

# Taste | *Food & Wine*



The Moorish architecture of Andalusia.



Ahhhhh,

# ANDALUSIA

The Food Wranglers visit the cultural melting pot of food-rich Southern Spain





An Andalusian butcher explains to a customer the quality of one of the region's famous hams.

MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

# CULTURAL FUSION

FOOD BECOMES A SOCIAL EVENT IN THE CULTURALLY COMPLEX SPANISH REGION OF ANDALUSIA

By **MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ** and **JULIO RAMIREZ**  
*Herald Correspondents*

**W**e were floating in a mosaic pool of hot water; candles glowed and the scent of orange-blossom massage oil filled the air. Stars cut into the domed ceiling above admitted shafts of the bright Cordoban day into the softly lit Moorish bathhouse.

Here, in the heart of what had been Islamic Spain, we considered the successive civilizations that had, one after another — through conquest and migration — contributed to the culture — and cuisine — of present day Andalusia. Romans, Moors, Jews, Christians and Gypsies . . . the pendulum of history swinging between eras of tolerance and progress; enmity and expulsion.

At one time, in the 10th

## Food Wranglers Back Roads, Good Food



century, while Europe was mired in the Dark Ages, Andalusia had been a center where Arab-speaking Jews, Muslims and Christians lived in relative harmony.

Under Islamic rule, Cordoba was an urban jewel of gardens, palaces, libraries and universities — a center of science and medicine where architecture, art,

literature and philosophy flourished.

The early Andalusians raised sheep and ate mutton, along with ducks, capons, pigeons, quail, hares and wild game; the Mediterranean provided them with seafood. The Romans brought grapes, olives and wheat and made wine, olive oil and bread. Moors from North Africa, who invaded Spain beginning in the 8th century, introduced sugar cane, rice, dates, citrus fruits, spices such as cinnamon and cumin, and new agricultural methods. Their orchards and farms produced oranges, almonds, figs, pomegranates, artichokes, saffron and onions. Christians perfected pork production and the art of curing hams. Popular wines were produced in Jerez and Granada — though contrary to Islamic law — and vinegars made from fruits were utilized in many dishes. The

contemporary cuisine of Andalusia, an autonomous region in Southern Spain, is firmly based on the fusion of these historical contributions.

While the countryside seems much as it did centuries ago (fields of bright sunflowers, black bulls in golden pastures, patchwork quilts of olive orchards and vineyards), the cathedraled cities of Malaga, Jerez, Granada, Cordoba, Seville, Cadiz, with their museums of priceless treasures, are very present in the modern world.

Summers are warm, and the streets teem with activity. In the old city centers, scooters navigate mazes of cobbled streets to plazas where children play tag around fountains, friends chat on park benches, moms push strollers and couples walk dogs. Apartments with red geraniums

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## Andalusia

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on wrought-iron balconies look down over street-level shops that house pharmacies, shoe boutiques, bridal salons, toy shops, bookstores and bakeries. Street musicians serenade shoppers as they stop — for coffees, pastries, ice cream — at the many umbrella-covered cafes lining the sidewalks.

At night the streets are full of strolling couples, kids on skate boards, fans celebrating soccer victories, alfresco diners and club goers. At midnight we often wondered: Doesn't anyone have to go to work tomorrow? But the streets here are social venues, and the restaurants, clubs and bars — often open until 3 a.m. — are living rooms: places to eat, drink, socialize.

On the way home from work, people join friends at local bars for a glass of wine and a few tapas (small plates). We got into the habit of eating tapas instead of dinner, enjoying the wide variety of dishes and the animated — often opinionated — conversations exchanged in the informal pub-like bars. The range of tapas is seemingly limitless: codfish croquettes, potato and onion tortilla española, poached Galician-style octopus, chorizo, garbanzos in spinach, Venus clams, suckling pork ribs, deep-fried squid with aioli, local cheeses, hams . . . One of our favorites, evoking the iconic bull of Spain, was *rabo de toro* — oxtails in a rich sauce. Another was Moorish influenced *pinchitos* (little brochettes) of grilled duck breast and dates.

Groups of families and friends dine out, especially on weekends. Menu ingredients are usually fresh and local. Along the coast, the fishermen's by-catch winds up at small beachside restaurants. Here patrons line up for plates, or paper cones, of fish deep-fried in olive oil: sardines, anchovies, undersized sole, snapper, hake. Variations of paella, Spain's classic rice dish, reflect regional ingredients: a "black" seafood paella cooked in squid ink; a rabbit paella with rosemary, garlic, fava beans and string beans. Every Andalusian town has its version of gazpacho, a cold refreshing soup. Our definite favorite was Cordoba's tomato-based *salmorejo* garnished with hard-cooked egg and pata



MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

Sardines, fresh, cured or canned, are popular as tapas and with meals. At beachside cafes, fresh-caught sardines are skewered and grilled over open fires.

negra ham.

It's the simplicity of many dishes that impresses. Absolutely fresh salads — not complicated: maybe just a few leaves of lettuce, a ripe tomato, and a slice of onion drizzled with aromatic olive oil; or sometimes complemented with Spanish tuna, olives and anchovies.

