

Liquid gold

Kate Goldstein explores the roots of horchata



The legend of what is perhaps Spain's most famous non-alcoholic beverage goes back to sometime in the 13th century. King Jaume I of Aragón was served a sweet milky drink by a young girl. "What is this?" he asked (*¿Qué es això?*). "It's chufa milk," she responded (*Es llet de chufa*). To which he exclaimed, "This is not milk, this is gold, darling!" (*Això no es llet, això es or, xata!*).

And so today we call this drink horchata, or *orxata* where Catalán or Valenciano is spoken. Horchata is a cool, cream-coloured drink, which tastes like a sweet, nutty milk, and is best enjoyed in the warmer months in a tall glass, preferably while one is seated on a *terrazza*. True to the Spanish tradition of dunking things in drinks, one can often buy *farçons* - elongated, light pastries dusted with sugar - to dip in the refreshment.

Horchata is made from the chufa (*Cyperus esculentus*), a diminutive tuber originally grown in ancient Egypt. Ever since the Arabs introduced the chufa to Spain, the fertile fields of Valencia have been home to its cultivation. In fact, the chufa has become so important that it has its own regulating council for the "guarantee of origin" (*denominación de origen*—D.O.), much like Rioja wines or sherry.

Horchata production begins, then, with the planting of the chufa, which occurs in April or May. Above ground, the plant sprouts green grass-like stalks, which grow quite long and dry by the end of season. Below ground, a tangle of roots develops, and among them, the nut-like chufas. In November the chufa fields are burnt, clearing the grassy stalks and leaving the roots and chufas intact. A machine then comes in, turning the earth and bringing out the chufas, which are separated from the roots and other matter. The chufas are then washed and left to dry out for a period of two months, during which they must be in a place with proper ventilation and turned over twice daily.

When the chufas are dried, they are sorted on a conveyor belt before being placed in sacks. At this point, the chufa resembles a light brown, hard raisin and has a sweet, nutty taste. For

horchata production, the chufas are washed again, and soaked for 10 to 12 hours before being washed another time. Finally, they are ground in a mill with water and strained before sugar is added and the whole mixture is stirred in a refrigerated machine.

José Luis Monrós, who runs his family's horchatería in Madrid, says they use around 5 or 6,000 kilos of chufas a year. About 20 kilos of the tubers go into production of just 100 litres of horchata. Monrós is originally from Alboraya, a town just north of Valencia, and one of the principle producers of chufas. It is one of the 16 towns that form part of *L'Horta Nord* (the northern garden) of Valencia and are the only places where D.O. chufas are produced. Monrós's grandparents grew chufas, and his parents moved to Madrid to open their horchatería in 1980.

Traditionally made horchata is really a special treat but, as with many food products, industrially produced horchata lines many supermarket shelves and is served in bars. According to Monrós, the companies that produce this horchata grow the chufas in Algeria and dry them very quickly with heat, rather than allowing the necessary two months to dry. "The chufas are very big," he says, "and not as sweet as the ones from Alboraya."

In many places in Spain you can find authentic horchata. Here's where to go:

Valencia

Horchatería Daniel, Avda. de la Horchata, Alboraya. Metro Palmaret. Tel: 96 185 88 66. www.horchateria-daniel.es

Horchatería Toni, C/ Colón, 11, Alboraya. Metro Alboraya. Tel: 96 185 65 94.

Madrid

Horchatería Alboraya, C/ Alcalá, 125. Metro Príncipe de Vergara. Tel: 91 576 58 17. www.horchateriaalboraya.com

Barcelona

El Tío Che, Rambla del Poblenou, 44-46. Metro Poblenou. Tel: 93 309 18 72. <http://www.eltioche.com/>

Alicante

Heladería Gori, C/ Pinto Lorenzo Casanova, 5. Tel: 96 522 93 54.