

Why Spanish ingredients are worth their salt

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The country's larder is bursting with the finest produce, from fiery spices to preserved fish and vegetables – all perfected over centuries by generations of passionate artisans



Only the best: Spanish sea bream with saffron and herb flavoured extra virgin olive oil (©ICEX/Fernando Madariaga)

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There's a reason the flavours of Spain are instantly recognisable. Seasoning from salt flats, smoky pimentón, precious saffron... the region's unique ingredients, and the care and attention that go into bringing them to the table, are what make its dishes so special.



Gold standard: precious saffron plays a key role in celebrated Spanish dishes such as paella (©ICEX/Félix Llorrio)

The gold standard

Spain is one of the world's largest producers of saffron, plucked from the stamens of the delicate crocus flower. It enriches dishes around the globe and is worth more than its weight in gold. Azafrán de La Mancha saffron, with its protected designation of origin (PDO) status, is considered the best. It has aromas of dry hay with floral hints and a bright red hue, and a flavour profile that begins with a slight bitterness and mellows to ripe grain and toast.

Just a pinch of this precious ingredient is enough to impart big flavour and bring that familiar yellow to the country's much-loved paella. Resplendent with ruby-red peppers and scarlet tomatoes, together they make up the colours of the Spanish flag.



Bright stars: black truffled cod with saffron aioli from Monastrell restaurant in Alicante (©ICEX/Fernando Madariaga)

Originating in the Levant, saffron was brought to the Iberian peninsula by the Moors. The purple crocus only flowers for a few fleeting days in October, so labour for the cultivation and production is intensive – saffron workers' nimble fingers need to gather 10,000 flowers to produce just one kilo of the spice. Everything is done by hand: tending the soil; harvesting the crocuses; separating the stigmas; and arranging them in layers to be gently toasted over hot coals. In autumn the towns of La Mancha celebrate their efforts at the annual saffron harvest.



Back to stool: tapas bars like Alicante's Nou Manolín are a way of life across Spain (©ICEX/Fernando Madariaga)

Crystal-clear winner

Salt or flor de sal is used to cure anchovies straight from the sea and is a key seasoning in salt cod, chorizo and *salchichón*, another classic variety of fermented Spanish sausage. Harvesting in Spain dates back to antiquity, from the pristine coasts of Majorca to the Canaries, thanks to natural ingredients of sunlight, moisture in the air and wind. Pioneering *salineros* are ever inventive, creating new gourmet products like "salt foam", a variety of delicate, low-density sea salt, with light, soft crystals; airy in consistency, subtle in taste and perfect with fish. Production takes place on the Santa Pola Salt Flats of Alicante, a nature reserve of almost 1,600 hectares inhabited by 40 species of birds and fish.

Other luxury varieties include salt flakes or sea salt flavoured with lemons, tomato and basil, red wine, ginger, and even rose petals – often hand harvested on a small scale.



The spice of life: huevos rotos with Pimentón de la Vera (©ICEX/María Costa)

Old flames

Pimentón or Spanish paprika is one of the quintessential flavours of Spain. A touch of this special spice gives a distinctive sweet, smoky signature to chorizo, soups and stews. In Extremadura's La Vera valley, the fields blaze with an intense red from crops of peppers that originally came back from America with the Conquistadors. Columbus brought the first pepper seeds – *Capsicum annum* – from the New World, gifting them to the Spanish king and queen in 1493, who gave them to monks to grow and, praise be, they did a great job. The PDO Pimentón de La Vera and PDO Pimentón de Murcia remain the main production areas today.

Picked and dried on racks for several days, the peppers are then smoked over fires burning holm oak. Wafts of smoke drift around piles of peppers, which are turned every couple of days before being ground into the deep red spice. Graded by flavour, the three distinctive blends are sweet, bittersweet and piquant.

Well preserved

In winter months, cooks reach for canned fish and vegetables and Spain's longstanding tradition of preserving produce picked at its peak means quality all year round.

The best anchovies in the world are from Cantabria – on a par with Ibérico ham, truffles and caviar for gourmet status.



Small but mighty: a flavour-packed Basque 'Gilda' plate of olive, anchovy and chilli with extra virgin olive oil (©ICEX/Toya Legido)

The blue-hued, firm-fleshed fish thrive in the cool waters along the Cantabrian coast. Salted and cured for a year, the anchovies are then filleted and packed by hand into ornate tins, in neat layers topped with olive oil. They're delicious draped on top of a salad of crisp lettuce with boiled eggs and pungent aioli or served solo with a chilled glass of white wine.

The tradition of tinning tuna began with exceptional albacore from the Bay of Biscay – and now Spain is the world's second largest producer of tinned tuna.

On Andalusia's Cádiz coast, PGI (protected geographical indication) tuna is caught by the *almadraba* technique, used for upwards of 3,000 years in the area. In ancient times nets were attached to land on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar to catch the fish on their migration; now a system of nets suspended between boats is used to ensure sustainable quotas are adhered to.

Spanish molluscs are excellent too, such as clams and cockles typically preserved in brine, octopus canned in olive oil and squid in its own ink.

The growing and canning of vegetables in Extremadura, Andalusia and Catalonia follow traditions going back generations. Star products include vibrant asparagus from Aragón and stalk vegetables such as cardoon and borage from Navarre.

In regions like Murcia and Valencia, and around the Ebro valley, Navarre and La Rioja, just-picked asparagus, peppers and artichokes are preserved. And in all areas of Spain, tangy tomato puree and sauce are fantastic.

Navarre's preserved PDO Pimiento del Piquillo de Lodosa peppers are a sought-after delicacy, for their silky texture and sweetly fragrant, slightly hot flavour. Peppers from Nájera in La Rioja are a tapas favourite as are the smoky Bierzo peppers from León.

Bittersweet artichokes like the ones from Tudela in Navarre (PGI Alcachofa de Tudela), with their layers of leaves and flavoursome hearts, taste equally good preserved as they do fresh.

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