Spanish towns still have ancient Jewish Quarters and even some synagogues have survived from that period (see *Spain Gourmetour*, No. 15). Though subjected to periodic outbreaks of persecution, which, as in the rest of Europe, almost always coincided with times of drought, plague or poverty, the Jews lived, on the whole, comfortably and peaceably with their neighbours. They were to make an important contribution to Spanish culture, particularly in medicine but also in science in general, literature and philosophy. Among the most important figures who came to prominence during the centuries of mutual tolerance and peaceful coexistence were Maimonides, Yehuda al-Levi and traveller Benjamin of Tudela. While Cordoba was the focus of cultural activity in Islamic Spain, it had its Christian equivalent in Toledo from 1085 on.

Inevitably, eight centuries of Muslim occupation saw not only many attempts by the Christians of the northern territories to oust the invaders but also internal struggles among the invaders themselves. They, in their turn, were invaded by new contingents from Africa with extreme religious attitudes which would today be described as fundamentalist. The first of these were the Almoravids, summoned by the king of Seville in 1086 from their territory in the southern Sahara. Other religious reformers from the same area,



TURESPIÑA



the Almohads, were to invade southern Spain in 1144, subjugating the rulers of the various small *taifas* and initiating a campaign of cruel persecution against Christians and Jews.

Interspersed with these major events were lesser invasions by Normans and Vikings. From 844 on, they wrought terror among the population along the coasts and navigable rivers of Galicia, Asturias, Seville and the Balearic Islands before establishing trade relations with the survivors. Many of these invaders also settled in the Peninsula, and even rose to positions of power under the Caliph: one, for example, became king of Almeria. Another invasion attempt was that of Charlemagne, aiming to take possession of the territory south of the Pyrenees. Defeated, he retreated back to France, to be attacked en route at Roncesvalles (probably by the Leonese or Navarrese) —an event immortalised in the legends of Bernardo del Carpio in Spain and the *Chanson de Roland* in France.

Twentieth century philologist, historian and analyst of Spanish culture Menéndez Pidal divides the period of Muslim power in Spain into a clear pattern. From 711 to 1002, the Muslims enjoyed absolute supre-

macy, though the Christian kingdoms of the north were beginning to join forces after long years of generalised passivity in the face of the invaders. The years between 1002 and 1045 saw the start of the decline of the Caliphate of Cordoba, and the emergence of numerous independent Islamic kingdom states known as *taifas*. Though their number and importance varied over the years, the most significant of these were Seville, Badajoz, Saragossa, Toledo, Valencia and Granada. While they battled either alone or as allies against the Christians, they also fought among themselves. From 1045 on, there was a marked increase in the Christian offensive which was to be sustained over the following two centuries. At the battle of Navas de Tolosa (1212), an alliance of the four Christian monarchs of Castile, Navarre, Aragon and Portugal succeeded in defeating the last of the great Muslim powers, the Almohads.

The prolonged hit-and-miss struggle for the Reconquest of Spain wrought profound changes in its population patterns. Vast unpopulated areas of no-man's land which served as frontiers between Muslim and Christian territories (the Duero Valley was one example), were repopulated as frontiers were pushed backwards or forwards. New cities were founded in much the same way: as early as the 9C the Arabs founded Madrid, Murcia, Ubeda and other centres of population which are major cities today. Similarly, defensive castles were built and repeatedly changed hands according to the fortunes of war. Francisco de Quevedo, 17C satirist and poet, maintained, though with obvious exaggeration, that 4,700 battles were fought between Muslims and Christians. The whole Reconquest saga came to be studded in the popular imagination with heroic figures (such as El Cid) and miraculous events (the intervention in battles of the Apostle St. James), reality and fantasy becoming so closely interwoven that it is difficult to separate folklore from fact in this fascinating period of Spanish history.

The Arabs introduced to Spain systems of irrigation as well as the water-wheel and other mechanical devices.



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QUICK CONVERSION

In our recipes, quantities are given in metric measurements. The charts on this page show approximate equivalents between Imperial or American measures, and metric measures.

FLUID MEASURES METRIC/BRITISH STANDARD

10 MILLILITRES = 1/3 OUNCE	1 TEASPOON = 5 MILLILITRES
50 MILLILITRES = 1 3/4 OUNCES	1 TABLESPOON = 18 MILLILITRES
100 MILLILITRES = 3 1/2 OUNCES	1 OUNCE = 28 MILLILITRES
250 MILLILITRES = 8 1/2 OUNCES	1 PINT = 570 MILLILITRES
500 MILLILITRES = 17 1/2 OUNCES	1 QUART = 1.14 LITRES
1 LITRE = 1 3/4 PINTS	1 GALLON = 4 1/4 LITRES

