



Castilla-La Mancha:

the flavours of south central Spain

In the past twelve years, the gradual introduction of irrigation technology has notably improved output.





Fotografía:
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Major crops of the region include saffron, onion, aubergine, field mushroom, garlic, melon, vineyard and olive grove. These crops have deep roots in the community and sustain many rural jobs. In the past twelve years, the gradual introduction of irrigation technology has notably improved output, which in some instances has doubled. This process of change is clustered on the main aquifers of Albacete and Ciudad Real.

The large region of Castile-La Mancha forms part of the inland plateau known as the meseta castellana. The region's horticulture extends over large areas and is sometimes industrial in scale. Castile-La Mancha is essentially a wide plain, although it also embraces mountainous landscapes like the Cordillera Central (north), the Sistema Ibérico (northeast), and the Sierra Morena and the Montes de Toledo, to the south. Castile-La Mancha has three national parks and numerous sites of environmental interest.



Ajo Morado de Las Pedroñeras is a native garlic variety grown in the Cuenca area of La Mancha.

The climate is Mediterranean tending to mild continental, with low rainfall, fairly low temperatures in winter and hot summers.

The fruit and vegetable sector of Castile-La Mancha has been modernised only to a limited extent, and mostly does not use irrigation, but is nonetheless important at the national level. The protected names of Castile-La Mancha include the protected geographical indications (PGIs) Ajo Morado de las Pedroñeras (garlic), Berenjena de Almagro (aubergine) and Melón de la Mancha (melon). The recently created producer organisation Productores de Cebolla de Castilla La Mancha aims to register a new protected designation of origin (PDO), Cebolla de La Mancha.

The PGI Berenjena de Almagro, recognised in 1995, covers a native aubergine variety bred by the local growers which has been cultivated here for time immemorial in the municipalities of Aldea del Rey, Almagro, Bolaños, Calzada de Calatrava, Granátula de Calatrava and Valenzuela de Calatrava in Ciudad Real province. The crop is harvested from July to November in several stages; the land is watered after every harvest stage. Almagro aubergine is available commercially in three forms: ready-dressed, stuffed with pepper paste and chopped.

Ajo Morado de las Pedroñeras is a native garlic variety chiefly grown in the Cuenca area of La Mancha, though lately it has spread to other provinces of the region, particularly Albacete. Besides its purple colour, the distinctive features of this garlic are its strong smell, its piquant taste and its medium size – each head comprises eight to ten crescent-shaped cloves of yellow-white flesh. The protected geographical indication Ajo Morado de las Pedroñeras was recognised in 2001; it covers garlic produced in 225 local districts of La Mancha, Mancha, Mancha Alta, Mancha Baja, Manchuela and Centro.

Manchego melon is specially significant. Castile-La Mancha dedicates around 13,637 ha to melon



cultivation, and accounts for 37% of national output and 35% of the surface area under cultivation for this crop. Melon is grown, processed and packaged in the natural district known as Mancha in the northeast of Ciudad Real province. May 2003 saw the creation of the Asociación para la promoción del Melón de La Mancha (La Mancha melon promotion society), an association of cooperatives which promoted the present protected geographical indication Melón de La Mancha. The Consejo Regulador (inspection body) grants the PGI label to melons of the Saccharinus variety of the native Piñonet or Piel de Sapo cultivars, whose distinctive feature is their oval shape. The peel can be smooth or slightly rough, with lengthwise marking of varying depth. The peel is mostly green, with uniformly distributed dark patches of middling size; the skin turns yellow as the melon ripens. The pulp is white, while the central seed cavity is orange.

Another standout crop is Azafrán de La Mancha (saffron), whose pink crocuses (popularly known as saffron 'roses') give the landscape a special touch of warmth and colour in October and November. The bulbous saffron plant is part of the region's historic and cultural heritage. Saffron spice is made of the stigmas of the saffron crocus. The Consejo Regulador covers saffron production in the manchego districts





of Toledo, Cuenca, Ciudad Real and Albacete provinces.

La Mancha saffron has a very strong, exotic fragrance and a slightly bitter taste. These traits make it a wonderful flavouring that lends food a deep aroma. Saffron is indispensable to many Spanish recipes, particularly in manchego cookery.

A further important crop are the peppers grown to make pimentón dulce (sweet paprika); the most highly prized varieties are "Ocal" and "Agridulce de la Vera".

