

Forget buidings, museums and beaches. Get a real taste of Spain by eating your way through the country. **Adrian McManus** gets festival fever in Galicia

**W**E ARE a bit spoiled in the UK and Ireland when it comes to ethnic eating. Most towns have a decent Chinese and Indian/Bengali/Pakistani restaurant. Thai restaurants pop up in the strangest of places, tapas restaurants seem to be making a comeback and it can only be a matter of time before *Croatian Dreams* and *Bulgarian Buffet* open up on a high street near you.



# The seafood pilgrim





Apart from the good food, these places also save the hassle of actually travelling to Shanghai, Bombay or Valencia. It can be done and dusted in a few hours. A bit of sitar twanging in the background while you snap that papadam, a beaming waitress from Thailand taking that order or the string picking flamenco guitarist helping the paella down, you can be there without, in fact, going anywhere.

The other great reason to eat as a virtual tourist is for the sake of our hosts. The restaurant trade is probably one of the few easy openings work-wise for any new arrival in search of a job. What better than being able to prepare and serve the food that you've grown up with and love to an appreciative audience and then get to eat that food when the customers have all gone home.

In some ways this explains the amazing variety of regional restaurants in the major cities of Spain. You could go out every night for weeks in Madrid or Barcelona and never eat *Spanish* food. People from every region heading to the cities have set up restaurants, so you could eat Catalan food one night, visit a chain from Extremadura the next, eat scrumptious Galician squid off a square in Valencia or try an authentic paella made with *bomba* rice in the Canary Islands and so on.

It just couldn't happen here. Take London, Glasgow or Manchester. It would be easier to find a great chicken tikka massala than fresh Cromer crab, aromatic haggis or rich Lancashire hotpot in any of those cities.

And it doesn't stop there. Each region of Spain has its own celebrations in the form of *fiestas*, which, although many are religious in name, are in fact just one big party. Dancing horses and girls in frilly frocks form the centrepiece of fiestas in Andalucía. Up around the Costa Blanca they play with their noisy fireworks and papier mache dolls, but the fiestas of Galicia invariably revolve around something far more interesting, food.

### Food festivals

September sees two very different festivals in the Pontevedra region. One is the internationally acclaimed Seafood Festival of O Grove where you will feast on the very stuff for which this region is so justifiably famous. The other, the *Feira Franca* is a wild and wacky affair in the city of Pontevedra which celebrates the city's golden age from the end of the 15th century to the last part of the 16th.



In those days, ocean-going galleons plied the sea-routes to *La Nueva España* (now South America) and docked by the symbolic *Puente del Burgo*, the picturesque mediaeval bridge that is featured in the town's coat of arms.

The lucrative trade with the newly established colonies in the Americas, the booming local shipyards, the sardine and cod salting industry, and the emerging merchant classes all brought tremendous wealth and prosperity to the town. Sadly, by the end of the 18th century, all this came to a grinding halt, due in part to the silting up of the river *lérez*, and also to the rising star of Spain's largest maritime port, Vigo.

The gastronomic legacy of that intercontinental trade though, added to a cuisine already rich in farm produce and the celebrated bounty from the coast. Enriched with the exotic from the Americas, the food in this corner of Spain makes it well worth a visit anytime but festival time with food as its focus gets my vote.



### Mirth & merriment

Last year the theme of the Feira Franca in Pontevedra was the *guerra dos irmandiños*, an ill-fated 15th century rebellion against the local feudal order of the day. The streets in the old town are torch-lit and strewn with hay. Townsfolk drape heraldic pennants from their balconies while stocks, pillories and whipping posts are erected for the punishment of wayward citizens. Beside the *basilica de santa maría la mayor*, children and adults clamber around on stilts and take turns at rolling the iron hoop and serious archery contests are available to those who fancy themselves as a would be William Tell or Robin Hood figure.

The whole town turns out for the party, stopping along the way to watch lively street theatre, jugglers, comedians, fire-eaters, lepers and beggars. Imperious knights and their damsels stroll by while leery priests, obese donkey-riding bishops and other unsavoury characters lurk in darkened doorways waiting to pounce on unsuspecting victims – all in jest of course.

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### STOCKING UP

**You'll want to take home virtually everything you get a taste of here. Visit the golden triangle of wonderful bar, funky food store and one of Spain's great fish markets**

First of all, head for one of the oldest bars in town, the atmospheric *la navarra*, a city institution since 1925, and an excellent place to buy quality wines, as the owner Jose María is an extremely knowledgeable and helpful chap. Look out for the *chorizo picante ahumado* and *cecina* (delicious cured beef in wafer thin slices) from León, Asturian cider which you can safely *escancear* or ritually pour from a ridiculous height in the rear entrance of the bar without fear of splashing someone's boots. If you're there at *aperitivo* time at around 1pm, try the *vermú casero* (homemade vermouth) with a *taco* of *tetilla con anchoa*, which, effectively, is a slice of baguette with a piece of *tetilla* cheese and a pickled anchovy anchored into place

with a cocktail stick. These anchovies from *Santoña* in Cantabria, along with *jamón de bellota*, are some of the finest things Spain has to offer in gastronomical terms.

