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My website

A taste of Seville Province this Christmas

fionafloreswatson December 9, 2020 [Education](#), [Environment/Eco](#), [Food and Drink](#), [Gastronomy](#), [Sevilla province](#)

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Making polvorones by hand.





This year, everyone's travel plans have been disrupted, cancelled and generally put asunder, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Consequently many of us will not, sadly, be spending Christmas with our nearest and dearest, whether in the same country, or as in my case, another one. In addition, some of us have restricted movement, making gift shopping in person almost impossible.

So ordering presents will be more essential than ever before.

Luckily, there are several ways of brightening up your seasonal splurge with some authentic Spanish goodies – send them to a recipient, or even treat yourself to adorn your own festive table.

As you are no doubt aware, Seville is second to none for fabulous tapas bars of every price range, decor and cuisine. But venture beyond the capital of Andalucia, to the province within which it lies, and you'll find gastronomic treats well worth the easy drive down the motorway.



Packing the polvorones into boxes.

Crumbly Christmas cookies

I recently visited the town of [Estepa](#) in Seville province, 120 km east of *Sevilla capital*, as part of a trip to discover some gourmet producers and makers. For this journey, I needed special written permission to leave my town, where I've been locked down for the past month or so. It was exciting to travel around my province for only the second time since March. (Another blog post is coming soon about the town's fascinating history.)

Estepa is famous for its *mantecados*, the collective name for lard biscuits (yes, they're available in a non-pig-fat version). All over Andalusia, and further beyond, people adore these crumbly little cookies, individually wrapped in brightly-coloured paper.

At [La Ponderosa](#), they make *mantecados*, *polvorones*, *alfajores*, and other tooth-achingly sweet goodies, which are sent all over Spain and Europe every year between September and December – to Italy, the UK, France and Germany.

Part of this market is Spanish expats, for whom the Christmas season cannot be contemplated without *mantecados*, any more than British people would countenance the festive season without piles of mince pies. (You can take the girl out of England... Extra brandy butter on mine, please.)



These cookies are sweet and light, with a crumbly texture (use a plate – or your hand – to catch the bits, or you'll be covered in powdery deliciousness when it disintegrates delicately), and best eaten in one or two neat bites. The closest comparison for Brits would be shortbread, although these Spanish biscuits are much lighter and more powdery.

The *polvorones* have four main ingredients: flour, sugar, almonds, and pork fat, or lard (vegetarian versions are also available, made with locally-produced olive oil, for which the town is also well-known). The flour has to be dried before it is used, and the sugar is ground to make icing-sugar, for the feathery-light consistency.

It's a truly local industry – all the specialist machines for making the mantecados are also made in Estepa.

The biscuit dough is rolled by hand into sausages, and then each individual *polvoron* is shaped, before being baked, cooled and packed in colourful paper wrapping.

This company also makes *bombones* (little chocolates), the famous *mantecados* themselves (round-shaped), and *alfajores* of honey, almond and sweet potato, which have a more dense, chewier texture. Like many other companies, La Ponderosa also have gluten-free and sugar-free.

I must also mention two other Estepan sweet-makers: El Dispensa del Palacio, whose chocolate-covered orange and lemon pieces, [Lunas de Sevilla](#), are sublime; they have [a shop in Seville](#). The other is E. Moreno, which has [a kit](#) so that you can make your own *mantecados* at home, with flour, lard, sugar, cinnamon, sesame and chocolate, as well as moulds and wrapping.



Navel oranges, ready to be picked from the tree at Huerta Ave Maria.



Seville oranges

Andalucia is renowned for its fabulous fresh produce, and Seville, my adoptive home city, is famous for its fragrant *naranjos amargos* (bitter oranges). You can see them on the trees which line pavements all around the city, and surrounding towns. Their intoxicating, sweet white blossom fills the spring air, and is a signature scent of the city.

These oranges are the variety used to make the marmalade so popular in the UK for spreading on toast, but virtually unknown here in Spain.



Huerta Ave Maria oranges: boxed, wrapped, and ready to go to France.

One of the most important suppliers of bitter Seville oranges is [Huerta Ave Maria](#) in Mairena del Alcor, about 35 km east of Seville city. I first went to this organic farm nearly six years ago – read more about my visit in [this post](#).

The Huerta is the main supplier of bitter oranges to Waitrose in the UK, with the first Ave Maria *naranjas* (under the supermarket's own brand label) due on the shelves any day now. They come in 2 kg boxes, sized to make 15 jars of marmalade; the season only lasts about six weeks, so you need to be primed and ready to snap up your bitters when they arrive.



