



# Food & Drink IN ALMIERÍA — & MURCIA —

Written by Kavita Favelle Images by Kavita Favelle, iStock

Spain is a perennially popular travel destination, attracting visitors keen to explore its gastronomy, as well as its glorious beaches



**The neighbouring regions of Almería and Murcia lie along Spain's sunny southeast coast. Blessed with an excellent climate, the local cuisine reflects the abundance of fresh produce, supplemented by locally-reared meat and fish from the Mediterranean.**

#### **AJO COLORAO**

Typical of the Almerían kitchens, this fish stew is made with mashed potatoes, garlic, dried peppers, and cumin, and is usually served with fried cornmeal buns.

#### **ALCACHOFAS DE LA ABUELA**

'Grandmother's artichokes' may not look very promising dish on the plate, but they are much-loved in Murcia; not least for the delicious sauce. Fresh artichokes are peeled to reveal the heart, fried in olive oil, and then cooked in wine and stock until tender. This cooking liquor is thickened with flour and served over the halved artichoke hearts, with toasted pinenuts scattered on top.

#### **ARROZ CALDERO AND OTHER RICE DISHES**

Originating in Mar Menor, arroz caldero is named for the cauldrons it was once cooked in and has its roots in the nineteenth-century fishing community. Fishermen would cook themselves simple and hearty rice stews, adding the least-profitable fish from their catch. Core ingredients are rice, tomatoes, capsicum and fish, with paprika and ñora peppers added for smokiness. Today, the fish is usually served separate from the rice.

#### **BONITO CON TOMATE**

Like tuna, bonito is a popular fish, abundant in

Mediterranean waters. Smoked or salt-cured bonito is paired with fresh raw tomatoes and olive oil, and the dish is also made using tuna and cod.

#### **CARNE A LA BRASA**

Along with fish and seafood, grilled meats are at the heart of most traditional meals. Lamb and goat are particularly popular, often served with potato dishes like Murcian favourite 'patatas al ajo cabañil' (cooked with garlic and a hint of vinegar).

#### **CALAMARES EN SU TINTA**

This simple dish of squid cooked in its own ink doesn't boast the most appetising appearance; however the freshness of garlic-and-ink-enriched seafood is a delicious treat. A similar dish made with chipirones – whole baby squid – often has broad beans added.

#### **GAZPACHO**

Originating in Andalucía (of which Almería is the most eastern province), this simple bread soup has been the subject of many jokes about it being served cold; a most welcome aspect during the heat of summer. The colour depends on which vegetables are added – plain versions are white, red ones have lots of fresh tomato, and green gazpachos are flavoured with fresh herbs.

#### **GURULLOS**

Gurullos is a small-sized pasta typical of Almería, shaped by rolling the dough into thin cords and pinching off little pieces. It is often used in hearty dishes such as gurullos con conejo (with rabbit) or in vegetable broths with beans or chickpeas.

### MATRIMONIO ANCHOA Y BOQUERÓN

The combination of anchoa (brined anchovies) and boquerón (vinegar-cured anchovies) is indeed a marriage made in heaven, and a typical Murcian bar snack. Though you'll sometimes see matrimonio on toast or with slices of grilled red pepper, it's often served simply on its own.

### PAPARAJOTE

This simple fried sweet is emblematic of Murcian pastries, originally introduced to the region by Arab invaders and now associated with spring festivals. Aromatic lemon leaves are dipped into a flour and egg batter, deep fried and dusted with sugar and cinnamon. Don't let locals trick you into eating the inedible leaf – it is intended only to give a lemon-scented flavouring to the crispy coating and is pulled out from the batter and discarded.

### PULPO A LA MURCIANA

In Murcia, octopus meat is cooked long and slow – baked in an oven with wine, peppercorns, garlic, and bay leaves – until it's beautifully tender and full of flavour; a good few hours are needed. It's served chopped into pieces and drizzled with lemon juice and olive oil.

### SOPA MORUNA

This soup is an Almerían version of the Moroccan dish harira and, similarly, it has a meat-and-vegetable base with lentils, garlic, coriander, and saffron also added.

### TABERNEO DE ALMERIA AND PISTO MURCIANO

A variation on ratatouille, the Almerían stew of onion, capsicum and tomato often has a little chilli for extra kick and is served on its own as a starter, in sandwiches, or with salted cod added to make a more substantial dish. In Murcia, look for pisto, which adds aubergine to the basic mix of vegetables – beaten egg is commonly added shortly before the pan is taken off the heat.

### TOCINO DE CIELO

This caramel cream dessert is a regional variation of Spanish flan, the key difference being that it uses only egg yolks rather than whole eggs, owing to origins in Jerez, eastern Andalusia. Local wineries used egg whites to clarify their wine, donating leftover egg yolks to a nuns at a nearby convent, where they were put to good use in this rich, yellow flan. Confusingly, the dish has come to be known as 'tocino de cielo' ('heavenly bacon') despite there being none in the dish; it's likely a contraction of the original name 'tocinillo de cielo' ('heavenly pudding').

### VERDURAS A LA PLANCHA

Grilled vegetables may not sound very exciting, but when you visit a region known as the vegetable basket of Europe, it's the perfect way to enjoy very fresh and high-quality local produce. Sliced, oiled and thrown on a hot griddle, beautifully-charred vegetables are arranged on large platters to be served a starter or later in the meal alongside fish and meat dishes.



# FIVE FEASTS FOR THE EYES IN MURCIA

### LA FORTALEZA DEL SOL

One of the largest castles in Spain, the mediaeval fortress in Lorca was constructed between the ninth and fifteenth centuries as a key defensive hold against Moorish invasions.

### MAR MENOR

A salt-water lagoon separated from the Mediterranean by a twenty two kilometre sandbank, Mar Menor has been a resort destination since Phoenician times. The wetlands to the north are preserved within a conservation sanctuary.

### REAL CASINO DE MURCIA

Take a step back in time at this beautifully renovated eighteenth-century social club in Murcia city.

### ROMAN THEATRE OF CARTAGENA

Enter via the informative museum to learn more about this impressive Roman theatre before viewing the restored remains.

### SANTA MARIA CATHEDRAL OF MURCIA

Although construction started in the fourteenth century, the cathedral was expanded in the eighteenth century, the reason for the mix of architectural styles of the exterior. Inside, the style is predominantly gothic.

# WHAT NOT TO MISS IN ALMERÍA



## ALCAZABA

Spilling down an arid hillside, the Alcazaba is an extensive walled fortress built in the tenth century by the caliphate of Al-Andalus – a beautiful example of Moorish military architecture.

## CABO DE GATA-NIJAR NATURAL PARK

Especially popular in the summer, when sea breezes and mountain shade offer welcome respite, this park offers beautiful views of the sea. The extensive El Albardinal botanical gardens are nearby.

## CUEVA DE LOS LETREROS

Just south of Vélez Blanco, look for signs to these ‘caves of the signs’ featuring archeologically significant cave paintings made between 6000 and 3500BC. Contact the Vélez Blanco visitors office to arrange a visit and check out the local castle while you are there.

## GUITAR MUSEUM

One for music-lovers, this new museum in Almería relates the history and manufacture of this classic instrument while also celebrating local guitar-maker Antonio de Torres.

## MUSEO REFUGIO DE LA GUERRA CIVIL

This museum is a stark reminder of the horrors of the Spanish Civil War, during which Almería was the last Republican holdout and kilometres of concrete refuge tunnels were built beneath the city.

