



Savour the *flavours* of Spain

Sun-drenched Andalucia provides an inspirational setting for cautious cooks keen to increase their repertoire with an array of authentic dishes

WORDS BY RUTH CHANDLER

Take seven home-cooks, add lashings of expert tuition, a selection of fine fresh produce, a generous helping of sherry and a dash of Mediterranean sunshine. Marinate for several days to infuse with Andalusian flavours. So might read a recipe for Annie B's Spanish Kitchen in Vejer de la Frontera, an old *pueblo blanco* (white town) with geometric buildings stacked at all angles against a steep, scorched hill on the Costa de la Luz at the southern tip of Spain.

Annie's quintessential whitewashed villa, Casa Alegre, is where most of these ingredients combine in an intimate, laid-back atmosphere. I joined a group indulging in a girls-only getaway, and who shared my desire to escape a cooking rut. Despite a love of good food and years of experience, Belinda, Monica, Jane, Louise, Fiona, Anne and I all lacked culinary

confidence. So when we started our first class, there was a collective sense of relief that we'd be contributing to, rather than bearing full responsibility for, each dish.

We joined Annie in measuring, beating and mixing to create an authentic orange and almond cake, the sweet scents of which escaped into the kitchen while it baked. Sitting around the vast table, we were then allotted tasks, from chopping and slicing to measuring. Against a soothing soundtrack of traditional guitar music, we helped make gazpacho, the refreshing chilled soup that is among the region's most celebrated dishes. We were each encouraged to sample the results. "A touch more salt, perhaps. What do you think?" Annie asked us and her assistant, Pepi, who after some consideration, agreed to a little more – we came to think of her as our secret ingredient. Protective of her area's culinary customs, she shares her inherited

family recipes with Annie and her classes but is wary of too much experimentation.

Beyond the cooking sessions, there is plenty of fine food and drink to enjoy in Vejer. The small hill town has a gastronomic reputation of its own with tapas bars galore offering small plates of local *jamon* (ham) or *boquerones en vinagre* (cured anchovies) and *gambas al ajillo* (prawns practically boiled in oil with garlic). The surrounding area includes the genteel-sounding 'sherry triangle', linking Jerez de la Frontera, Sanlúcar de Barrameda and El Puerto de Santa Maria. Clustered around these towns are makers of the fortified wine, many of whom open their *bodegas* (cellars) for tastings. The region's farmers and growers serve up an abundance of foods, from Conil de la Frontera's market gardeners who supply fragrant *fruterías* (grocers) to the acorn-fed black Iberian pig.

Many of Annie's classes begin with



At Annie B's Spanish Kitchen in Vejer, you can learn to create delicious dishes that draw on Andalucía's tempting ingredients



ALAMY/FOTOLIBRA, SPANISH FOODS PART OF THE BRINDISA TREASURES RANGE AVAILABLE FROM BRINDISA.COM

buying food, a colourful introduction to Andalusian life and none more so than a trip to choose fish at the market in the port of Barbate. On Wednesday morning, stalls in the noisy, tiled hall are piled high with pink, white, orange and silver glossy heaps of sea bass, eels, razor clams, gilthead bream, anchovies and cuttlefish stained with its own black ink. "If I was on my own I'd come in here and walk out straightaway, not knowing what to do with half these things," said classmate Monica on looking at the daunting yet spectacular variety on display, while Annie, bearing a woven shopping basket on either arm, expertly compared the catch on different stalls. She plumped for two large sea bass: "Look at those clear, bright eyes staring at us, their bold-red gills and slimy skin – beautiful." Back in Vejer, Annie showed us how to bake them whole in a mound of salt which sealed in their moisture,

resulting in the freshest fish I've ever eaten, served with salsa verde and salad potatoes tossed in olive oil with sundried tomatoes and lemon zest. "Buen provecho" we all said in unison, toasting the feast with a glass of *fino*, the pale-hued locally made dry sherry, at the pool-side table.

After siesta, we gathered to glean Pepi's tips on the preparation of *sofrito*, the all-important base for paella, and then headed up to Annie's roof terrace with a glass of cava to savour the sunset. As I took in the indigo mountains, knocked back into the distance, and watched the town's streets and 12th-century church disappear into the evening, the sounds of a guitar and a soft female voice reached us from the balcony below: a surprise flamenco serenade. The musicians

climbed the steps and the dancer beckoned us to join her: Louise and Pepi obliged while the rest of us were happier to spectate and listen to the folk songs.

Having feasted on our saffron-scented paella decorated with prawns, mussels and cockles at the candlelit table, we left to walk back to our hotel, entering the quiet cool night not only with the sunset imprinted on our memories and Spanish music in our ears, but a whole armoury of cooking skills and Andalusian dishes to brighten even the wettest winter day. ▷

A four-day Cooking, Shopping & Sherry break including four half-day cooking courses, all meals, accommodation (based on two sharing) and airport transfers costs €950 (excluding flights), anniebsspanishkitchen.com. With thanks to Hotel La Casa del Califa, Vejer de la Frontera, lacasadelcalifa.com.

