



The complete foodie guide to La Rioja and Navarra

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Despite being two of Spain's smallest provinces, both La Rioja and Navarra have a rich food and wine heritage and their capitals in particular should be high up the list of places for a foodie to visit in Spain. We take a closer look at the produce and culinary traditions of these two Northern Spanish regions.



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Arriving at Pamplona from the coast feels like one big uphill journey and once you reach the capital of the Navarra region, the stark contrast between the wet green coast and the much drier inland of Spain's meseta is evident.

Navarra and its next-door neighbour the Rioja region are two of Spain's smallest provinces and form a cultural and climatic bridge between the coastal areas and the heart of Spanish Castille. These landlocked regions are famous for both their culture and produce the world over; Pamplona's San Fermin festival, immortalised in Ernest Hemingway's 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*, continues to be a massive draw for people around the world and the Rioja region is so famous for its wine that for many across the world until recently Spanish wine was Rioja.

To think of Navarra as simply host to one of the best weeklong summer parties in the world is to do it a grave injustice, for here there is a really strong food tradition and the abundant vegetable crops make it a northern Spanish powerhouse of produce. Most famous are its piquillo peppers - so called because the end are turned like a horn, pico, and in particular the roasted and preserved P.D.O. peppers from Lodosa. Piquillo peppers from Lodosa are special due to their roasting technique which gives them a much deeper flavour, making them perfect for the traditional dishes of piquillo peppers stuffed with fish, meat or vegetables famous in the region.



Ingredient Focus: piquillo peppers
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Navarra is famous for all kinds of vegetables; their specially preserved white asparagus and their artichokes both have protected geographical status, and one of their best-known traditional dishes is menestra - a light stew of all different vegetables served as a starter with extra virgin olive oil. A common starter in both La Rioja and Navarra is pochas - fresh haricot beans which are cooked and then preserved in jars. They are recognised as one of the best ingredients in the Ebro River region of both provinces. Pochas are traditionally cooked simply either with clams or chorizo, although vegetarian dishes using the vegetables of the region and a drizzle of extra virgin oil to finish are increasingly popular.

For Navarrans one of the highlights of their vegetable crop, and a regular dish on their Christmas tables, is the cardoon. Sometimes called the artichoke thistle, cardoons look similar to flat celery, have a soft texture and are slightly more bitter than artichokes. They are often served cooked with almonds or Serrano ham as a Christmas starter.

Both lamb and beef from Navarra have protected geographical status and the two provinces, La Rioja and Navarra, are also renowned for charcuterie. Riojan chorizo, with its own P.G.I. and strict standards for production, is enjoyed the world over either semi-cured as a cooking ingredient or cured on its own sliced with a glass of Rioja red, while Navarra produces chistorra - a long thin type of semi-cured chorizo that is best grilled or fried.

The star cheese of La Rioja with P.D.O. status is a goat's cheese called Camerano after the valley of the same name. It can be made from both pasteurised and unpasteurised milk and is sold fresh or semi-cured. The most famous D.O. cheese in Navarra meanwhile, is Roncal - a hard creamy sheep's cheese from the Roncal valley.



Logroño: a tapas-lover's paradise
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As would be expected from such a famous wine region, vineyards are ubiquitous throughout Rioja and seeing names like Marqués de Riscal and Muga on a map of the region brings home to just how long Rioja has been at the top of the wine-making world. With a population of 315,000, the region produced 268 million litres of wine in 2020, which is about 850 litres per year per inhabitant. Fortunately, they don't keep it to themselves and have a thriving wine export industry under the care of D.O.Ca Rioja which oversees production and maintains quality.

Navarra has its own D.O. and while its production (at approx. 60 million litres in 2019) is dwarfed by La Rioja's, Navarran wine is increasing in both production and reputation in the wine world. What Navarra does have that is famous throughout Spain, is Pacharán, an after-dinner liqueur made of sweet anise soaked in sloes. While shops in Navarra often sell bottles of anise specifically for making Pacharán at home, there are many high-quality artisanal and also more commercial brands of Pacharán available nowadays for those of us with neither the patience nor the ability to pick our own sloes and leave them for months in anise.

Both regions' capitals are ideal places to experience the best of their produce. Pamplona is fast gaining a name as the new San Sebastián for visiting Spaniards who come to experience their pinchos and wine and sit down and eat menestra, the best of their beef cooked over a flaming grill and their piquillo peppers. As the city of Logroño has expanded over the years it has absorbed more than one vineyard, with a couple still making their wine in the city, and while all its best wine is available throughout the city, the heart of Logroño is the Calle Laurel, a stretch of tapas bars that have achieved near mythic status in Spanish food folklore. Both cities are must visits for the foodie minded to explore and enjoy.



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