WHAT'S THE SECRET TO HOME COOKING IN SPAIN?

From jamón ibérico to pungent, aged cheeses, protected designation of origin ingredients can elevate your cooking to something sublime.

SCROLL DOWN

IN THE FOOD FRONTIER of western Spain's Extremadura, the landscape is beautifully rugged. Hot, arid summers and cool, damp winters give the region's bounty of jamón, olives and cheeses uniquely nuanced and exquisite flavors. Freely roaming goats liberally graze on rolling hills blanketed with the flowers and herbs that lend cheese such as Ibores its unique, buttery tang. Pimentón de la Vera, a locally produced paprika, gets its intense rust hue and smokiness from sweet red peppers that have been grown in Cáceres since the 16 th century and smoked; it is an essential ingredient in Spanish cooking and is also used to wash the rinds of the Ibores. Perhaps one of its most renowned gastronomic exports, the umami-rich Jamón Ibérico de Bellota, is made from black-hoofed Ibérico pigs that feast on acorns in an ancient Mediterranean forest.

Each of these Spanish food products are labors of love, honed over centuries, but what makes them even more distinctive is that they are protected under law with a P.D.O label, or protected designation of origin. And P.D.O products aren't just found in Extremadura, but across the entire country.

"The P.D.O. is an important mark of quality," says the chef and restaurateur Katie Button. "Regions in Spain became well known for specific products and became the expert producers — whether it's Marcona almonds, olive oil, jamón or wine. It's the climate, the terroir and the farming that created those products." And Button is more than just a fan. Her Cúrate bar de tapas and La Bodega by Cúrate in Asheville, N.C., as well as the online shop Cúrate at Home, have played a large role in popularizing Spanish food and wine in the United States.

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Ibores is a protected designation of origin cheese made in Extremadura from goat milk and washed in pimentón de la Vera, a smoky paprika.

IN AN ERA WHERE consumers want to know the provenance of the food they eat, who produced it and how, specialist Spanish producers dedicated to creating exceptional ingredients are experiencing a boom in appreciation among consumers. “Consumers now want authentic, traceable products,” says Summer Thompson, buyer at Market Hall Foods in Oakland, Calif., a luxury food emporium specializing in local and imported gourmet foods. “They want to pay for stuff that is grown by people who work in that agriculture. They want the real deal. Spanish food is food from their land.”

In Spain, ingredients are not only reaped with respect from its land but grown in synergy with it. Doreen Colondres, the chef ambassador of Fermín, which was the first company to import the richly marbled ibérico ham into the United States, embraces the value of the country’s P.D.O. guidelines. “The authenticity and quality of Spanish ingredients is protected, which means the product quality is better,” she says, explaining that Jamón Ibérico de Bellota, nutritionally rich in antioxidants such as Vitamin E and oleic acid, embodies the consistent quality created by strict production methods regulated by the ministry of agriculture. It is considered by some to be a national treasure.

“Jamón ibérico is treated as a luxury ingredient like caviar or truffles,” says María Castro Bermúdez-Coronel, communications director at jamón purveyor Cinco Jotas. At a Michelin-starred restaurant in New York, she remembers trying “a lobster served with the fat of the jamón ibérico, instead of butter or olive oil. For dessert the chef made a chocolate biscuit covered with black chocolate and desiccated ham and almonds that had a crunchy texture.”

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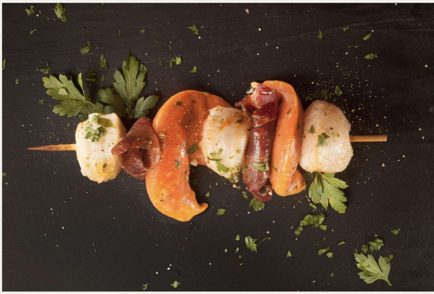
Chef ambassador

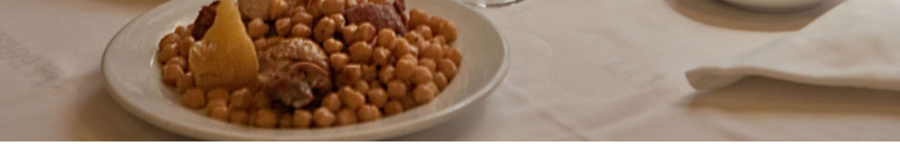


Richly marbled jamón ibérico is delicious served on its own or incorporated into recipes, like this skewer with scallops and fresh parsley.

Cupboard staples can also be replaced with Spanish alternatives to give familiar dishes a gastronomic kick.

Whether used stateside at the finest restaurants or in home kitchens, even a simple substitution of jamón ibérico instead of a domestic cured meat can elevate a charcuterie platter into something sublime. Cupboard staples can also be replaced with Spanish alternatives to give familiar dishes a gastronomic kick. In a salad dressing for example, a P.D.O. sherry vinegar from Jerez or a Pedro Ximénez wine with its subtle raisin notes can be transformative.

Take Garbanzos a la Riojana, a chickpea and tomato stew — a classic recipe from the northeastern Spain region La Rioja. “If you use preserved Spanish beans such as chickpeas or butter beans instead of regular [domestic] canned ones, it is like night and day,” Button says. “It involves centuries of understanding that preserving something isn't just about making it last. It's about retaining its incredible flavor while doing the least to it.” Spanish preserved beans such as garbanzos, or chickpeas, are meaty and complex in flavor, not dissimilar to the wines that have quickly become of global interest.



The difference between a classic chickpea stew made with preserved Spanish beans instead of regular canned ones "is like night and day," according to the chef and restaurateur Katie Button.

"SPANISH WINES ARE HAVING A GREAT MOMENT," says Oscar Garcia Moncada, wine and spirits director at New York's 67 Wine and Spirits. "The wines are very exciting. You're seeing a new influx of producers that you haven't seen in any other time before. Everybody is familiar with Rioja, but there are a lot of new producers and varietals putting their name on the map. Raúl Pérez is the king of Mencía, a beautiful and expressive red grape, from Castile and León. For people who enjoy Pinot noir, it's the de facto varietal that I recommend."

In colder winter months, Moncada enjoys other typical Spanish stews such as chickpea and chorizo as his go-to comfort foods. His personal favorite however, is an oxtail stew he likes to pair with an aged Gran Reserva Rioja or a dry red blend of Priorat, a wine appellation in Catalonia.

With specialty food shops in the United States now stocking a wide range of lesser-known wines and foods from Spain, making them ripe for keen home-cooks to experiment with, entertaining at home with Spanish ingredients has never been more accessible. When Button hosts dinner parties at home, she professes to live by the Spanish culinary philosophy of doing as little as possible to the ingredients.

"I just buy cheese, jamón, chorizo, olives, Marcona almonds, pickled peppers and put out a spread of Spain," she says. "Can you cook with these things? Of course. But they were also made over centuries to be incredible, just as they are."

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> Wine and spirits director

Spain is seeing a new influx of wine producers. Specialty food shops and wine stores in the United States now stock a wide range of lesser-known bottles and varietals.

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Shop Food

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- Spanish Table
- La Española
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- Covap Store
- Iberico Club
- Caputos
- Murrays Cheese
- Igourmet
- Zingermans
- Central Market
- Whole Foods en Amazon
- Market Hall Foods
- Cúrate at Home

Shop Wine

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