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Culinary Pilgrimage in Galicia

The coastal region is considered to be Spain's spiritual home of seafood, wine and cheese.

By Glenn Kaufmann



All across Galicia, Pimientos de Padrón or Little Green Peppers of Padrón are served as a starter course.

Glenn Kaufmann

A great many classic and favored dishes on the Spanish table have their roots in the country's northwestern coastal region. The region is Galicia, and it is known for two things.

The first of these is the Way of St. James, a pilgrimage made by tens of thousands each year to visit the tomb of St. James in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. The other is the bounty of both the sea and the lush green hills of this region known as Green Spain.

With its cool, moist, maritime climate, Galicia looks nothing like the drier arid regions of Spain. The resulting cuisine takes advantage of a number of local specialties and puts a decidedly Galician stamp on some classic Spanish dishes.

Galician Specialties

All across Spain, plates of small green peppers are often served as a starter.

These Little Green Peppers of Padrón are usually mild, but a few in every batch are real scorchers. When asked if they are hot, the Galician cook's playful refrain is always, "Some are hot, and some are not."

These Pimientos de Padrón are lightly fried in oil and eaten with no sauce or accompaniment. They can be expensive outside of their native province of Galicia. But close to the source, these delightful, "mystery" peppers are quite affordable and satisfying.

Perhaps the most famous of Galician dishes is Pulpo Gallego (Galician-style octopus). To soften the meat, the octopus is frozen and then boiled. It is then drizzled with olive oil and dusted with paprika, creating a tasty dish that makes a fine addition to the "been there, done that list" of any self-respecting foodie.

With hundreds of miles of navigable coastline, it's common to find excellent, reasonably priced mussels, shellfish, hake, barnacles and white fish all over Galicia, but look for these to be particularly fresh and inventive in coastal enclaves such as Pontevedra, and the Ria de Arosa area, near the renowned La Toja spa.

One of the great treats of Galicia in general, and of Santiago de Compostela in particular, is a rich, chewy almond cake dusted with powdered sugar. Though it is found on menus and in shops all across Galicia, Tarta de Santiago is the standard by which all others are judged. Often it bears the symbol of a



cross fashioned from a sword. This is the mark of St. James the Greater, who was both an Apostle of Jesus Christ and a warrior during his time in Galicia.

The sword/cross motif is also a symbol of the great pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. That the symbol is used by both pilgrims and on one of the region's most cherished dishes speaks to Galicia's blend of faith and food. It's a union of decidedly Spanish elements, done in a uniquely Galician fashion.



Among the Galician cheeses sold at the Santiago de Compostela Market are tetilla and San Simon.

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Classic Spanish Fare With a Galician Twist

In general, Spain is known for its ham and pork products. One of the more delightful presentations is a tasty starter known as *choricitos*. These small chorizo sausages (or pieces cut from a larger link) are boiled in wine and served with good bread for dipping in the flavorful sauce made by combining the oil of the sausage and the wine.

In Galicia, they'll use one of the excellent local wines, such as Albarino, Ribeiro or Godello to flavor the sauce. It's a classic Spanish dish with a Galician kick that cries out for an equally Galician accompaniment.

Spain is also known for its distinctly shaped tetilla cheese, a creamy, soft cow's milk cheese produced in Galicia. A less well known but equally pleasing Galician cheese is San Simon, a delicious smoked cow's milk cheese. Tetilla and San Simon are often served together at the start of a meal.

While most definitely a part of Spain, Galicia is a region that is climatically and gastronomically different from the rest of Spain. As a result, dining in Galicia offers the possibility of experiencing classic Spanish cuisine, while also exploring a region teeming with distinct regional wines, cheeses and seafood.

For more information, contact www.turgalicia.es and www.spain.info.

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