



EARTHLY DELIGHTS

Words by Karyn Noble & Illustrations by Piera Cirefice

A cheese-and-cider pilgrimage to Asturias.

Years before I visited Spain, I sat in a hot and humid lounge room in my then home of Australia, glued to a documentary by Master of Cheese Will Studd called *Cheese Slices*. In one episode, he declared that most of Spain's hundreds-odd cheeses were unknown to the rest of the world - before travelling through the lush Picos de Europa mountains, via tiny villages, to misty caves where he went deep within to taste one of the best and rarest cheeses of Asturias.

Fast forward to almost a decade later - 2021 - and I'm in the very same spot, visiting the principality of Asturias for the World Cheese Awards. Admittedly, when I was watching *Cheese Slices* and shouting, "That bit! That's the part of Spain I want to visit", I didn't quite foresee that I would eventually be here in such glorious circumstances. While many outdoor enthusiasts are attracted to Asturias for the hiking, unspoilt beaches, medieval ports and sailing villages, I spend a good part of my trip underground, inhaling pungent, award-winning cheese. Daylight can be overrated, you know.

Other parts of Spain may bristle at my assertion that 'the best cheese' is found here, but there's no getting around the fact that there are more varieties of cheese produced in Asturias than in any other part of the country (no-one can agree on exact figures, but it's believed to be in the realm of 300). Cabrales and Gamonéu - both made from cow, sheep and goat milk - are just two of eastern Asturias' PDO-status blue cheeses that mature in the region's 5.5-kilometre maze of caves.

My first encounter with a cheese cave feels a bit like going to see Batman in his Batcave. I drive up the misty, winding hills of the Picos de Europa to increasingly dramatic sea-and-mountain views, until

my car comes to a gravelly halt beside a precipice and a square entrance into a mountain. The cave looks suitably dark and mysterious; there's zero signage and just a wooden gate slightly ajar to indicate that there might be something welcoming inside. And while there are some bats deep within, the musty aroma emanating from the chilly, limestone interior is unmistakably cheesy. I don't need my eyes to adjust to the dim lighting to know that there are rounds of Gamonéu ageing here, lined up in what look like wooden bookcases for their two-month stay of maturation. Gamonéu is one of the oldest varieties of cheese in Asturias, and it's a lightly smoked blue that benefits from the unique topography of the karst terrain, and a microclimate shaped by sea mist and fog.

The magic continues on another mountainous journey to one of the principality's best restaurants, Casa Marcial, in the remote village of La Salzar. This is the two-Michelin-starred domain of chefs Nacho and Esther Manzano, a brother-and-sister team who grew up (alongside siblings and co-workers Sandra and Olga) in this two-storey, brick-and-wood building that is now an homage to Asturian nature and gastronomy. Inspired by their mother's cooking, the duo restore traditional recipes to meet the modern palate, with their creative and intuitive genius on display in the multiple tasting courses.

Given the abundance of cheese varieties in Asturias, I ask Nacho if he could narrow down his top five favourites for anyone visiting the region for the first time. He deliberates at great length and, thinking that perhaps three or four might be easier to choose, I attempt to nudge him along - but he is determined to give me five, clearly delighted with the challenge: "Gamonéu, Cabrales, Beyos, Afuega'l Pitu and Varé," he eventually says.

“

*I find myself craving a hangover as an excuse to keep
indulging in this most addictive of comfort foods.*

”

I'd tried Cabrales, his second choice, at a cave I'd explored earlier that day. While I loved its creaminess and jolt of intensity, it's one of the world's most pungent (and expensive) cheeses and not for the blue-cheese averse; I've known a food-judging companion to liken it to “licking a car battery”, which is a fair comment. It's not until I reach the elegant Asturian capital of Oviedo that I start to develop a greater appreciation for it. At another of Esther and Nacho's creations, Gloria, a *casa de comidas* (a Spanish restaurant known for traditional food at affordable prices), I try a dish Nacho invented at the age of 13: the maize *tortu* with caramelised onions and Cabrales cheese. A *tortu* is an Asturian word for deep-fried flatbread, and this is not an Instagrammable dish by any means: a thick, oozy beige spilling from little vessels of bread that look like taco cups. The taste is another matter entirely. I am transfixed by the complexity and synchronicity of the contrasting textures and flavours; the sweetness of the onions countering the creamy sharpness of the Cabrales, the fried bread distracting and absorbing. While a *tortu* is now relatively common in Asturias, Nacho has elevated what sounds like a dense dish to light fluffiness, and I find myself craving a hangover as an excuse to keep indulging in this most addictive of comfort foods.

Fortunately, ‘Cider Boulevard’ beckoned. And how. Along this laneway of *sidrerías* (cider houses) on Oviedo's Calle Gascona, visitors can enjoy their drinks *escanciado* (poured theatrically into a glass from overhead). Cider is an important part of Asturian history. It is home to almost 500 varieties of apples, 22 of which are approved for cider use; look for the green *Sidra de Asturias* Designation of

Origin label on the bottles (more than 40-million of them are produced annually in the principality's 80 cider mills).

My baptism by elevated-cider-stream fire comes at El Ferroviario, the very first cider house on Calle Gascona, which serves libations from each of Asturias' four cider-producing regions. Don't be offended if you think your tippie is on the small side; if it's poured from a height it should only fill about a quarter of your glass - this enhances the bubbles, froth and aromas, giving it the perfect amount of oxygen to be imbibed in just one sip. Rest assured that many sips were had on Cider Boulevard.

But if there's one drink that encapsulates my cheese expedition to Asturias, it's a liqueur served in Las Arenas, at the foothills of the Picos de Europa, one sunny lunchtime. It arrives in a white bottle with the word ‘penicillium’ written on it against an image of the Naranjo de Bulnes limestone peak and various wildflowers. It is presented enigmatically by my host at tapas bar La Cabraliega, and the bottle gives me no clues whatsoever. The intrigue continues as the liquid is poured into a shot glass, the palest of lemon-copper in shade. I wonder if it's a kind of limoncello when I feel its icy coldness, but then the aroma leaves no doubt. “It's a Cabrales cheese liqueur,” confirms my host. “Do you like it?” Much like Cabrales cheese itself, it divides the table. The musky, cave-like aroma is nothing at all like the taste, which is surprisingly refreshing, with notes of white chocolate, butter and toast. It seems Asturias is a principality of many surprises, especially its food and drink - and occasionally both at once.

casamarciales.es
elferroviario.es
estasengloria.com