Marketplaces are social venues for Spaniards. While supermarkets offer all the usual products urban shoppers expect, it's the central markets where the community gathers, amidst clean, beautifully displayed produce — heads of lettuce looking so fresh you want to pick one up like a bouquet, sprinkle a little olive oil and salt — and eat it. Here, shoppers offer advice to one

another as they select from among Spain's many goat, sheep and cow's milk cheeses, discuss dinner with the greengrocer, and exchange gossip with the butcher as he slices their ham.

"Jamon de pata negra" — that was the first thing we learned when we asked a cab driver, "What's good to eat?" Spain is enamored with its hams. Serrano ham, similar to Italian prosciutto, is good — but *pata negra* comes from a special breed of small, black-hoofed pigs known as "Iberico." Ibericos produce one of the finest cured hams in the world: dry and nutty tasting because of their diet of acorns. And Iberico hams from Jabugo are considered the best: they come from pigs free-ranging in

### About the authors

Julio Ramirez and Marie Perucca-Ramirez, creators of the Fishwife Seafood Restaurants and Turtle Bay taquerias on the Peninsula, sold their restaurants to start The Food Wranglers Inc., a restaurant consultant group.

Julio is certified as an executive chef by the American Culinary Federation and in 1999 was inducted into the prestigious American Academy of Chefs. Marie is a writer with a degree in history and sociology and a master's in applied linguistics.

The couple have always enjoyed traveling the back roads of the world; they are interested in seeing what other ethnic groups grow, what they eat, how they prepare their food — what their various cultures "taste like."

During their travels they have met many remarkable individuals, had a number of unusual experiences, eaten a variety of unfamiliar foods — and collected some great recipes they have adapted for home use.

Once a month they will share their experiences — through words and photos — with Herald readers. Write to them at [marie@foodwranglers.com](mailto:marie@foodwranglers.com).



MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

A waiter at a tapas bar serves traditional small plates of stews, brochettes, shellfish, olives, cheeses and hams.

oak forests where they've never eaten anything but acorns. Cut and served in very thin slices, the ham's rich, dark meat has a delicious umami flavor.

In the marketplace, rows of hams suspended from hooks festoon vendors' shops; butchers presiding over counters of charcuterie stand beneath curtains of these hanging hams — some, such as the Jabugos, going for 85 euros a kilo (\$60 a pound). Shop after shop . . . so many hams; we wondered: Could there be that many pigs in Spain?

Looking back, we knew that the memories of Andalusia we'd take with us would be of graciousness, of people at ease

within their culture:

At a Moroccan restaurant in the old Jewish Quarter — in a room of gold-threaded tapestries and embroidered pillows — our Muslim host Mustafa proudly served Berber tanjins and lamb brochettes, dishes once served by Moors in Andalusia centuries ago. When we asked where he had gotten his beautiful dishware, he answered, "later." As we left, he handed me a package. I opened it to find one of the restaurant's serving dishes.

At a sidewalk cafe, street musicians began serenading patrons with traditional Spanish songs. An 8- and

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10-year-old brother and sister dining with their family spontaneously got up and began dancing — twirling and dipping ballroom style — as the adults looked on with pleasure, caught up in the enjoyment of family, community, music and food that is Andalusia.

### Camarones al Ajillo (Garlic prawns)

(Serves 2; 4 to 6 for tapas)

Large shrimps in their shells sautéed in olive oil with lots of garlic and a kiss of lemon — the way many Spaniards enjoy them after work with a glass of wine and great conversation with friends; for tapas, serve 2 to 3 prawns in a small plate per person (don't forget the napkins). As an entrée, serve with rice and a fresh vegetable accompanied by Spanish wine and a loaf of good bread.

¾ lb. U-15 size (under 15 to a pound) shrimp with shell on, cut down the back and vein removed  
¼ cup minced, peeled garlic (about 1 head)

2 T. of extra virgin olive oil  
½ tsp. crushed red chile pepper flakes  
Pinch of freshly ground black pepper

1 T. chopped flat leaf parsley



**Salmorejo, Cordoba's version of gazpacho, is a popular tomato-and-bread-based cold soup, shown here with a topping of Spanish tuna.**

MARIE PERUCCA-RAMIREZ/Special to The Herald

½ tsp. kosher salt  
1 tsp. fresh lemon juice  
**Steps:** Place the prawns, garlic, olive oil and chile pepper flakes in a mixing bowl and toss well so that the garlic penetrates the shells of the prawns. Let rest in the refrigerator for 30 minutes or more.

Put the prawn mixture into a 10-inch sauté pan and place over medium heat for 4 minutes, then turn to the other side and cook for 3 minutes more. By this time the shells are bright red; sprinkle the black pepper, the parsley, salt and lemon

juice and toss the shrimps to make sure all of the ingredients are evenly distributed. Serve immediately.

### Rabo de Toro (Oxtail casserole)

(Serves 4; 12 for tapas)

Popular in tapas bars throughout Andalusia, Rabo de Toro is served in tiny clay pots. The slow-cooked meat is juicy and tender and full of flavor. It makes a great entrée served with rice — or try it over pasta or mashed potatoes. Leftovers taste great the next day — de-bone and serve the meat over slices of baked potatoes or slices of toasted baguette, or use in lettuce-leaf wraps.