On this visit, we were treated to fresh orange juice (made from deliciously sweet navels) and bread with home-made marmalade.

All the fruit is hand-picked, and then brushed to remove any dirt, but it is not washed. The oranges must not be picked when damp, so before it rains, or when the sun's rays have dried the fruit after a shower, which is not uncommon in the winter months in Seville.

"Small trees produce large oranges, and big trees produce smaller oranges," explains Pepe Gahona of Huerta Ave Maria.

Pepe Gahona, one of the owner's sons – his chic octogenarian mother is the chatelaine, and is still actively involved in the business – explained about the calibre of sweet oranges. This measures the dimension, with the largest being calibre 0 or 1, and the smallest 9, from about 95-55mm – as we all know, "small ones are more juicy", so calibre 3-5 are the most in demand.

The organic oranges are exported to the UK and France (where the consumers prefer their fruit to have the leaves still attached, and some are wrapped in paper). The bitter ones also go to Ireland, Germany and Denmark; about 600-700,000 kg of these are produced annually, representing 70% of the farm's output. The penchant for marmalade at breakfast is a key element of this company's existence.

Liquid gold



Another staple of Andalusian gastronomy is EVOO (Extra Virgin Olive Oil) – for sauces, dressings, basting, frying, grilling, or just drizzling on toast for breakfast. Large parts of the region’s rolling landscape are dominated by *olivus* (olive trees). Did you know that Spain is the world’s biggest producer of olive oil?

Not far from Huerta Ave Maria, in the next town of El Viso del Alcor, is the [Basilippo olive oil farm](#) and mill. I had previously visited [an olive oil farm in Jaen](#), in the autumn – like the previous two producers mentioned in this post, Basilippo’s work is seasonal. This particular hacienda was founded in 1870, and has been in the family for four generations.



The variety of olives grown at Basilippo is mostly *arbequina*, as well as *manzanilla* and *picual*. As our guide Isaac, the events and visits manager and son-in-law of the owner, told us, olive oil should smell of foods like tomato, apple, banana and almond. Extra virgin means that the oil should have no defects or impurities.

The pure olive juice extracted mechanically – nothing else is added to EVOO, as it is not refined or treated – should be neither bitter nor acid. Smooth, fruity, intense, and spicy are some of words used to describe this oil, with its colour ranging from gold to an intense green.



The six oils produced by Basilippo: vanilla; orange; arbequina; arbequina gourmet (my personal favourite, using early-harvest olives); picual; organic manzanilla+arbequina coupage.

Olives are picked from the trees in autumn and early winter – September to December – by hand. The picking season has moved forward from mid-October, 20 years ago, due to climate change, Isaac told us. The later you harvest the olives, the more oil they produce, but this oil will be of lower quality. Knowing the exact moment to pick, in order to gain optimum yield of high-quality oil, is part of the skill of being an olive farmer.

It takes 12kg of olives to make one litre of oil, and each tree produces around 25kg of olives.

The picking day starts before dawn, when the olives are still cool from the night, and they must be milled the same day, to avoid them fermenting. By late morning they have progressed from fruit on the tree to oil in stainless-steel tanks.

After the leaves and stalks have been removed, the olives are crushed to a paste, and put in a *batidora* (literally, blender) to be heated and churned (the technical term is “malaxed”). This lasts for a carefully calculated length of time, and at a constant temperature, to prevent the olives from over-heating.

Then lastly, centrifuge machines are used to separate the paste and *alpechin* (water from the olives) from the oil, which is decanted, filtered and bottled.



Chocolate ice-cream with orange olive oil (see photo above). A sweet, rich, tangy taste revelation, paired with Tintilla de Tota.

After seeing the mill, we had a brief tasting (it was a tight schedule), where Isaac showed us how olive oil *shouldn't* smell (basically, consume within 12 months of purchase), the desired aroma, how to taste it correctly, and most memorably, gave us chocolate ice-cream drizzled with orange EVOO. I had heard about this, but had never tried it. Heavenly.

Our visit was shorter than usual, and took place during a torrential downpour, but normally [visitors to Basilippo](#) can walk around the farm and see the olive trees, visit the museum, watch a video about how the oil is made, and then have a tasting – and check out the shop, obviously.

For those living in Seville city, and nearby once our lockdown is lifted, every weekend until Christmas there is [a fair of local produce from the province](#) at the Casa de la Diputacion, opposite Puerta de la Carne. You can meet the farmers/producers and taste their wares – and, of course, buy them too. Also check out [Sabores de la Provincia](#) to see which producers sell online.

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