



Logroño: a tapas-lover's paradise

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The capital of La Rioja, Logroño, has wine production at its core. However, its tapas scene is equally impressive. Rachel McCormack visits the northern Spanish city to find out more about its food culture.



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When you arrive in Logroño it's easy to forget that it really is the capital of an autonomous community, the same as Seville or Valencia. Logroño feels more like a big town than an administrative capital. **La Rioja**, with fewer than 320,000 inhabitants, is the smallest autonomous community in Spain and Logroño reflects that size.

One of the cities along the St James Way to **Santiago de Compostela**, Logroño is also the capital of Spain's most famous wine region; in the old part of Logroño almost everything that isn't connected to pilgrims seems to be connected to wine. As the city has expanded, it has absorbed more than one vineyard and winery and you can still see *calados* - underground wine production and storage cellars - dating from mediaeval times. The most easily accessible is the Calado de San Gregorio on Ruavieja 29, which is open to the public and is full of artefacts and information relating to mediaeval wine production. There are a couple of wineries in the city too, with Bodgeas Franco Españolas continuing their wine production directly across the Ebro from the old town and offering tours in English by pre-arrangement.



The wine regions of Spain: La Rioja
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The most famous place for food for visitors and Logroñeses alike is the Calle Laurel. A street full of tapas bars all serving tiny menus advertised on the outside of the bar, people have a small glass of Rioja wine and a tapa mostly standing outside leaning on a tall table, before moving on to the next spot. Calle Laurel is busy every night of the week but a Saturday night at the Laurel really should be on every foodie's bucket list. The street is packed with people of all ages eating tiny tapas, each place having their own speciality. Weekend tourists from Madrid mix with locals, families with stag dos, while groups of friends of all ages take selfies, drink wine and eat tapas, all aware that they are having a better time than anyone anywhere else. Why, when you can have a tiny inky squid sandwich and move down the street to eat fresh tuna in tomato sauce, follow that with a skewer of pork or three garlic mushrooms served on a stick with a prawn on top and still be considering a few other things an hour later, would you ever want to be anywhere else on a Saturday night?

You can find seats inside if the cold or the highly unusual rain keeps you under cover, you can stay in the one restaurant and eat their entire menu, but that is to miss the point. Moving from one place to another outside in the street gives you the ideal next day conversation of which tapa you liked best and the next best thing to the night before is the argument the day after about which bar had the best food.

Sometimes when a kitchen is overwhelmed and the glasses are still being washed you may walk into a place and start to order, only to be told to wait a few minutes while the kitchen and the bar gets through some orders before they take yours, but no one is in a rush. Unfinished drinks get taken from bar to bar and the bars collectively employ a glass gatherer who knows, as if by magic, which glass belongs to which bar. Everyone takes great care and on a packed Saturday night I saw only one glass falling on the ground and smashing.



Calle Laurel is a street in Logroño that's famed for its many buzzing tapas bars.

'Logroño wouldn't be Logroño if we didn't have the Calle Laurel' Angelines Gonzalez, co-owner of DellaSera ice-cream (regarded as one of the best ice-cream makers in Spain) tells me while we sit outside sipping coffee the next evening. 'For us here it's part of the fabric of our lives and the heart of the city.' A couple of her friends walking by stop to say hello and explain that they are off for a couple of tapas at the Laurel. It's a Sunday, Laurel is full of people from the outlying villages, and when we arrive it's almost as busy as the previous night but with a slightly more laid back atmosphere.

Angelines with her husband Fernando Sáenz are themselves a huge part of the modern Logroño food scene. Sáenz is the creative director of DellaSera and he describes their ice-creams as 'frozen gastronomy.' Using all natural ingredients and creating new flavours every year such as 'frozen fig leaf ice-cream', they have played and continue to play a big role in raising the food profile of Logroño. It's obvious how much they are admired in the city from the number of people who stopped to say hello and then tell me how lucky I am to be talking to them. Both Angelines and Fernando are so passionate about La Rioja that during the pandemic they produced a film about the province's produce, La Cesta, which won the Best Short Documentary prize at this year's Malaga Film Festival.

Over a tiny Iberico pork sandwich I ask Angelines and Fernando how a city can be so focused on the one street of tapas bars, 'people of all ages come to eat and drink and socialise, it's what unites us all here, it makes us who we are.' says Fernando. As if to make his point for him there's a toddler sitting with her family nearby, a piece of bread in her hand shouting hello to everyone walking a pastler who duly stop, smile and reply. 'There's the next generation, learning how to Laurel' says Angelines with a smile.

While the Calle Laurel is the heart of Logroño's food offering here are four of the best for some time off the Laurel across the province:

Cafetería Tizona, Ciriaco Garrido, 14: A recent winner of the best tortilla in Spain, you have to elbow your way into Cafetería Tizona through what can feel like the whole of Logroño, who are stopping by to try the tortilla and have coffee before they go to work in the morning. The cafe menu also has hamburgers, tapas and sandwiches for an informal lunch or dinner.

Matute Asador, Laurel 6: If you want a sit down meal in Calle Laurel with traditional Riojan food then Matute Asador has what you are looking for. Piquillo peppers, oxtail and fire grilled meats are on the menu for a true Riojan taste.

El Portal de Echaurren, Ezcaray: The Paniego brothers, with Francis at the helm of the kitchen and Chef in charge of the front of house, run this well loved two-Michelin-starred restaurant in the village of Ezcaray, about an hour's drive from Logroño. Chef Francis has taken up the traditional inland flavours of La Rioja and given them a shake up using innovative techniques and his own skill.

Nublo, Haro: Right in the middle of the wine capital of La Rioja, Nublo is run by Dani Lasa, Llorenç Sagarra and Miguel Caño, all former employees of the mythical three-star Mugaritz. The food is all made slowly and on a wood fire, eschewing the latest techniques in favour of tradition. Nublo has proved a hit with the Michelin inspectors gaining a star in the recent Michelin guide announcements in Spain.



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