

# A GLASS APART

PHOTOGRAPHY MIGUEL ANGEL PÁEZ



IT'S WORLD SHERRY DAY ON MAY 26TH AND TO CELEBRATE WE SENT **CHARLOTTE RICCA-SMITH** OUT TO SOUTHERN SPAIN TO LEARN ABOUT - AND DRINK A LOT - OF THIS FABULOUS FORTIFIED WINE





## Apparently, there are eight types of sherry that can be enjoyed in innumerable ways, or is it innumerable types of sherry that can be enjoyed in eight ways?

It's not just that the world of sherry is far more complex than the Bristol Cream at the back of your cupboard, but I'm on my fourth glass, and clearly finding it hard to keep up with all the sherry banter.

And no, I'm not at my Gran's on a wet afternoon – that's another misconception about this drink. You see, it's not the sole preserve of the over-60s. At least, not when you're in Spain's 'sherry triangle' in Andalusia, which is where I find myself taking a crash course in the art of sherry appreciation. I'm very good at drinking the stuff, it seems, just not so hot on the history bit.

### **A FAMILY AFFAIR:**

(Above) Mother and Daughter team Carmen and Carmen host visitors thorough sherry tastings at their Gutierrez Colosia bodega in Santa Maria

The three points of this sherry-producing region are the cities of Jerez, Sanlucar de Barrameda to the west and El Puerto de Santa Maria to the south. Fortified wine is made elsewhere in Spain, but by law it can't be labelled as sherry, or 'jerez' as the locals call it. Coming to this region on southern Spain's Atlantic Coast and not trying the local tittle is akin to visiting Brighton and not eating fish and chips. So forget all your preconceptions about sherry and get stuck in. The best way to do this is to take a tour of a bodega (sherry warehouse) right at the beginning of your trip, so can spend the rest of your holiday putting your new sherry skills into practice.

The bodega I've been taken to is Gutierrez Colosia in Santa Maria, and my hosts for the tour and tasting are mother and daughter, Carmen and Carmen. At last,



FOODIE  
HOLIDAY



two names I can remember. The family are fiercely proud of their business, which started in 1838, and rightly so. It aezis the closest bodega to the Atlantic Ocean, which gives their sherry a unique and frankly delicious taste. Their fino, which is the driest of all the sherries and the one traditionally served with pre-dinner nibbles, takes on the salty tang of the sea. And I mean that in a good way. Served up with a plate of jamon Iberico, I was in heaven.

At the other end of the scale there is the dark, treacly Pedro Ximénez, which can turn an average lump of blue cheese or humble biscuit into just about the perfect ending to a meal. In between these two there is a sherry for every possible culinary occasion, 90 per cent of which come from the Palomino grape. I didn't take to all of them initially (the fino and manzanillo are bone dry), but once they were paired with the right food, the taste took on a whole new meaning.

Listen to me, going on like I know what I'm talking about. I really don't. I just did what any self-respecting faux-pro does; I made sure I had a good back-up team behind me. Aside from my tour with the two Carmens, the secret to my sherry success was my partner for the weekend, self-confessed sherry-holic (aka certified sherry educator) Annie Manson. She also knows a thing or two about local food, as she has run a cooking course for the past four years from her home in the charming Moorish

'VEJER HAS AN URBAN, MODERN EDGE YOU DON'T EXPECT FROM TRADITIONAL SPANISH TOWNS'

town of Verez de la Fontera, just south of the sherry triangle.

This pueblos blanco (white village) clings to the side of a hill, with fabulous views all around. Its maze of narrow, cobbled streets are unblighted by tourism, yet they have an urban, modern edge that you don't expect from traditional Spanish towns. Alongside the usual great tapas bars and pastelerias, there are some cool cafes, boisterous bars for late night drinking and elegant restaurants.