Ligneous crops like vineyard and olive grove are enormously important in Castile-La Mancha. Both help form the backbone of the regional economy. The large surface area they cover and the size of the agricultural and service industries they support embrace over 2000 undertakings and 250 cooperatives that bring the population together in the major production areas.

Environmentally compatible farming is gaining ground year by year in Castile-La Mancha. The surface area given over to organic farming in the region accounted for 8% of the total for Spain in 2005. By crop, 14,000 hectares are dedicated to cereals and similar produce, 8,622 ha are given over to olive grove, and a little over 4,942 ha to vineyard. According to Ministry of Agriculture data for 2005, Castile-La Mancha was home to a total 76 organic farming businesses, particularly olive oil and wine producers.





Castilla-La Mancha

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AJOSANTO

The incomparable lands of Castilla-La Mancha are home to the native purple garlic, known in Spain and abroad as Las Pedroñeras purple garlic, Ajo morado de Las Pedroñeras.

The local climate and relief are perfect for the cultivation and storage of this garlic variety: its wild forebears evolved to adapt to the specific environment of La Mancha. This garlic variety benefits from its own Protected Geographical Indication, Ajo Morado de Las Pedroñeras.

As far back as 1963, the local growers grasped the importance of garlic for the area's economy and formed the association now known as the Cooperativa San Isidro El Santo, which produces selected, certified garlic under the Ajosanto brand.

The Ajosanto brand identifies the cooperative's exceptional purple garlic, with a stimulating, powerful flavour that lends a special touch to the finest recipes. Its unbeatable quality is the outcome of modern technologies meticulously applied to a setting of firmly rooted local tradition. Garlic contains a sulphur compound called allicin which has been shown to lower the risk of cardiovascular disease.

Thanks to the use of modern facilities, Ajosanto, genuine Pedroñeras purple garlic, is available the year round for the consumer to appreciate and benefit from its properties, endorsed by the quality marks GLOBALCAP, IFS, ISO 22000 and BRC.

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COOP SANTIAGO APÓSTOL DE TOMELLOSO

On the vast plain of La Mancha, the land of Don Quixote's travels, lies the town of Tomelloso. It was here that in 1971 a group of melon growers founded the Santiago Apóstol de Tomelloso cooperative partnership. Since, the partnership has grown to a membership of 700, joined in a commitment to achieve excellence in product and service quality.

Their main product is the melon, the cultivation of which was introduced to La Mancha by the Arabs in the eleventh century. The deep-rooted traditions of the growers combine with modern techniques to produce - under the special local conditions of climate and soil - a delicious fruit, grown and marketed under strict controls that ensures that the consumer is offered an exceptional standard of quality. Cooperative Santiago Apóstol has thus been the first to certify and label its melons with the seal of the recently introduced protected geographical indication (PGI) Melón de la Mancha.

The partnership produces thirteen varieties of Piel de Sapo, Amarillo and Cantaloupe melons. The standout is the Requet, a native variety of Piel de Sapo that has adapted to the climate and soil of La Mancha. Crunchy and with an exquisite flavour, it keeps outstandingly well.

The cooperative also produces watermelon and peppers. Its products are marketed under the labels Plinio, El Bombo, Yema, Sanapol and Tomil.



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VUELTA F1

Castilla-La Mancha, a region in the very heart of the Iberian Peninsula, is home to Spain's largest onion-growing district, accounting for 55% of the country's total cultivated area for onion. Despite the scant rainfall, and thanks to its soils, hard winters and traditional cultivation methods, the area produces onions of unbeatable quality for the export market.

When the onion crop ripens, the fields of the vast manchego plains, far from the sea breezes that attenuate the extremes of cold and heat, are turned golden by each of the myriad varieties.

Takii Europe, one of the leading onion variety developers and a subsidiary of Takii & Company Ltd, Japan, operates an onion improvement programme that offers European growers valuable cultivars for different sowing seasons.

The programme has now produced Vuelta F1, a new variety developed by Takii Europe offering outstanding characteristics. This is a late-harvest onion for storage, ensuring stable output and optimal uniformity in the packaging line. It is an appealing brown colour, firm and with a good skin. Sowed in February, it is harvested from late August to early September. Vuelta F1's special advantages can express their maximum potential in Castilla-La Mancha.