Two doors away from here, there's a wonderful *ultra marinos*, or old fashioned corner shop where you can stock up on typical rural produce like country wines and liqueurs, nuts, beans, cheeses, chorizos, *morcillas* or black pudding and *panceta*, delicious smoked bacon. If you are planning on recreating dishes of Galicia back home, you'll need to stock up on *tocino*, the solid white lard rendered from the prized Iberian hog and *unto*, another kind of fat, yellowish in colour, used to flavour hearty Galician winter broths & stews like *cocido* or *caldo*. This little treasure trove of a shop is open until around 10pm.

If you find yourself in town on Saturday morning, don't miss the newly renovated market place or *plaza de abastos*, for a bewildering selection of weird and wonderful fish and seafood, brought directly from quayside auctions in Marín and other fishing ports in the Ria de Pontevedra and surrounding areas.







## OUT AND ABOUT

**Pontevedra makes an ideal base for visiting two very different must-sees. One a humble fishing village, the other for a bit of ¡Hola! celebrity spotting. You'll eat well in both**

While you're in Pontevedra, it would be a shame not to visit the charming port of Combarro with its sea-front *horreos* or rat-proof stone sheds used for storing corn, potatoes, fishing nets etc. There are some splendid fish restaurants here, such as the upmarket *Casa Alvarías*, the mid-range *O Peirao* and the very down to earth *terrazza bar-restaurant de la señora Lola*, which no doubt has a real name, but most people refer to it as '*la taberna de Lola*'. The *tortilla* here is spectacular, as is the fried fish - just ask for *cariocas*, *xoubiñas* and *xurelitos* - you won't be disappointed. Lola's place also has a strange 'hole-in-the-wall' just opposite where you can have some ham and cheese if you have to wait for a table. It also attracts some of the locals who stop by for a 'chiquita' or local 'country' wine served in white porcelain bowls, which can be filled with either a dubiously cloudy '*ribeiro de barril*', a paraffin-pink and very acidic *país blanco*, or *país tinto*, red country wine, the colour of blackcurrant cordial that, rather charmingly, stains your gums and teeth. Though it goes well with the eminently scrummy octopus, serious wine buffs please be warned.

If you stay on the same road, you'll eventually reach the summer resort of *Sanxenxo*, a chic place with a huge marina that will be hosting part of the Americas Cup Yacht Race. Amancio Ortega, the owner of high street clothes chain Zara keeps his huge motor-cruiser here. Just grab a roadside terrace and watch the 'beautiful' people 'sail' by. If you stay for the evening, there are some nice restaurants - *Marlima*, where King Juan Carlos I eats when he's in town, *La Goleta*, great for carnivores, ask for the *chuletón*, an immense t-bone steak, weighing up to a kilo or more. For a divine shellfish experience head for *Casa Rotilio* and ask for *centolla*, spider crab and *cigalas*, norwegian lobster - not cheap by any means, but an unforgettable experience all the same.



Horreo



Cambados

## Food finding

In the *plaza de la leña*, whole *terneros* (young bullocks) are spit-roasted. In other squares, row upon row of crucified rams and hogs roast over wood fires. Blacksmiths hammer away at improvised forges, shoeing horses and making wrought iron tools. Stallholders in mediaeval garb peddle local foodstuffs, such as the breast shaped cheese known universally as *tetilla*, which goes extremely well with the local *miel* (honey) and *nueces* (walnuts). Trestle tables groan with *empanadas* (local shellfish & meat pies) and all manner of *dulces* (sweet things) like *rosquillas* (aniseedy mini-donut like things). *Churrasco* (pork ribs) and *chorizo criollo* (criole sausages flavoured with garlic and bay leaf) are never far away.

## Sit down, do

The local restaurants and bars join in the fun, setting out huge communal tables where for around 20 euros per person you are treated to a three-course feast including *vino*. Look out for posters advertising mediaeval menus and you should be able to secure a place. *La Casa Filgueira* in the *plaza de la leña*, the town's most beautiful square, is an excellent choice for lunch or dinner, though the secret is to book early. Last year the menu featured roast quail, braised wild boar served with chestnut puree, *filloas*, a kind of pancake, filled with honey and *empanada de manzana*, the local apple pie.

## Looking the part

If you arrive early and want to really enter into the spirit

of things, there are plenty of places to hire costumes. Look out for *disfraces teucro* in the *plaza teucro*, or just check out the window displays in shops while you're strolling around town. When you stumble on one, just walk in, you'll find plenty of people trying on costumes to the smirks and bemused looks of the shop assistants - all great fun. The rental costs somewhere in the region of 20-40 euros per costume. You collect them on the Thursday and take them back on the Monday.