Hotel Califa, where I stayed for the duration of my trip, exemplifies this mix of modernity and Spanish heritage. Positioned in the heart of the medieval quarter of Vejer, it is made of eight different houses dating from the 10th century to a contemporary rebuild of a 17th century property. The result is a charming, higgledy-piggledy hotel that is easy to get lost in – and mind your head. The décor is elegant, but minimal and the staff is friendly and relaxed. But what really impressed me about this place was the food; after all that was what I was here for. In a nod to its Moorish roots, it employs a Moroccan

**MOREISH FOOD:**

(Above) Among the narrow, cobbled streets of Vejer, Hotel Califa serves up exquisite Spanish dishes with a Moroccan influence

chef who rustles up just about the tastiest, freshest food I've ever eaten in Spain, in a fabulous setting. You can choose to eat in



**FOODIE HOLIDAY**

# ¿TIENES HAMBRE?

WHERE TO EAT IN THE SHERRY TRIANGLE

## EL CHOZO, PEÑA DEL TORRE

Great beach side restaurant (with campsite) on the road between Gibraltar airport and Vejer. Despite my reservations I tried and really enjoyed the pulpo (octopus) washed down with an ice-cold (alcohol free) beer. Well, it was only 11am UK time.

## VENTA PINTO, LA BARCA DE VEJE

Traditional Andalucian bar and restaurant, just before you climb up the hill into Vejer, where I first tried jamon Iberico and mojama. By now it was definitely sherry time, and a fino was the perfect accompaniment.

## HOTEL CALIFA, VEJER

Even if you're not staying at Hotel Califa make sure you eat there to experience the fabulous North African-inspired cuisine in a beautiful setting.

## PEPE JULIAN, VEJER

Very traditional tapas bar where we had ensaladilla (Spanish potato salad) served like scoops of ice-cream, with breadsticks and yet more fino.

## CAFÉ CENTRAL, ???

Sit at the bar and order tostadas con anchoas y boquerones (anchovies in a tomato sauce on a toast). These are not the hairy, salty things you find on pizzas but the fresh fish before it was sent to hell and back.

## QUATRO GATOS, ???

Very cool French-run restaurant and bar that serves tapas with a modern twist called chupitos – shot glasses containing complete mini meals instead of booze. I had duck and pea,



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the atmospheric caves, or out in the courtyard garden, which is perfect for balmy Spanish summer evenings.

The menu is impressive, if slightly overwhelming, but luckily help was at hand. Being rather particular about what I eat and something of a control freak (an attractive combination I'm sure you'll agree) I would never normally allow someone to order for me, but I knew I was in safe hands with Annie.

She ordered the mezze to start along with an aleppo, which is a warm salad of caramelised aubergine and tomatoes, with a generous hint of cinnamon. Both were incredible and came with warm, fresh flatbreads. I was already full, but had a job to do, so next on the menu was pastella, which is one of Morocco's most famous dishes of chicken and almonds wrapped in paper-thin pastry, served with an almond and cinnamon sauce. Wow. Annie and I shared this along with a magluba, a dish of minced beef and rice wrapped in aubergines and topped with pine nuts and served with a mint sauce. It tastes a whole lot better than it sounds. I then just about managed to squeeze in the best pistachio ice-cream I've ever eaten (actually, I finished off Annie's as well).

Sitting back and letting Annie order for me became the norm during my few gastronomic days in Vejer. Her enthusiasm for the local food was infectious and without her I wouldn't have known why jamon Iberico tastes so damn good (the pigs live on acorns so the fat tastes, well, of acorns apparently) and I definitely wouldn't have ordered the

mojama – air dried, salted tuna. Slightly weird but very good, especially with a glass of fino.

When I wasn't eating food, I was cooking it. Frankly, it was exhausting – but luckily, Annie's course is very laid back, despite being very hands on. There were nine of us in the group on our first day and we were all given tasks to do. I found it slightly disconcerting that some of the group, American navy surgeons from a nearby naval base in Rota, really struggled with cutting parsley but we still managed to rustle up ten dishes in just a few hours, which included a chickpea, feta, mint and orange salad, baba ganoush, barbecued Moroccan chicken, and almond and lemon macaroons. We then sat down and ate the whole lot, washed down with you know what?

The following day there was a smaller class, but the same impressive array of dishes were made. My favourites were the incredible, but simple, ajo blanco – like a white gazpacho, made predominantly with almonds – a salad of tuna, roasted red peppers, capers and boiled egg, and a very moreish (Moorish?) orange and almond cake.

You don't have to love food to holiday in Vejer, although it certainly helps. But aside from eating there are loads of things to ensure you and your family have a great time. El Palmar beach, a long, wide and unspoiled stretch of sand, is

## EN LA COCINA:

(Above) Annie Manson teaches a new class the secrets of Spanish cuisine at her culinary school, Annie B's Spanish Kitchen