Staying in Is a Lot Easier When Spain Does the Catering

Foodies delight in Spanish wines and delicacies as online orders skyrocket.

When panicked shoppers began emptying supermarket shelves this spring, Brandon Schantz, a lawyer in Orange County, Calif., bypassed at least some of the lines. Instead, he went to The Spanish Table website and ordered a case of wine — whites mainly from Spain's Catalonia and Basque regions, reds from Rioja and Castile and León — and a stockpile of conservas, artisanal canned seafood predominantly sourced from the country's northern coast.

"Spain is producing some of the most exciting and vibrant wines these days," says Mr. Schantz, who first became enamored by Spanish culture and cuisine while studying in Madrid during the mid-aughts. And as for those flavorful tins of fish, he says, "People flock to bars around Spain that make tapas or pintxos — small plates — solely based on the seafood that they're taking out of these cans."

According to Tanya Booth, who owns the Bay Area-based Spanish Table (there are three brick-and-mortar locations) with her husband, Andy, online sales at the beginning of the pandemic were three times what they usually see in their busiest month, December. What have been top sellers? Richly marbled jamón Ibérico cured from prized black-hoofed pigs that graze on acorns in the vast Dehesa agroforests. A broad range of intensely flavored extra virgin olive oils, such as the phenol-rich Picual and the delicate Arbequina varietals. Protected Designation of Origin Sherry vinegars. Manchego cheeses. Cookbooks. "And we sold a lot of canned seafood, stacks and stacks of it," she says.

Spain produces a bountiful variety of cheeses, olives and almonds, as well as globally acclaimed wines.
LEFT: PHOTO COURTESY OF DESPAÑA

Other online purveyors of gourmet Spanish goods, in the United States and Canada, saw similar surges. In Williamsburg, Va., La Tienda, the oldest and largest of the e-commerce retailers, watched its numbers more than triple, with new customers making up 40 percent of sales. For the shop at New York's Mercado Little Spain, the 35,000-square-foot, all-day Spanish-dining mecca created by the chefs José Andrés and Albert and Ferran Adrià, the initial increase in sales was 80 percent over the prior year's period, fueled by paella kits for enthusiastic homecooks. SolFarmers, which offers retail and wholesale from Ottawa, continues to see solid growth, particularly with canned sardines and truffle potato chips. And Despaña, which began as a chorizo factory in Queens, N.Y., before expanding to a SoHo tapas cafe and grocery, as well as a wine shop, fielded an upswing in internet orders, many from its core Manhattan regulars after the downtown locations had been forced to temporarily close.

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"A lot of specialties from Spain are linked to a sense of travel, of happy moments," says Angelica Intriago, who owns Despaña with her husband, Marcos. "Our sense of food and smell and taste is heightened, especially when you can't do any of that and you're staying home."

Ms. Booth, of The Spanish Table, says, "We're all looking for ways to make our meals at home more exciting and to incorporate these really high-quality finished products in our everyday cooking."

The Spanish Table keeps shelves in its Bay Area stores stocked for walk-in customers. PHOTO COURTESY OF NATALIE AND CODY GANTZ/THE SPANISH TABLE

Spanish cuisine didn't take off stateside until the 1990s, when the mainstream American news media began describing Ferran Adrià as the world's best chef. "The world was no longer turning to France for creativity and innovation in food as they had for 100 years," says Rob Wilder, who in 1993 formed a partnership with Mr. Andrés, then 23. As their first project, in Washington, they opened the Spanish fine-dining restaurant Jaleo, which evolved into ThinkFoodGroup. "If the single best chef in the world is from this country, there must be something going on there," Mr. Wilder says. "And then you realize, 'Oh, it's not just one great chef; there's dozens of great chefs.' It woke up the world to start paying attention."

Jaleo remains a top culinary destination in D.C. to this day, and the newest ThinkFoodGroup venue, Mercado Little Spain, opened in New York to critical acclaim last year. "That's part of the magic," Mr. Wilder says. "Once people taste a food — or wine or sherry — that's new and unique and strikes a chord with them, then you win them over for life."

The retailers curate their selections by seeking out artisanal Spanish producers making the most of the natural environs. "There is this little valley called Calasparra where the rice grows very slowly because the water is coming down from the mountain and it's very cold. It absorbs several times more liquid than normal rice. So when you make paella, it's got that much more flavor," says La Tienda C.E.O. Tim Harris, whose family lived in Spain in the 1970s before starting the company in 1996. "The saffron we sell, it's picked by one family from this one area of La Mancha, and all the cousins come in to harvest the crocus flowers that make saffron. We buy almost all of their production."

What I love about foods from Spain is they basically take the highest-quality raw materials — the best meat, the best fish — and it's prepared very simply.

LA TIENDA
OPEN
LA GITANA
LA GITANA

Tapas are some of Spain's most iconic dishes, featuring savory items like boquerones (white anchovies) and mixed olives, and usually accompanied by drinks. The small plates are found at restaurants and bars around the world, like La Tienda Tapas Bar in Williamsburg, Va. RIGHT: PHOTO COURTESY OF LA TIENDA

Mr. Schantz, who has befriended the Booths since discovering The Spanish Table when he lived in San Francisco, often contacts the staff — sometimes via direct messages on Instagram — when he has a special request or a question, often about painstakingly sourced rare and storied bottles of wine. For many of the owners, their passion for the products and culture paired with intimate customer service is what sets them apart from standard e-commerce operations.

“What I love about foods from Spain is they basically take the highest-quality raw materials — the best meat, the best fish — and it’s prepared very simply,” says David Nowland, who started ordering from La Tienda when it first opened, before moving to Madrid and other parts of the world. But when he returned to the United States, La Tienda was his go-to source for products he missed from Spain, including piquillo peppers, jamón Ibérico and Serrano, and Marcona almonds. “You can find the [almonds] that are made in California,” says Mr. Nowland, who now lives in Houston, “but they don’t ever taste the same.”

The wines of Spain are considered some of the most exciting vintages in the world right now by enthusiasts.

Now that many restaurants have reopened for takeout and outdoor dining, fans of food and wine from Spain can seek out the flavors in more elevated experiences. In August, Despaña Fine Foods & Tapas Café and Mercado Little Spain's Spanish Diner and El Chiringuito reopened, providing open-air seating for customers craving classic dishes like tortilla de patatas and bocadillos paired with a glass of refreshing fino sherry, effervescent cava or a chilled Albariño. But Mr. Harris isn't worried about his business. "There's been a paradigm shift, and a lot of people who had never ordered food online before had a good experience," he says. "Those folks are not going to go away."

Mr. Wilder is also optimistic. "If somebody is trying to make a paella at home and putting all these ingredients together for the first time, it's only good for our restaurants," he says. "They miss our flavors. It gives us confidence that people will be back when the coast is clear."

Where to Shop for Foods and Wines from Spain

Shop Wine:

- **Astorwines.com** (US)
- **B21.com** (US)
- **K & L Wines** (US)
- **PJWine.com** (US)
- **TotalWine.com** (US)
- **Wine.com** (US)
- **SAQ** (Canada)
- **LCBO** (Canada)
- **BCLDB** (Canada)

Shop Food:

- **Caputos** (US)
- **Delicias de España** (US)
- **Despaña** (US)
- **La Española** (US)
- **Iberico Club** (US)
- **Igourmet** (US)
- **La Tienda** (US)
- **Mercado Little Spain** (US)
- **Murrays Cheese** (US)
- **SolFarmers** (Canada)
- **The Spanish Table** (US)
- **Whole Foods en Amazon** (US)
- **Zingermans** (US)

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