6 lbs. of oxtails, cut in 2-inch pieces  
2 T. flour  
1½ cups chopped onions  
1½ cups carrots cut in ¼-inch slices

1 cup chopped celery  
1 head of garlic, minced (about ¼ cup)  
1 cup of sliced mushrooms (optional)  
2 tomatoes, chopped (about 1½ cups)  
¼ cup chopped flat leaf parsley  
1 T. fresh chopped thyme  
2 bay leaves  
1 cup red wine (Spanish preferred)

1 cup sherry wine (a Spanish Jerez preferred)  
1 cup stock (homemade, or use a rich, boxed stock such as Pacific Organic Chicken Stock available at Costco)  
1 T. kosher salt (or 1½ tsp. table salt)

**Steps:** Place the oxtail pieces on a sheet pan and place in a preheated 400-degree oven for 30 minutes to render out some of the excess fat. Remove from oven and reduce the heat to 300 degrees. Arrange the oxtail pieces in a heavy clay pot or Dutch oven — big pieces on the bottom layer, small pieces on top.

Sprinkle the flour over the meat, then distribute the vegetables (onions, carrots, celery, garlic, and mushrooms) evenly over the meat; add a layer of tomatoes and finally sprinkle the parsley and thyme, then top with the bay leaves. Pour the two wines and the stock over the contents of the pot. Place the pot, uncovered, on the stovetop over medium heat until it comes to simmer (about 10 minutes). Put the lid on the pot and place it into the oven on the middle rack at 300 degrees for 2 hours.

Remove the pot from the oven, carefully remove the lid, sprinkle the salt and gently stir all of the ingredients together. Turn off the oven; return the pot to the oven to let the meat rest until ready to serve. Before serving, degrease with a shallow spoon.

### Salmorejo Cordobés (Cordoban Gazpacho)

(Serves 4)

Amazingly simple and delicious, this cold gazpacho from Cordoba gets raves from everyone. It's essential to use vine-ripened, flavorful tomatoes and quality ingredients; the results will delight everyone on a hot summer day.

2 lbs. ripe tomatoes, quartered (they must be ripe and flavorful)  
3 cloves of garlic  
1 whole green bell pepper, deveined and deseeded, coarsely chopped  
½ cup extra virgin olive oil (high quality olive oil is very important in this recipe)

2 T. sherry vinegar (Spanish Jerez is the best; try La Bodega brand)  
½ day-old baguette (6 oz.), soaked in water  
1 T. kosher salt (or 1½ tsp. table salt)  
½ cup water to adjust thickness

**For garnish:**  
1 chopped hard-boiled egg

1 oz. Serrano ham (or use prosciutto), sliced into short strips  
**Steps:** Put the tomatoes, garlic and bell pepper in a blender; blend at medium speed. While blending, add the olive oil and vinegar; continue blending and add the bread. When the bread is incorporated into the mixture, increase the speed to maximum and add the water to get the desired consistency (it should coat a spoon). Add the salt, finish blending, then put the soup into the refrigerator to chill (at least an hour).

Before serving, chill the bowls and the soup spoons. Serve garnished with chopped eggs and little strips of ham.

### Tortilla Española

(Serves 4; 8 for tapas)

A tortilla is a "little cake" in Spain, not a taco wrapper. Like many things in Spain, a few good-quality ingredients create a simple but satisfying dish. Tortillas are served as tapas and also at meal times. Be creative; once you've mastered the technique, customize your tortilla with extra ingredients such as red peppers, minced basil or parsley; or serve with thin slices of manchego cheese.

2 T. olive oil  
½ pound white or red potatoes (do not use russets), sliced 1/16-inch thick

1 Spanish onion, about 6 ounces, sliced vertically in 1/16-inch pieces or diced

1½ tsp. kosher salt (¾ tsp. table salt)

¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper

4 large eggs,  
Optional: 4 oz. Spanish chorizo, sliced and fried

**Steps:** Preheat the oven to 400 degrees. Put the oil in a 10-inch Teflon sauté pan over medium heat and add the potatoes and onions and toss a few times to make sure the vegetables are coated with the oil; cook for 10 minutes stirring gently to brown the potatoes and onions evenly; While cooking, sprinkle the salt and pepper evenly over the mixture. When potatoes and onions are browned, add the cooked chorizo (optional) and mix gently.

Beat the eggs with a tablespoon of water in a medium bowl using a wire whisk; add the eggs to the golden brown potatoes and onions. Using a rubber spatula, incorporate the egg mixture with the potato mixture being careful not to smash the potatoes. Cook for 3 minutes on top of the stove to set the bottom of the tortilla; then transfer the pan with the tortilla to the middle rack of the pre-heated oven. Cook for 5 minutes to finish cooking the eggs. Remove from oven carefully so as not to burn yourself; separate the tortilla from the pan by using a spatula (it should come out easily if it is cooked; if it's runny, finish cooking it). Let it rest before serving.

In Spain, it's usually cut into wedges and served at room temperate or cold.

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