

Dani Carnero



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Dani Carnero began his career working in some of Spain's greatest kitchens, including under Ferran Adrià at El Bulli and has since gone on to open a number of restaurants of his own in Málaga, including the Michelin-starred Kaleja. There, he aims to showcase the traditional cookery style of Málaga, using the exquisite local produce to do so.

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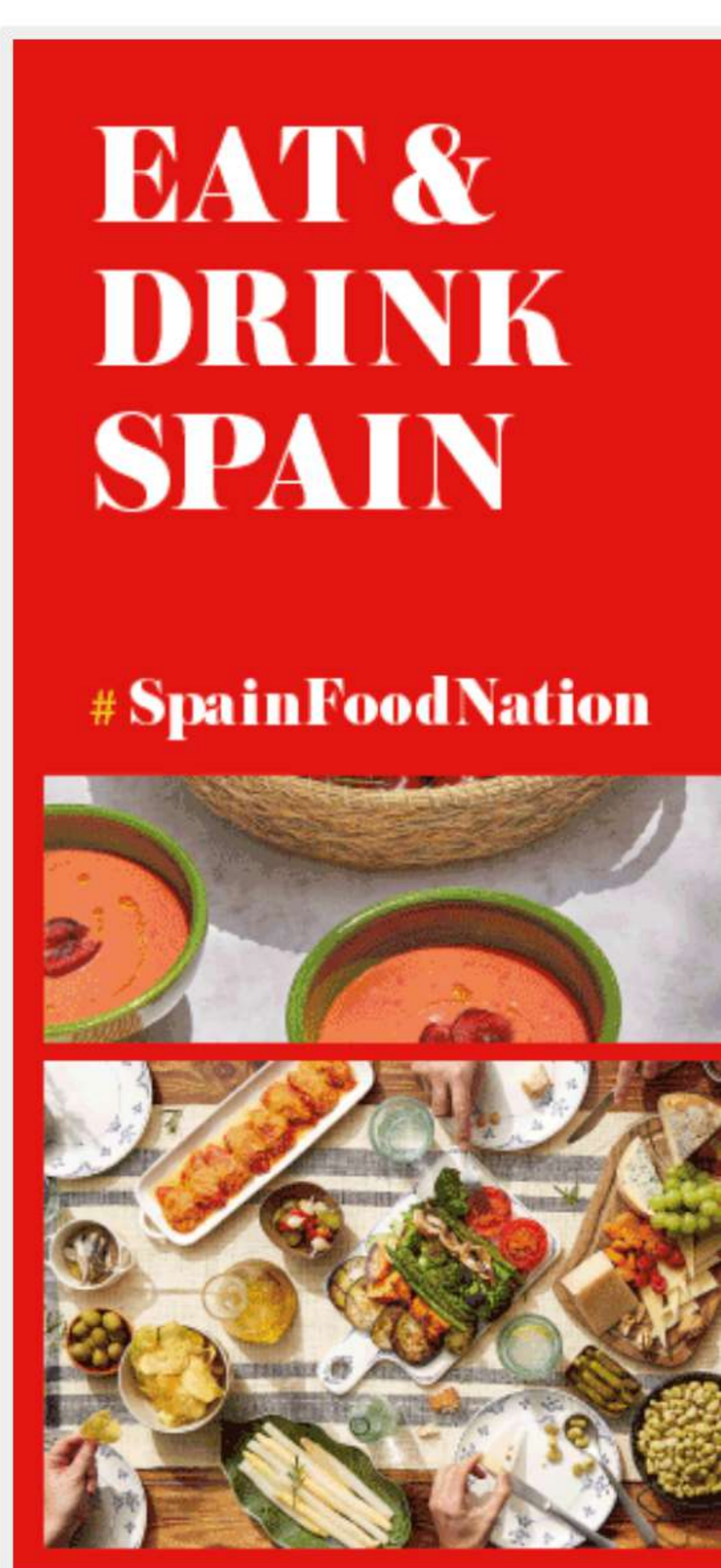
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When the [Michelin](#) star plaque arrived in January 2023 at Kaleja, Dani Carnero told a Spanish journalist he was, 'happier than a kid at Christmas.' Named after the Sephardic word for alley and located in the old Jewish quarter just behind Málaga's cathedral, Carnero's flagship restaurant got its star at the end of 2022 after opening in December 2019, just before the pandemic hit.

