

¡Delicioso! Five gourmet favourites from Spain

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Tangy manchego, fragrant olive oil, succulent slivers of Ibérico ham, new age or vintage vinegars and sweet, sticky turrón... these Spanish offerings are at their best when tasted at source

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Feeling peckish? Discover the very best of Spain (© ICEX / Fernando Madariaga)

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At the heart of traditional Spanish cooking are the star products of its *alta cocina*. All good meals, be they from fancy chefs or cosy *tabernas*, start with the best ingredients - and those grown in Spain are tended with passion. Marrying ancient techniques with modern technology for sophisticated results, Spain's eco-friendly practices have made it Europe's number one producer of organic food and wine. And as artisans across the country are happy to share their wares with hungry visitors, here are five of the best Spanish ingredients - the foundations of many a delicious dish...



Into the grove: olives love the sunny Mediterranean climate (© ICEX Dpto. Multimedia)

1. Liquid gold: olive oil

Extra virgin olive oil is the foundation of Mediterranean cuisine, pressed from sun-ripened fruit growing on millions of olive trees dotted around the hillsides. Thanks to its mild winters and hot summers, Spain produces around half of the world's olive oil. Advanced growing systems, drip irrigation and environmentally friendly practices create fantastic fruit harvested at optimum ripeness, capturing the best aromas and flavours.

In Andalusia, olive orchards grow on broad plains beside cork oaks and cling to mountain slopes amid pine forests, where the native picual variety is the star. Traditionally slightly bitter with notes of fig, earlier harvesting now produces fragrant, green, fruitier oils.

Olive groves ring Cordoba, and the old Moorish capital is a hub of *rutas de aceite* (olive oil trails), each with its own character. In Baena, the honey-coloured oil is so delicate, you can drizzle it on fruit salad. Cornicabra olives, grown mostly in central Spain, produce thick fruity oil, great for blends, while the sweetness of oil from Catalonia's arbequina variety is sometimes complemented with botanical blends such as orange blossom and thyme, or cardamom, clementine and apple.



Perfect cure: nothing beats wafer-thin shavings of Iberico ham (© ICEX / Toya Legido)

2. Slice of life: Ibérico ham

The world's most prized ham, *jamón ibérico* comes from native Ibérico pigs. Close relatives of wild boar and the last grazing species

The world's most prized ham, *jamón ibérico* comes from native Ibérico pigs. Close relatives of wild boar and the last grazing species in Europe, these black-trottered creatures roam in *dehesas* (wooded areas) on the sierras of Extremadura, feeding on acorns. Aficionados of the cured meat make pilgrimages - to the towns of Jabugo, in the Andalusian province of Huelva, or Guijuelo, in the Castilian province of Salamanca - to sample different styles and tap into the passions of local producers still using ancient methods of salting, drying and curing. Waxy legs are hung in drying chambers, slowly maturing for more than 18 months. "Bellota" on the label guarantees a pig was fed on acorns and "puro" refers to a pure rather than crossbred animal. Nose-to-tail cooking means no part of the animal is wasted: forelegs are cured, hung and sold as shoulder ham or paleta (hams are made from the back legs) and international chefs use the remaining meat and offal.

Melt-in-your-mouth slivers are expertly carved and served at the counters of tiny bars where the lingering acorn-laden flavour teams perfectly with a chilled glass of fino sherry.



The blue note: sharp Cabrales cheese is ripened in Asturias caves (© ICEX / Antonio de Benito)

3. Queso crazy: artisan cheese

Afuega'l pitu is one of the oldest Spanish cheeses and one of four from Asturias with PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) status. In fact, the region is known as the "*pais de quesos*" or "land of cheeses". Another protected variety from this area is Cabrales, which ripens in caves where it develops its blue veining. With a creamy piquant flavour, locals can tell which cave the cheese was matured in just by the taste - the milk could be cow's, sheep's, goat's or a blend.

The semi-hard Casín from Redes Natural Park and smoky Gamonedo also bear the quality stamp of PDO. Such classic cheeses are back on the radar for gourmet travellers along with fresh new flavours. In Murcia there's a PDO goat's milk cheese bathed in Jumilla wine, while an agro-ecological project in Extremadura uses renewable energy to make untreated cheese from the milk of free-roaming Malagan goats. And of course, once nibbled, it's easy to see why the intense manchego is still Spain's bestselling cheese.



Like a fine wine: Spanish vinegar producers use ancient methods (© ICEX Dpto. Multimedia)

4. More than malt: vinegar

In Jerez, famous for its sherry, vinegar making dates back centuries. Rows of barrels are stacked in pyramids, where the bottom row, or *solera*, contains the oldest vinegar, some of which is taken and bottled. The same amount is extracted from the higher casks, or *criaderas*, and moved to the barrels below, while new vinegar is added to the top row. Aged for a minimum of six months, the resulting dark velvety liquid is intensely aromatic.

Vinegars are considered either *joven* (young) or *viejo* (old) and aged vinegars are classified as: *solera* (aged six months to a year), *reserva* (over a year), or *añada* (vintage, aged in oak casks for a minimum of three years).

Inextricably linked to wine making, Spanish varieties are produced under PDO designations made from the correspondingly protected wines, and special techniques vary the vinegar's characteristics. In DO Vinagre de Condado de Huelva, where the white grape Zalema grows, chestnut-coloured vinegars are traditionally dry, but muscatel grapes are yielding increasingly popular semi-sweet vinegars.

Hints of raisin mingle with delicately sour notes in the rich vinegars made from sweet Pedro Ximénez in DO Montilla-Moriles, while exciting new blends from Galicia, La Rioja and Castile-La Mancha use albariño, tempranillo and chardonnay.



Not just for Christmas: crunchy Alicante and smooth Jijona turrón (© ICEX / Juan Manuel Sanz)

5. It's the nuts: turrón

Sweet turrón or almond nougat is a Spanish festive favourite. Originally from the small Alicante town of Jijona, where the nut orchards carpet the valley, the 500-year-old recipe combines almonds, honey, sugar and egg whites.

Moorish in origin, there are two main types - the soft, smooth Jijona version, and hard Alicante turrón, which is dry and firm with pieces of almond.

New takes include toasted peanuts, hazelnuts or walnuts, candied fruit or chocolate. Creative spins from tops chef Albert Adrià include turrón made with cabernet sauvignon, and a beer nougat made from white chocolate ganache and ale coated in milk chocolate. In Asturias, turrón is made with marzipan, sweet apple paste and local cider.

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