



## Girona: Catalonia's culinary gem

by Great British Chefs  
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*It may be a fraction of the size of Catalonia's capital, but Girona is undoubtedly home to some of the region's most exceptional food. We take a look at everything this beautiful city has to offer by way of restaurants and produce.*

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For decades Girona was a closely guarded secret, known as a great food destination to others in the surrounding province or by Barcelona residents, who would regularly make a day trip to eat in the sophisticated northern city at some of the best restaurants in Spain, many of them situated in the stunning old town some even overlooking the Onyar river. The secret came out when the Roca Brothers, Joan, Jordi and Josep, started gaining international fame for their three-Michelin-starred restaurant Cellar de Can Roca, winning the prestigious Best Restaurant in the World award at the World's 50 Best Restaurants in 2013 and 2015.

Located in the north east of Catalonia, near the Mediterranean coast, less than fifty miles from the French border, Girona has taken its worldwide fame in its stride. The city's bars and restaurants continue to offer the best of produce to locals and increasing numbers of international tourists, assuming what they have to offer is quietly, without fuss and with typical Gironin reticence, some of the best food in the world.

Unlike many other cities in Spain, Girona doesn't have a real tapas tradition, you might get a local vermouth with some local olives, charcuteries like fuet, bull blanc and PGI Vic salchichón, or a local cheese like D.O.P L'Alt Urgell y La Cerdanya cow's cheese, but the Gironin tradition is to sit at one restaurant and have a lunch menu or an a la carte dinner. What they cook is their Mediterranean coastal suquets – fish stews with a tomato base and potatoes often finished with a picada of almonds and hazelnuts – as well as their own versions of Mediterranean seafood rice dishes. Josep Pla, one of their most famous food writers of the mid-twentieth century, is well known for pointing out that the province's black rice wasn't from the squid ink so popular in much of the Mediterranean, but rather from the sofregit base - the dark colour gained from long slow frying of onions in D.O.P Empordà Extra Virgin olive oil that is the basis of so many dishes in this area.



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When it comes to meat, beef is the most popular choice, especially PGI beef from the Catalan Pyrenees and, when not simply fried or grilled on a flame, the Fricando stew of slices of beef cooked with fresh or dried wild mushrooms is not to be missed. Another important Catalan cooking tradition that is often on Girona's menus is mar i muntanya, a decidedly more sophisticated version of 'surf n'turf'. Traditionally chicken with prawns, the concept has gone through an update by the region's chefs in recent years and dishes like venison cooked in squid ink, sea bass with wild mushrooms or squid stuffed with chestnuts can be found on the city's menus at various times of the year.

When drinking, Gironins have polished tastes and enjoy wine from across Spain but keep a special place in their hearts for the small local D.O. Empordà region, whose mostly small wineries produce famous cavas and rosés as well as dry red wines from the Garnacha grape variety. Garnacha is also used to produce their well known sweet garnatxa fortified red wine. Desserts in this city meanwhile, are often simply cooked local apples, peaches or pears, or fresh curd called recuit, and, due to the youngest Roca brother Jordi's love of craft chocolate and his influence, quality chocolate desserts.

A visit to Girona and its restaurants, cafés and bars will leave you quietly awed at just how well people cook in this city and how high locals' expectations are. And you'll feel as quietly satisfied as they are, knowing you too have had some of the best culinary experiences in the world and wondering how reticent you should keep about them.

### Four of Girona's finest

**Cellar de Can Roca:** The best restaurant in Girona, **Cellar de Can Roca** is also widely regarded as one of the best restaurants in the world. The Roca brothers started out their culinary life at their parents' restaurant (below) and now have the famous three-Michelin-starred Cellar, a craft chocolate business which includes both a shop and hotel Casa Cacao, an ice-cream parlour Rocambalesc, and now a new more affordable restaurant in the old part, Normal.

**Plaça del Vi:** A favourite of the city's inhabitants, **Plaça del Vi**'s owner Roger Viusà is a big natural wine fan and has an extensive wine list available by the glass and the bottle. This accompanies an ever-changing menu filled with updated Catalan classics based on the kitchen's extensive knowledge of the earliest documented Catalan recipes from books like the fourteenth century Sent Soví.

**Can Marques:** Opposite the Mercat de Lleó, **Can Marques** prides itself on being the market's restaurant and has a changing daily lunch menu based on the best of the market produce. As it's also close to several local and national government buildings it's generally full of civil servants at lunchtime and offers a great lunch menu that pleases such fickle customers' taste buds and wallets.

**Can Roca:** This is the Roca brothers' parents' restaurant and the place where their kitchen team eat everyday. It all started here with traditional food and the restaurant continues offering a great well priced lunch menu of Catalan stalwarts made from fresh local produce. Be sure to get there early.



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