A Málaga native, Dani has been in professional kitchens since the late eighties. He started off in Mar de Alborán, one of Málaga's best restaurants at the time, then moved on to work in some of the best kitchens in Spain including with Basque supremo Martín Berasategui, before later going on to spend a year at El Bulli in Catalonia under Ferran Adrià.

Kaleja, one of three restaurants Dani owns in Málaga, is where all his knowledge and experience gained working across Spain, mixed with his passion for Málaga food traditions, has reached its zenith. 'Before I opened my first restaurant, La Cosmopolita,' he says, 'Ferran Adrià said that chefs need to open places that offer diners something different and what we did with La Cosmopolita was open one of the first classic food restaurants in the city. Kaleja is much more of a personal project for me.'

With Kaleja, Dani wants diners to experience the traditional Málaga that, until recently, had been almost forgotten. The cooking is long and slow and often done directly on fire or its embers. Dani calls it candela cooking, explaining that it's a very Málaga tradition. It's a bonfire where people gather round and cook some dishes, talk and eat and drink wine and spend an evening in company sharing food whilst having a generally good time. 'With Kaleja,' he explains, 'what we want to do is convey that real Málaga experience of food and conviviality to the customer.'



Calamar kru con salsa de mantequilla (battered raw squid with lime)
by Dani Carnero



Maimones
by Dani Carnero

Text

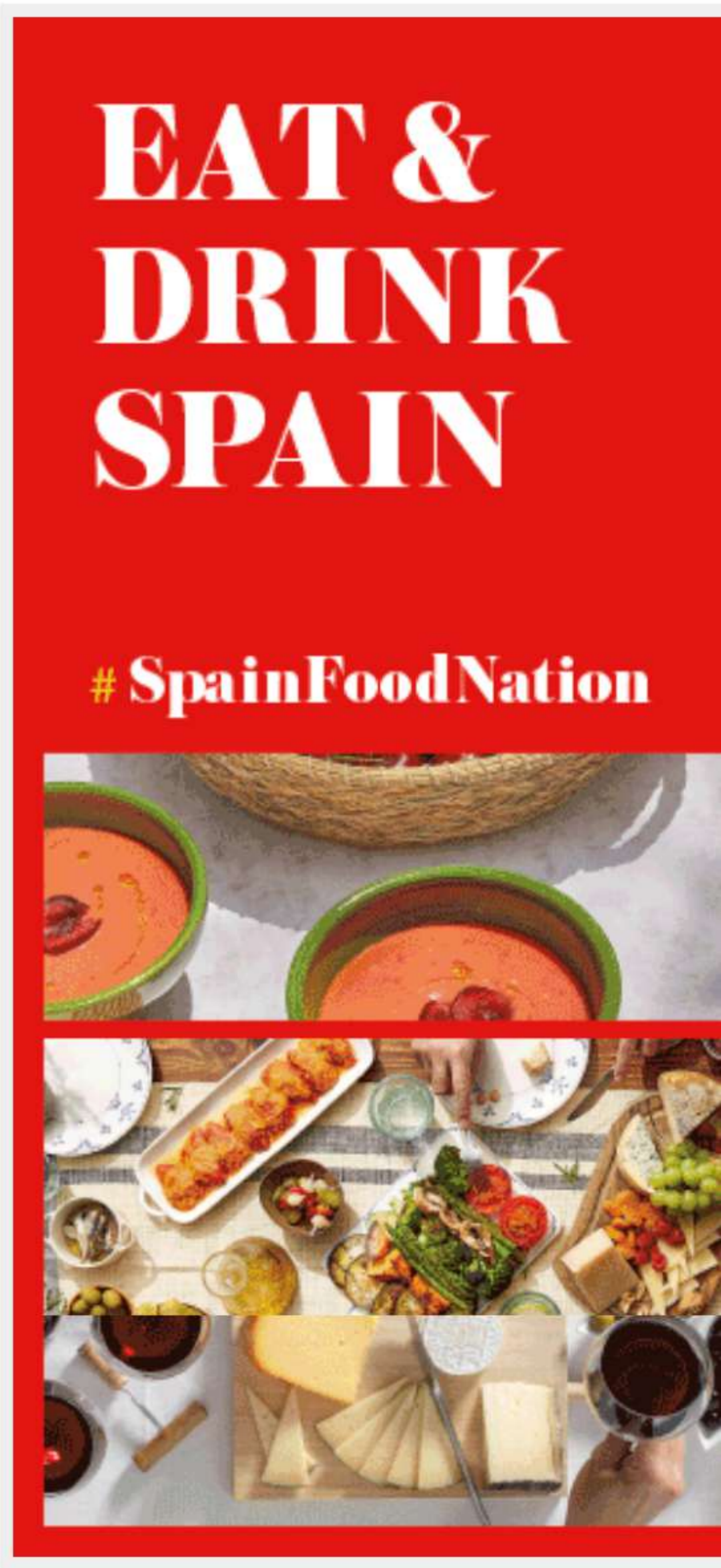
The changing tasting menus at Kaleja are both a nod to memory, the idea being both to invoke old memories of past meals with native Málaga and to create new ones from visitors from afar. One of the signature dishes is Maimones, a soup made from dried bread. 'Diners find it quite amusing to be eating something so simple in a Michelin star restaurant,' says Dani, 'but it's one of the backbones of traditional Málaga food. If you are in Naples you think pizza, in Valencia, paella. I want people to think Maimones when they think of Málaga.'

