

SPAIN

A novel approach to walking the hills

By Patricia Borns
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

ARACENA — In a chapter of my perennially unfinished novel, a young woman in the Middle Ages walks to Portugal from Spain: “They came to a remote outskirt where the pastores grazed their sheep. A late-day sun tipped the wildflowers,” I had written. Now here I was on a dirt road flanked by the very flowers and farm animals of my imagination. Welcome to the Spanish dehesa — literally, meadow or pasture — where life imitates art.

Lying east of the Guadiana River, which forms the Spanish-Portuguese border, the dehesa is a heartland that for centuries tended its businesses of farming and mining, happily eclipsed by



Sierra de Aracena’s bucolic landscape, the dehesa, or meadow, extends into Portugal.

Spain’s drama queen, Seville. Less developed for tourism than some areas, its attractions tend to the odd and pastoral — and as I discovered, the delicious.

An hour and a half’s drive from Seville, the sunny whitewashed towns of Sierra de Aracena and Picos de Aroche are linked by looping off-road trails, a walker’s heaven. Here the hills slope instead of jag, and Moorish place names roll gently off the tongue.

“Life used to be so hard that people drank shots of 50-proof aguardiente de anís for breakfast to brace themselves for the day,” a pensioner confided in the tiny square of Alájar, one of some 30 mountain towns. “Now everyone wants to retire here and open a restaurant.” I think they already have, for besides ancient cart paths, the through line of my journey was the region’s sumptuous larder and unassuming eateries.

From the administrative center, Aracena, the villages, some with fewer than 200 residents, can be reached on walks lasting an hour to a day depending on several factors, including picnic breaks and momentarily losing one’s way. (Portions of the trails have been partially restored and the way marked, but consulting the Aracena tourist office, local knowledge, and a hiking book or map will help.) In the woods and pastures, foragers, who in the days of my novel would have been pilloried for trespassing, were gathering pine nuts, wild oregano, and mushrooms.

“We find them [mushrooms]

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BIG ON ‘BISTRONOMICS’

Catalan capital reigns over the country’s cuisine with dishes that are creative and . . . ‘sincere’

BY JOE RAY | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

BARCELONA — Over the last decade Spanish cuisine has been propelled into the global limelight in the slipstream of a culinary cannonball named Ferran Adrià.

As the chef at El Bulli, probably the most coveted reservation in the world, Adrià builds dishes like gels, foams, and “spherified” olives, creating something Catalan author and El Periódico food writer Pau Arenos coined “technoemotional” cuisine.

For a while, it looked like every chef in Spain wanted to be the next Adrià, creating his or her own gels and spherifications. Instead, the lasting effect has been to give Spanish cuisine a long-lasting adrenaline boost. Instead of burn and fade, eating here has been like watching a slowly building fireworks finale that, just when you think it’s got to end, gets better.

Now, instead of slowing in the middle of an economic crisis, there is not one movement, but many. The brightest of the new is “bistronomic”: restaurants that combine quality, creativity, and well-timed economy, often run by friends or couples, with Michelin-star-trained chefs in the kitchen.

I meet Luis Plamas, Juan Coma, and Josep Casas-Febrer for a crash course in bistronomics at Gresca, one of the movement’s founding restaurants. The three men are all retired or semi-retired locals who seem to devote most of their time to dining well. They belong to a Barcelona eating club called La Xefla de Gelida — 30 or so friends who meet once a month to cook a big dinner and tell tall tales.

“We like to eat, but we like to eat well,” says Coma.

Get them talking about El Bulli and they start twitching and tipping their heads with excitement, yet the tiny Gresca is one of their favorite restaurants.

Why here?

“Hombre!” says Plamas. “This is sincere food.”

“There’s simplicity to what he does, but he also creates perfect combinations and not all chefs can do that,” adds Coma, referring to chef Rafael Peña’s efforts.

When the dishes arrive, the three take a closer look, using their forks to inspect what’s in front of them. They had had a big lunch and asked for something lighter than the offerings on the dinner menu. Peña came up with a “salad” of thinly sliced raw artichoke, Iberian ham, Parmesan flakes, and paper-thin croutons under a drizzle of olive oil. Sweet and salty, fresh and crunchy, the flavors and textures play off each other.

“There are three keys to cooking,” says Coma. “Product quality is most important. Segundo is the combinations, and third, the exact cooking temperatures. If you’ve got all of this, the food is perfect.”

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An egg souffle — the yolk still liquid in the white — with vegetables, cream, and ham at the bistronomic Gresca.



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PATRICIA BORNS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE (LEFT); JOE RAY FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE (ABOVE)