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Seasoned by Centuries

A culinary road trip in Extremadura, Spain

BY KIT BERNARDI



Cáceres, Spain

Mountains, river valleys, woodlands and austere, savannalike pastures of holm oak and cork trees compose the storied landscapes of Extremadura, Spain. About 170 miles west of Madrid, the rugged region is a culinary traveler's dream.

Extremadura produces 10 protected foods labeled D.O.P. (Denomination of Origin Protected). These are **Jamón ibérico**, smoked paprika, olive oil, cherries, honey, lamb, veal, beef, cheeses and wine. The D.O.P. designation is similar to the wine concept of terroir — that the environment in which the food is grown or produced imparts a

singular flavor.

Extremaduran cuisine's intense flavors are also attributed to Roman, Arab and Jewish culinary influences over thousands of years. The foods pair well with a glass of Extremadura D.O.P. Ribera del Guadiana made from the tempranillo grape, the foundation of Spain's red wines for centuries.

To meet D.O.P. makers, I circled Extremadura like a hawk on a weeklong road trip visiting production facilities in the sunbaked countryside. Marco Mangut, an accredited regional tour guide, served as my translator and took me under his wing.

Before heading north on A-66, the ancient Roman route called Vía de la Plata (The Silver Route), Mangut

walks me through the city of Mérida's rich Roman history preserved in the UNESCO World Heritage Site's **Roman Forum**, temples, theater, amphitheater and must-see National Museum of Roman Art.

He explains Extremadura's deeply rooted, culinary traditions. "Perhaps, because of centurieslong isolation and poverty, our heritage stayed intact. Our cuisine is the result of rural towns being very closely tied to the land upon which they've always depended," he says.

Culinary stars José Polo and chef Toño Pérez are natives of **Cáceres**, another UNESCO World Heritage Site and a filming location for HBO's *Game of Thrones*. The two are behind the **Atrio**

contemporary hotel and its namesake restaurant, on which Michelin bestowed two stars. Polo describes the eatery's artistic, 24-course dining experience as "a tour of this land's history, showing us (through food) who we Extremadurans are, who we were and where we'll be going next." What's next is opening this summer — the duo's **Casa Palacio Paredes Saavedra**, an 11-suite, luxury hotel in a historically sensitive reimagination of a 13th-century home. The property's casual asador (grill) restaurant **Torre de Sande** opened late last year serving smoky, coal-roasted meats and vegetables.

Northeast of Cáceres, Spain's only smoked paprika, called **Pimentón de La Vera**, comes from the fertile valley of La Vera's abundant fields of red peppers. They are dried over holm oak fires before being ground into pimentón (paprika) at family-owned **Las Hermanas** run by Alicia López Sánchez. Touring the factory in Cuacos de Yuste, Mangut translates Sánchez's explanation of the mill grinding process pulverizing crinkled peppers into smoky paprika.

We arrive for our tour of the Almazara As Pontis olive mill in the village of Valverde del Fresno as silvery moonlight spills across the Sierra de Gredos mountains on the Portugal border. Quality control manager Ana Isabel Alonso supervises the production of 100 percent extra virgin olive oil pressed from the region's **Manzanilla Cacereña olives**. "In Roman times, Extremadura's olive groves were considered open-air gold mines," Alonso says. "That's why olive oil is called liquid gold."

D.O.P. products are in meals served everywhere. At roadside REPSOL rest stops, my fill-me-ups were cortado coffee and rose-shaped floretas pastries; patatas revolconas, a paprika-dusted pork and potatoes dish; and migas made of fried bread crumbs, chorizo sausage and egg. Jamón-flavored potato chips became my new favorite road-trip snack.

It's uncertain when I'll be back to wing my way around Extremadura. Until then, I savor the region's flavors at home, ordering its foods for delivery to my doorstep.



Jamón ibérico



Manzanilla Cacereña olives



Pimentón de La Vera



Las Hermanas paprika factory



Torre de Sande

FEATURED CONTRIBUTORS



Kit Bernardi is an award-winning travel writer and photographer. Her work has appeared in *Reveal*, *South China Morning Post* and other publications. She shares with readers her love of cooking and road tripping in stories on the quilt gardens of northern Indiana's Amish Country (**page 96**) and distinct foods of rugged Extremadura, Spain (**page 140**). "My favorite stories are about people whose cultural traditions and personal histories are deeply rooted in the land that sustains them."



Transporting readers to Sonoma County, Calif., and the natural wonders of the Caribbean was second nature for travel writer **Lisa Davis**. "Biking Sonoma County (**page 124**) is a great way to explore the area's vineyard-lined terrain," she says. "Hiking to the Caribbean's spectacular and thundering waterfalls (**page 142**) is one of my favorite things to do when island hopping." Davis also spoke with Barbara Bradley Baekgaard (**page 94**), creator of the Vera Bradley brand.



Erin Gifford has written about family travel, road trips and outdoor recreation for such outlets as *The Washington Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Parents* and *Family Circle*. A Northern Virginia-based freelance writer, she was thrilled to explore the natural wonders tucked away deep in the southwest corner of her home state (**page 76**). An avid hiker and a new backpacker, she's eager to take her outdoor adventures to the next level this summer with a paddle-in camping trip to a private island (**page 34**).



Washington, D.C.-based travel writer **Kathryn Streeter** is lucky to be living in the heart of the nation's capital and able to regularly walk, run and cycle around the National Mall. She treasures each of D.C.'s "secret" gardens (**page 60**) and is delighted to share them with those who don't have a local friend to show them around. Philadelphia is right up the road, and Streeter is pumped to share the city through actress Lauren Ambrose's insider tips (**page 54**). "I can't wait for my next road trip to Philly!" says Streeter.



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