

## Carefully cured and well oiled: Spain's tastiest region uncovered

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Appetite whetted by the promise of jamon, Ben Woods explores Spain's landlocked Extremadura region.

LIFESTYLE



Juan Carlos pulls a piece of whittled bone from his pocket and pierces the fallow flesh. He retracts, lifts the sharp tendril to his nose and inhales.

A smile flickers across his mouth. Then it's my turn. The beef bone – more a giant tooth pick – is plunged back into the meat. He slips it clear and lets it linger beneath my nostrils.

The aroma is sweet, woody and salty all at once. This is jamon country, and award-winning manufacturer Juan Carlos is getting me acquainted with Spain's most coveted offerings.

*Juan Carlos of Casa Bautista using a beef bone to pierce the jamon to test the aroma  
(Ben Woods/PA)*



To encounter Spain's food pioneers, I have taken the road less travelled. While most tourists hug the coastline, I have headed inland, driving two and half hours from Madrid to the region of Extremadura, where the sunsets burn blood red and the landscape gasps for water.

## An art to aging ham

To my unsophisticated nose, the ham smells good enough to eat, but it is not quite ready. Like its neighbours – some 2,000 joints strung up by their trotters in Juan Carlos' palatial curing room – it needs more time to mature.

Jamons can be kept in these darkened confines for up to three years. Ageing is an instrument used to coax them to their full potential. Another is the air. Each day Juan Carlos opens the windows at Casa Bautista to allow the wind from the hills to dry the hams naturally.

His father's family-run factory is nestled in Montanchez, swathed in some of the purest air in Europe. Together, his simple methods create flavours worthy of a hefty price tag. These jamons can fetch up to 1,000 euros (£892) each.



*The sign for the Casa Bautista jamon factory in Montanchez, western Spain, near the town of Trujillo (Ben Woods/PA)*

I take a sliver of the Iberico Jamon de Belotta, a soft ruby red meat flecked with white speckles. The spots peppering the flesh are evidence of the pig's strict Spanish acorn diet.

I also try the Cebo Jamon, a slightly tougher meat from a pig fed on grains. The Iberico has the edge, but what is Juan Carlos' favourite? He pauses, smiles again. "It is as if you ask what do you like most about your wife, husband, sister or brother," he says.



*Juan Carlos in the curing room of his family-run jamon factory, Casa Bautista, in Montanez, Extremadura (Ben Woods/PA)*

### **Digging into Spain's breadbasket**

I bunker down in Trujillo, a medieval town within reach of a weekend escape, but still serving up enough authenticity to leave you feeling ensconced in the Spanish way of life.

A quick jaunt for a morning coffee sends me twisting around 16th century convents, crumbling palaces and the remnants of Moorish mosques. At night, its flagstone streets become other-worldly, when a light haze envelopes the town and the inky shadows take over.



*A view of the sunset from Villa Moritos in Trujillo (Ben Woods/PA)*

Getting under the skin of Extremadura's food scene involves jumping back behind the wheel. I take a 30-minute drive to the Roman city of Caceres where I search out Leosetin, an olive oil merchant boasting a few gongs for its locally-produced wares.

The trick to tasting, I am told, is to put the tip of your tongue against your top teeth while allowing the oil to ooze towards the back of your mouth. Leosetin's extra virgin variety is buttery and soft, leaving a peppery sensation flitting in your throat.



*A statue in the Roman town of Caceres (Ben Woods/PA)*

An hour later, I head deeper into the city to seek out the two Michelin star restaurant, [Atrio](#). The thought of a plate of refined Spanish tapas kicks my appetite into gear, but I am not here to sample the food.

I am guided to an elevator at the fringes of the restaurant, which sends me sinking towards Atrio's richly-resourced wine cellar. Here, Chateau d'Yquem's rub shoulders with Chateau Margaux. The vintages in this vast vault are presented like royalty lying in state.



*The wine cellar of the two Michelin star restaurant, Atrio, in Caceres (Ben Woods/PA)*

## A blood-soaked history

The following day I spend some time getting to know Trujillo. Its roots reach back to the Roman period, but it was dominated by the Arabs for five centuries before the Christians seized control in 1232.

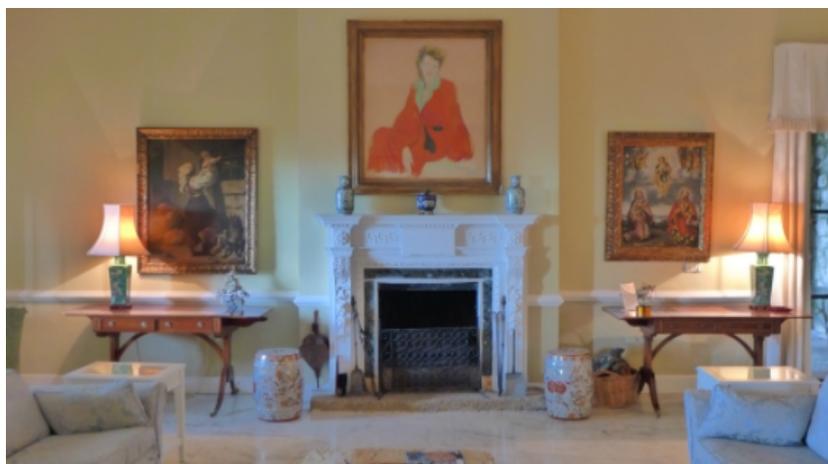
Picking my way up towards the castle, it's easy to understand why the town was fiercely fought over. On the ramparts, the landscape unfurls into a 360-degree vista, barely broken by the surrounding mountains.

As a traveller, it is sight to behold. As a soldier, its strategic importance is plain to see. Standing on these lofty walls, you could easily spot the sun glinting off enemy armour, or the dust swilling up from incoming cavalry.



## Trujillo's greatest son

Come the afternoon, we are exploring Trujillo's other historic marvel, the conquistadors. I'm already getting into the spirit of things by staying at a former conquistador's mansion, **Villa Moritos**, which is within striking distance of the ancestral home of Trujillo's greatest son, Francisco Pizarro.



*The living room of Villa Moritos in Trujillo (Ben Woods/PA)*

With little hope of inheriting wealth and amid a bitter famine, Pizarro left Trujillo to embark on several risky expeditions in the early 16th century – one of which eventually culminated in conquering Peru. His presence, and the exploits of his soldiers, are seared into the skin of Trujillo.

But even if that passes you by, a hulking six and a half tonne statue of the great man punctuates the town's main square. Bestride his whinnying steed, the legendary conquistador keeps an eye on today's travellers, including the thousands that descend on Trujillo for the annual cheese festival in the spring. I am told the smell is just as enticing as Juan Carlos' jamons.



*The statue of Francisco Pizarro in Trujillo's square (Ben Woods/PA)*

### **How to get there**

A stay in Villa Moritos costs from £2,145 to £2,750 per week, sleeping eight people. A stay in the Artists Studio costs £595 per week, sleeping two people, plus a sofa bed. Book through Trujillo Villas ([trujillovillasespana.com](http://trujillovillasespana.com)).