

EXPAT

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Remember Guernsey's late, lamented market? Now imagine it three times the size - with baubles on, if you like. In Spain, where people still shop daily for their food, markets thrive and are thronged by people with a fond respect for fresh local produce. And that includes expat **Andy Chapell**

Oranges? They're not the only fruit...

AH, THE old days. The days when the sun shone all summer long in Guernsey and there were tea baskets with buttered scones on the beach.

In the Markets, there were the plumpest, firmest and sweetest Cannon Hall grapes nestling in purple tissue paper and in the Fish Market, the rich, sweet smell of cooking shellfish was just irresistible.

And could animal fat really be that yellow – as displayed on the beef carcasses hanging above the sawdusted floors?

My grandparents' fruit and veg stall was at the top end of the Lower Market and forays into the upper halls were always exciting adventures.

Are those formative memories the reason why good markets still hold such a fascination for me? If you are ever in Barcelona, the fresh produce market, La Boqueria, right on the Ramblas, is mind-boggling in its extent and celebration of all things fresh and basically delicious. You're bound to come away having sampled or purchased something to enjoy on the hoof as you wander the theatre of life that is on offer in the vibrant city centre.

In Andalucia, Ms Expat has recently been to Málaga city centre – a very undervalued destination if ever there was one – and apart from being excited by its museums, galleries, shops and restaurants, she returned enthusing about the extensive covered market to be found near the centre.

She discovered the very best of local produce on offer from vendors who really know their wares. Explanations are generously offered as to the subtle differences between fourteen types of orange on offer on one stall, or just the right kind of squid to buy according to the desired final dish.

Today, as I write, we have returned from a visit to Cadiz's recently restored central market. Quite extraordinary. Dozens of meat counters, similar numbers of cold meat and charcuterie outlets, home-made croquettes with various fillings to be tried, sausages of all types, and cheeses from the local villages and mountains. Other stands sell nothing but olives and a Del-Boy-like character is purveying his wares with such delight that you have to buy some, having tried six or seven different varieties.

The enthusiasm for the fare is infectious and educational. With a little Spanish, you can become an olive authority in



A Spanish market is a thing of beauty, with all manner of fresh local produce sold by enthusiastic and knowledgeable vendors.

next to no time... and we won't even discuss how cheap they are.

There is a fond respect here for things that are grown in your own province and we are drawn, like many others, to a stall piled high with the gentle oranges and browns of wild mushrooms. These have been harvested in the sierras of Cadiz, from the forests of cork oak trees that carpet the mountainsides near towns with names like Jimena de la Frontera and Alcala de los Gazules. Garlic and olive oil are all that is needed to enjoy these beauties grilled. We succumb, and stash half a kilo.

Payoyo sheep's cheese, from the area of Grazalema and now to be found in the Harrods food hall, is also on offer but this is a regular feature of our hotel menu so we resist on this occasion. But Cadiz is a port and fish is the star of the show.

How many places are there to buy fresh seafood in Guernsey in 2014? I don't think you'd need more than the fingers of one hand. It's going to sound as though I am exaggerating, but just in the market alone, there are at least 80 stalls. It's fresh, it's varied, it's beautifully displayed, it's amazing. Most varieties we recognise after 28 years of Andalucian life, but there are still surprises. Line-caught vivid yellow and mellow brown eels, not as scary as a full-blown Guernsey conger but still impressive, are displayed alongside a fish of such orange intensity that it feels as though someone has spilt fluorescent paint by mistake. Swordfish, beasts of nearly two metres in length, proudly show their defensive prowess alongside members of the shark family with triple rows of serrated teeth for all to see. Out of respect for the raw material, I feel clear that all this seafood should be eaten on the day of purchase. Sadly, we already have our evening meal arranged, but we still cannot resist some goose barnacles – percebes in Spanish – to make an impromptu snack. I've never eaten them before but their reputation goes before them as one of the real delights of the marine harvest. The stallholder explains to me twice how to cook them – boiling salted water to your taste, add the shells and once the water returns to the boil, one minute's cooking is enough. Snap off and discard the nail of what looks like a child's finger, albeit a speckled black one, and suck the flesh. The taste is sublime – the sea distilled into a meaty digit with that chilled fino. Now for those mushrooms ...

So markets here are really flourishing, but why? The big supermarkets are already here and widespread, and their advertising budgets are enormous, but their market share is still not that great. Many

people prefer to buy freshly, locally and regularly. There is a suspicion – quite rightly in my opinion – that all the factory processing does nothing to improve the final product. Better to prepare food from raw ingredients and know exactly what you are consuming. It helps, at least as far as preserving skills and traditions are concerned, that an older generation did not expect women to work outside the home and even now, access to a vehicle may be restricting the choice of locations to shop. Purchasing locally was the norm, and time was, and still is, made to prepare food.

Home cooking is a source of huge pride for all social classes and valued above the quick fix of the microwave. Living in flats and apartments means that the Spanish are close to these central market places, too, and it may be easier to go to the corner market than trek to a bigger but more distant superstore.

And there is also a great confidence among people as to what they want to eat, coupled with huge pleasure gained from the quality of the food. Many do not want to see produce in film-wrapped polystyrene trays, filleted and bloodless. They want a fish with eyes, so that you can see how fresh it is, a wild rabbit cut up before them so that they are more in contact with the whole process of choice and survival. And tasty vegetables covered in mud and funny shapes are valued above a shiny clone. I heartily concur.

Goose barnacles are a real delight of the marine harvest.