FLUID MEASURES METRIC/U.S. STANDARD

10 MILLILITRES = 2 TEASPOONS	1 TEASPOON = 5 MILLILITRES
50 MILLILITRES = 3 TABLESPOONS	1 TABLESPOON = 15 MILLILITRES
100 MILLILITRES = 3 1/2 OUNCES	1 OUNCE = 30 MILLILITRES
250 MILLILITRES = 1 CUP + 1 TABLESPOON	1 CUP = 235 MILLILITRES
500 MILLILITRES = 1 PINT + 2 TABLESPOONS	1 PINT = 475 MILLILITRES
1 LITRE = 1 QUART + 3 TABLESPOONS	1 QUART = 950 MILLILITRES
	1 GALLON = 3 3/4 LITRES

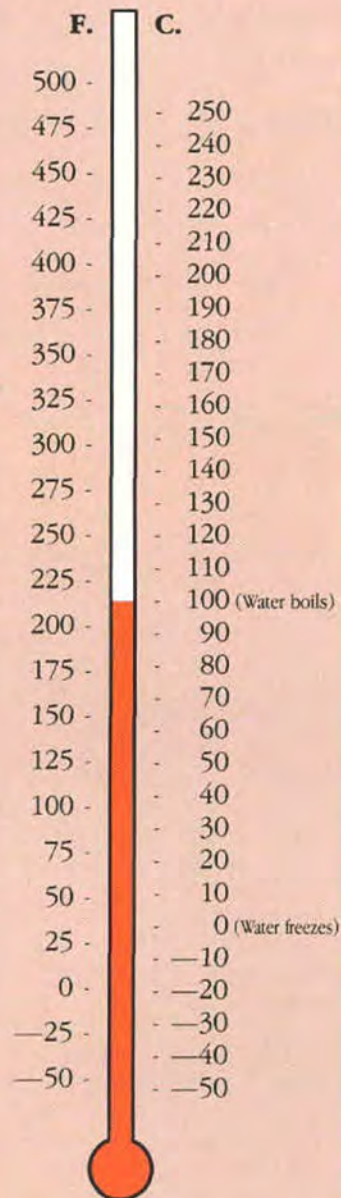
OVEN TEMPERATURE

TEMPERATURE	DIAL NUMBER
VERY SLOW = 250F/120C.	= 1/4
SLOW = 300F/150C.	= 1
MODERATE = 350F/180C.	= 4
HOT = 400F/200C.	= 6
VERY HOT = 450F/230C.	= 8

WEIGHT METRIC/OUNCES & POUNDS

10 GRAMS = 1/3 OUNCE	1/2 OUNCE = 14 GRAMS
50 GRAMS = 1 3/4 OUNCES	1 OUNCE = 28 GRAMS
100 GRAMS = 3 1/2 OUNCES	1/4 POUND = 110 GRAMS
250 GRAMS = 8 3/4 OUNCES	1/2 POUND = 230 GRAMS
500 GRAMS = 1 POUND + 1 1/2 OUNCES	1 POUND = 450 GRAMS
1 KILO = 2 POUNDS + 3 1/4 OUNCES	

TEMPERATURE



S P A I N
GOURMETOUR

Luis Meléndez

THE CHOCOLATE SET

THE PAINTER...

The 18C was not one of particular brilliance for Spanish painting. The Spanish Baroque, charged as it had been with realism and religion, had already run its course and the new century's tastes lay elsewhere. Moreover, the French Bourbon dynasty, which took over the Spanish throne in the person of Philip V in 1700, inclined more towards profane subjects which reflected the splendours of the court and worldly pleasures.

The new monarchs imported artists from abroad: French painters in the case of Philip and Italians in the case of his successor, Ferdinand VI. Charles III, in his turn, was to employ painters of the calibre of the internationally renowned Tiepolo and Mengs to work on the frescoes of the new Royal Palace in Madrid.

Luis Meléndez was the first Spanish painter to attain a certain prominence within this panorama. Born in Naples in 1716 into a painting family, he was taken to Madrid a year later and was to spend the rest of his life there. He became a disciple of the French painter Van Loo who had come to Spain with the court of Philip V. Though he competed on many occasions in the course of his career for the position of Court painter, he never achieved this particular ambition. This fact explains why his oeuvre reflects little courtly influence and concentrates largely on the still life. His mastery of this particular genre and the magnificence of his



technique are apparent in the many examples which have come down to us. His compositions are simple almost to the point of austerity, their precision rescued from chilliness by a warmth and clarity of vision and technical brilliance. He was to restore the still life to a position of prestige which it had not enjoyed in Spain since Zurbarán.

Of his paintings in other genres, one of the most noteworthy is a self-portrait

Painted in 1746, exhibited in the Louvre. It depicts Meléndez aged 30, still young and dark, haughtily displaying an academic drawing held in his left hand. This splendid example of his skill with the human figure shows us what this painter could have done in a genre which he barely explored. Critical reappraisal after the Second World War led to a revival of interest in Meléndez and renewed appreciation of his exceptional realistic technique.

...AND THE PAINTING

In this still life, Luis Meléndez reveals his talent in the areas of both technique and composition. Gently side-lit, the warm tones of the copper pot and the cakes and the cool whites of the porcelain cup and the paper chocolate-wrappers stand out against a dark background, producing an overall atmosphere of cosiness.