There is also a balance to be had in giving people an authentic traditional experience and confusing them. 'There's a danger that we get lost in the word 'experience', he remarks. 'As chefs we can get carried away in wanting to give diners a certain experience - in the case of Kaleja of traditional Málaga - and we forget that people come here principally to enjoy our food and drink. We don't want diners to be confused. We are also a restaurant and a business and have to be influenced by diners' expectations.'

Those expectations are easily met in part due to the embarrassment of riches in terms of the produce that is available from the region nowadays. While great olive oil is something that has been taken for granted in Andalusia for millennia, the twenty-first century has seen a great leap in the variety and quality of Andalusian fruit and vegetables, while its new artisanal cheese makers are putting Andalusian cheese on the map. 'My generation of Andalusian chefs, we grew up thinking that the best of Spain was in the North,' explains Dani. Indeed in the nineties and very early 2000s with the New Basque Cooking wave at its height and the fervour around El Bulli in Catalonia, the focus of food in Spain was virtually all northerly, but that has changed as the twenty-first century has progressed.

With Andalusian chefs returning to their native region to open up their own establishments and the boom in artisan and sustainable food production as well as new and exciting winemakers, things have never looked better for Andalusian food and drink. Dani's favourite vegetables to use across his restaurants are hyper regional and include the Huevo de Toro tomato from Coín, lettuce from Alhaurín El Grande and leeks from Cartama, while the olive oil he uses is Aceite Oro Bailen from Jaén. 'It took us a few years,' smiles Dani, 'but we learned to seek out and appreciate our own produce and our own wine, which in turn enabled more producers to make better produce.' Two great examples of this are the modern almadraba system of bluefin tuna fishing in Cadiz and the increasing number of winemakers making new types of wine not typical of the region, as well as reviving previously moribund wine traditions.

All of these elements together have created a moment where many of the brightest and the best in food and drink are now looking to Andalusia and chefs like Dani Carnero as role models for maintaining and reviving traditions, all the while adjusting and adapting them to the needs of the twenty-first century. 'That's the thing about Andalusia today,' Dani says, just before getting back to his kitchen. 'We have a vastly different food culture and dishes in each province and some of the best produce around. We really are Spain's Garden of Eden right now.'



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