



## The complete foodie guide to Galicia

by Great British Chefs · 4 October 2022

We take a look at Spain's most north-westerly region of Galicia, home of Albariño wine, empanadas and some of the best seafood available.



In association with FWS Foods and Wines from Spain and #alimentosdespaña

Perched on the top of Portugal and surrounded by the Atlantic, Galicia is Spain's wettest, greenest province. Galicians themselves claim to be a Celtic people and standing under an umbrella inside a castle listening to their traditional bagpipes and drinking spiced wine, a flaming mixture of herbs, sugar and the local orujo liquor, it is very easy to see the connection with other Celts in damp green lands.

Until Columbus and his team sailed on the hills, the Pinta and the Santa María in 1492, its furthest west corner, still called Finis (Latin's End in Galicia), was the end of the known earth for Europeans. Galicians in the port of Balboa were the first Europeans to learn about the New World, as Columbus first landed there on his return to Europe.

Today Galicia is world-famous for the Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage route that starts all over Europe and ends in Santiago de Compostela, the capital of Galicia and the resting place of St. James the Apostle. It was one of the great medieval pilgrimage routes in Europe; a pilgrim who completed El Camino was guaranteed a place in heaven, and the trip to Santiago was revealed only by the pilgrims to Rome and Jerusalem. Thousands of people today still walk the St. James' Way, particularly Spaniards in the summer looking for the celestial blessing of cooler weather than the rest of the country, the promise of some rain and Galicia's unique flavours.

This marked difference in climate from most of the rest of Spain is reflected in Galicia's unique culinary traditions of green leafy greens, poached seafood and fish, lightly cured pork, the best potatoes in Spain and empanadas. The fish and seafood here are amongst the highest quality in the world and Galicians are famous for cooking their fish and seafood simply and to perfection. That long fish and seafood tradition made Galicians early adopters of canning technology and by the early twentieth century the coastal city of Vigo became the centre of the fish canning industry with over eighty canning factories. Today Galician canned fish and seafood is a highly respected industry and items such as Queen scallops, cockles and sardines all form part of a large canning industry, with tinned mussels being a particular favourite. Chef Alberto Cruz at [Lindley in O Fieiro](#) in Costa da Morte has even paid homage to the Galician canning industry, making a light modern version of mussel escabeche.

Coming from the verb empanar, meaning 'to bread', empanadas – savoury pies which are mostly eaten by hand – are so widespread in Galicia and so varied from the dough to the filling that every neighbourhood, town and hamlet in Galicia can lay claim to having their own recipe. Traditionally the empanadas are made from wheat, although in Rias Baixas they were made from corn, and a stuffing of everything from octopus to leafy veg and minced meat is made and placed in between the dough and then baked. Like many dishes across the whole of Spain, the filling for many empanadas, especially on the coast, is based on a soffritto of chopped fried onions before the other ingredients are added. Galician chefs like Anna Portela at [Beldareix](#) in Santiago and David López at [El Camello de Indias](#) in the northern town of Ferrol are continuing to make modern versions of empanadas – in Portela's case a version of the Rias Baixas corn dough with cockles and in López's a one like Queen scallop empanada sprinter.



Galician cockle empanada with alioli by CBC Kitchen



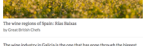
Texilla cheese-stuffed Padrón pepper gratin by CBC Kitchen

Pimentón is the main spice in a range of local dishes. Galicians, in common with most Spaniards, have a close relationship with pork, and dishes like Zarzifa, pork loin pieces marinated in pimentón and garlic, and a range of chorizos, all use pimentón. The famous ajada sauce, a mixture of pimentón, garlic and extra virgin oil is very common with fish, while both the extra virgin olive oil and the pimentón are regularly added to fish steaks called caldeirada and so many other Galician dishes that this style of flavouring is known as 'à la gallega' in other parts of Spain. The pimentón always used here is made in Galicia but is P.D.O. from La Vera in the southern Extremadura region, and is regarded as the best quality throughout the whole of Spain.

The peppers that are grown in Galicia are mostly a variety commonly called Padrón peppers. Named after the village of Padrón, these peppers were brought from Mexico by Franciscan monks to the monastery at Herbón, just beside Padrón and by the eighteenth century were being grown and commercialised with great success. Nowadays they enjoy Protected Designation of Origin status and are now listed as P.D.O. Pemento de Herbón. Due to the Galician climate, the peppers changed in character from the originals brought from Mexico and eating them today is a Russian roulette of heat, as each one can taste from sweet and dark like a bell pepper to hotter than a jalapeño.

The traditional cheeses in Galicia meanwhile, are cow's milk cheeses with the two most famous ones being the mild P.D.O. Texilla and the smoked P.D.O. San Simón de Costa, both of which are a similar shape and texture. Both are quite mild cheeses with buttery textures and eaten either as starters or desserts all over Galicia. Texilla is made to very strict standards at around the region, from three different breeds of cows or their mixes. Each individual cheese has to weigh between 500g and 1.5kg and they all have to have the same conical shape.

The signature dessert of the whole of Galicia is Tarta de Santiago, a naturally gluten-free sponge cake made with eggs, sugar, butter and ground almonds. Whatever the size of cake, the important thing is to have the outline of St. James' sword on the cake using icing sugar, to ensure its authenticity. Traditionally it's eaten cold but chef Alex Ferriz in the [Paseo de la Estrela](#) in Santiago makes a hot one with a molten centre.



The wine regions of Spain: Rias Baixas by Great British Chefs

The wine industry in Galicia is the one that has gone through the biggest changes in recent decades, with the indigenous Albariño and Godello grapes taking centre stage in most parts of Galicia, and white wine production really outstripping red. Once limited to small-scale production for home use, it is now an increasingly important industry, using the best of modern winemaking techniques all over Galicia. The five wine-producing D.O.s are Rias Baixas, Ribeiro Sacra, Ribeiro, Valdeorras and Monterrei, with Ribeiro Sacra being the only region producing mostly red wines, focusing on indigenous grape varieties such as Mencía and Brancosillo.

There's also a long history of home distilling here, using grape pomace – the skin, pulp, seeds and stalks – to make orujo in small home-made stills. Nowadays orujo production has followed Galicia's wine industry and is properly regulated with its own P.D.O. status.

Galicians today haven't abandoned their culinary and wine traditions but are instead building on them using modern techniques and new methods, bringing a distinctly Galician flavour to the twenty-first century.



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