## Nightlife

In the evening the revelry is centred in the bars around two or three squares in the old city, the previously mentioned *plaza teucro*, where you should make your way to *la navarra*.

The *terrazas* in the *plaza de la leña* and the *plaza de la verdura* are extremely popular and see a brisk turnover throughout the day, evening and night. If you manage to grab a table here, you'll be very lucky. Most people get a drink, then keep a beady eye on 'promising' tables, pouncing the very moment the occupants make the move to leave, which all sounds a bit dog-eat-dog, but as long as you smile pleasantly and then enquire, very politely, *¿se van?* Are you leaving? *Por favor, ¿está ocupada la silla?* Is this chair free, please? you shouldn't have any problems. After dinner, your first G&T or *copa* could be in the equally popular *terrazza* of the *plaza de méndez núñez*. After that, it's just a question of wandering around the myriad streets and venturing into those that take your fancy, until your feet (and your head) tell you they've had enough. ■







## O GROVE SEAFOOD FESTIVAL

**To fully appreciate the international acclaim of the seafood of Galicia, make your way to its biggest celebration or, as they proudly say, its exaltation**

Every year since October 1963, the picturesque fishing port of O Grove has played host to a quite amazing twelve-day seafood extravaganza. Or, as the local press describe it, "A pilgrimage consecrated to the pagan god of the good palate" O Grove is situated near the beautiful Ria de Arousa, which, along with the Ria de Pontevedra and the Ria de Vigo, accounts for some 25% of world mussel production. The area has long attracted the rich and famous, due to its proximity to the small swanky, chalet-studded island of A Toxa and its huge, turn-of-the-century spa centre. Unfortunately, this five star behemoth was 'remodelled' at some point in the past, and has consequently lost much of its bygone era charm. Having said that, it's still a fairly impressive place to stay. Also nearby are the fabulous beaches of A Lanzada and San Vicente Do Mar. These huge swathes of white sand are backed by Mediterranean-like scrubland, and in some areas, fragrant pinewoods fringe the shore. The access roads near the beaches are lined with chiringuitos, where you can lunch or dine on *pescados a la brasa* with spectacular views of the Atlantic.

Declared a festival of 'national import' in the 80s, the choice available to the 'seafood pilgrim' is simply stunning. Stalls hawking assorted weird looking crustacea such as, *nécoras* (velvet swimming crabs), *cigalas* (norwegian lobsters/Dublin bay prawns), *camaróns* (shrimp), *centollas* (spider crabs) and *buey* (common crab).

Representatives of the mollusc world include the king of the heap, *percebes* (goose barnacles) *almejas* (clams), *navajas* (razor clams), *berberechos* (cockles) and of course, the omnipresent *mejillones* (mussels) and *pulpo* (octopus), *calamares* (squid) and *chocos* (cuttlefish).

It should be mentioned that large spider crab or common crab doesn't come to the table 'dressed' in the British sense of the word. The two parts of the body are separated, the dodgy feathery bits are removed, the legs are bashed a couple of times in places to facilitate meat removal, but the diners are expected to do the rest, which can be tricky if you're not used to it. The *nécoras* can be extremely fiddly due to their small size. It involves a lot of chomping and sucking on the *patitas* or legs in order to get at the meat, which is hardly worthwhile, but it seems to form part of the ritual. If you should appear a little 'green', your fellow diners will only be too happy to give you a crash course in crustacea handling, they'll probably be watching you with interest anyway. Needless to say, all of this stuff is generously washed down with either Ribeiro or Albariño, two excellent, but not cheap, white wines from the region.







## ESSENTIALS

### Getting there

Ryanair fly from Stansted to Santiago de Compostela, around an hour from Pontevedra. If you fancy seeing a bit of Asturias as well, fly in to Oviedo with Ryanair and pick up a car. Journey time from here to Pontevedra is around 3.5 hours along a great coast road.  
[www.ryanair.com](http://www.ryanair.com)

If you are thinking of some serious stocking up on fabulous foodstuffs then take the super fast Pont Aven ferry from Portsmouth to Santander and then drive through Asturias to Galicia and Pontevedra. It's about a 6-hour drive but you could make an overnight stop in the lovely fishing village of Cudillero, featured in issue 19 of *Living Spain*.  
[www.Brittany-ferries.com](http://www.Brittany-ferries.com)

### Staying there

#### ■ PARADOR DE TURISMO

La Casa del Barón  
 Pontevedra  
 Gorgeous 17th century mansion converted into a 3 star hotel and perfectly situated in the old quarter of the city.  
<http://www.paradores-spain.com/spain/ppontevedra.html>

#### ■ HOTEL RESIDENCIA RÚAS

SARMIENTO 37  
 PONTEVEDRA  
 TEL: +34 986 846416

Great place in the heart of the old city located between two of the most beautiful squares in Pontevedra. Doubles with en-suite bathroom are approx. 50 euros per night.

