



## Santiago de Compostela: a food pilgrimage to St James' resting place

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We visit Galicia's capital, Santiago de Compostela: the end of the pilgrims' journey and a place to enjoy the region's world famous seafood, empanadas and cheese.



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The origins of the Galician capital are not quite as fantastic as the twin-suckled-by-wolves origins of Rome, but they are still a rollicking good story. At the beginning of the ninth century, a hermit called Pelayo (Pelagius in Latin) saw mysterious lights like star showers every night on the same hill in the forest of Solovio, where he lived. He went to Iria (modern day Padrón) to see the bishop there who led an expedition to the hill and discovered the buried remains of the mysteriously identifiable St. James the Apostle and two of his followers, all of whom had lain there undisturbed for over nine-hundred years. King Alfonso II of Asturias, ruler of Galicia at the time, handily agreed with both the bishop and Pelayo that these were indeed the bodily remains of Jesus' disciple James; he ordered the building of a chapel on the site and became one of the very first people to make a pilgrimage to the chapel.

By the early eleventh century, the cathedral was being built and the city of Santiago was on its way to becoming one of the most important centres of pilgrimage in medieval Europe, surpassed only by pilgrim routes to Rome and Jerusalem. A guaranteed way to get to heaven without the worry of a lengthy stretch in Purgatory or the burning pits of hell, travellers from all over Europe made the journey on foot to the cathedral at Santiago. Successful pilgrims then wore a scallop shell as a symbol of their epic journey on their outer garments and, just in case there was any doubt about their right of entrance through the heavenly gates, were often buried with the scallop shells in their coffins.

Today Santiago has more people than ever walking the St. James Way, even if most of them are looking for the earthly pleasures of a week-long walk and some good food at the end of it rather than a direct passage to heaven, most of them still have a scallop shell somewhere in their rucksacks. The old part of Santiago in the height of summer can feel like it has surrendered to rucksacks, walking boots and shops to cater for the whims of the new pilgrims, but scratch the surface and the real Santiago, with its edible delights, is still there.

The city's market, [el Mercado de Abastos](#), strikes a great balance between selling souvenirs for tourists and supplying residents with the produce they need. Although the present building was built in 1941, there has been a market on the site for more than three centuries. Here you can see the best of produce from Galicia – seafood, seasonal vegetables, and products such as Galician beef, Padrón peppers and Teiella and San Simón cheeses, which all have special geographic protection status – and also eat in one of the many restaurants surrounding the market. You can also go on a tasting tour of the market (in Spanish) on a Thursday during the high season and Saturdays the whole year round.



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Bars throughout Santiago still serve a small tapa for free alongside a drink: small portions of potato tortilla, some thin slices of smoked San Simón cheese or a slice of empanada are all common tapas. At certain times you might even get a taste of that day's soup or stew to tempt you to stay for lunch.

Most of the tourists in Santiago are Spanish and are great admirers of Galician food. The tourist shops near the Cathedral and the market often have the full range of Galician delicacies available, including high quality tinned fish and seafood, Padrón pepper relish, orujo liquor and of course [D.O. Rias Baixas](#) wine. They also sell the ceramic cups for wine, called *cuncas*, that until very recently were ubiquitous in Santiago and now have to be sought out and asked for as glass finally takes over.

The bars and small restaurants away from the old centre of Santiago have a long-standing sporting league competition called *A Chave*, a sport that consists of trying to knock down a piece of iron shaped like a tongue by throwing flat round metal pellets at it. The teams in the league are all formed from regulars at each bar and the game is played in pairs with two teams competing at a time. The *A Chave* league is played in an open space near each bar and the host team provides the spectators from both the rival and home teams with some wine and tapas while they watch. The prizes for each team are all edible, with the winners taking them back to bars to share around. Recent league winners won a goat to roast, whilst the runners up got a cheese from neighbouring Castile as a consolation and the third prize was a case of wine.

### Four of Santiago's best spots for food:

**Comovino:** Comovino consists of a wine bar at the front for all the latest and best of the Galician wine world, and a restaurant at the back where you'll find updated versions of Galician classics like local squid and marine aioli with squid ink and ham sauce.

**Pampin Bar:** Chef Alén Tarrío was a head chef at Paco Morales two-Michelin-starred restaurant in Córdoba and came home to Santiago to open a bar cooking classics like cockle empanadas.

**Abastos 2.0:** One of the restaurants surrounding the main market, Abastos is one of the best places in Santiago for seafood, with a daily changing menu. The recurring dish of cockles cooked in the coffee steamer is one of their regulars' favourites.

**Bodegaón Os Concheiros Pulpería:** It can seem that the traditional octopus bars of Santiago are in danger of extinction as every month another one shuts and another tourist shop, or branch of a ramen chain opens, but in the neighbourhood of Os Concheiros, on one of the main pilgrimage routes into Santiago going towards the Cathedral, this old fashioned bar serving pulpo a feira – sliced boiled octopus served with pimentón and olive oil – has all the traditional favourites.



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