In this celebration of the ordinary and of everyday objects, the painter leaves us a little vignette of his time, the brilliance of style and technique in no way diminishing the sensitivity of his treatment.

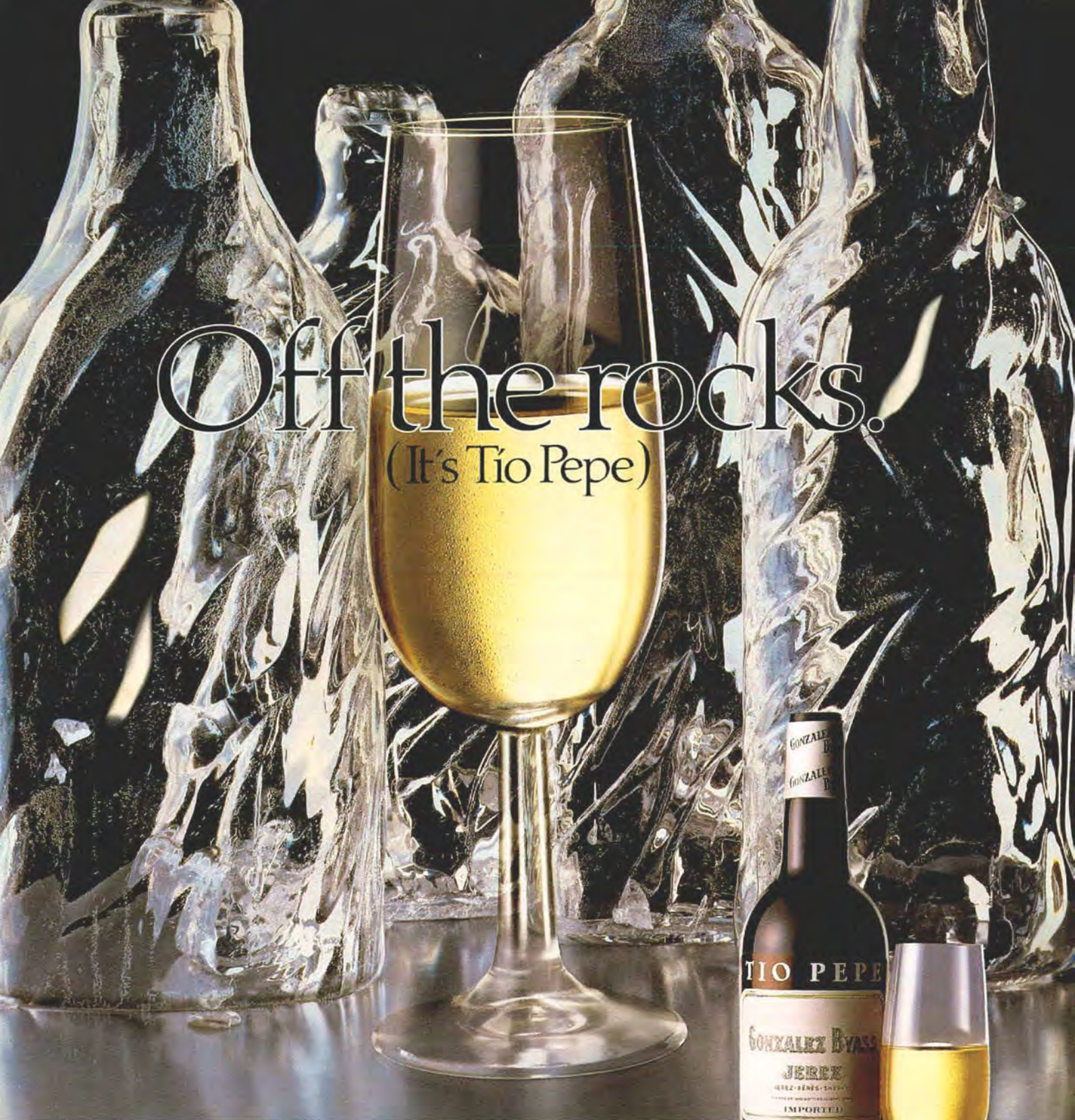
The composition is in the form of an isosceles triangle made up of whites, greys and browns, and depicts a chocolate set of the period. It shows us not only of what it was composed but also how it was served: the copper chocolate pot, porcelain cup, cloth, tray, cakes, rolls and ounce blocks of chocolate are all realistically and precisely represented, the objects and their juxtaposition conjuring up a whole ritual from the past.

Behind Meléndez's technical wizardry lies a subtle understanding and appreciation of the insignificant and ephemeral. It is this quality which transforms a slice of everyday life into a work of art. In his choice of genre and elegantly naturalistic style, Luis Meléndez encapsulates the selectivity which was the spirit of his age.

José María Ortega Sanz

Off the rocks.

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Heavenly Spain.

This church is on the route to Compostela which, literally translated, means "The Field of the Stars".

Guided by those stars, the medieval Pilgrims used to worship at churches such as this one, when on their way to visit the tomb of St James at Santiago de Compostela.

The area is typified by such important places of historical interest as Pamplona, Logroño, Burgos, Leon and Lugo.

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