



The Cider House *Rules!*

Think Spain is all about Paella and Sangria? Well, prepare to have your Spanish horizons broadened with a tastebud trip to 'La Sidreria'.

Sidrerías are the Northern Spanish tradition of cider house dining - a bite of Northern Spain mixed with all-you-can drink cider and a rowdy atmosphere.

All across Northern Spain, and especially in the Basque Country, Las Sidrerías can be found. Tucked away in small mountain villages, often in semi-industrial parts of town, but always in a setting that feels more like a barn than a restaurant, Sidrerías serve a rustic, wholesome menu of tasty starters, Spain-sized chargrilled steaks and plenty of cider.

Stepping into a Sidrería is like stepping into the Basque equivalent of a shearing shed. Inside you'll find long wooden tables and benches, giant barrels of cider and rustic décor. These venues are popular choices for bucks' nights or large gatherings but, surprisingly, still deliver a great dining experience for smaller groups or couples. Just don't expect hushed dinner conversation from the other patrons.

Menus are fixed, with a small amount of variation depending on your taste. Starters will typically include dishes such as revuelto de bacalao (a kind of scrambled omelette with salt cod), or Jamón Ibérico (cured ham). Other tapas-style dishes might include Chorizo a la Sidra (Chorizo cooked in cider), or white asparagus.





Main course is one of two options. Rape (monkfish) fried and served skinned with its enormous jaw-bone arcing above the plate, or “Chuletón”, literally, “very big steak”. The steaks are a favourite and are usually too much for one mouth to manage. They're flame grilled on a charcoal fire before being seasoned with rock salt and presented on a giant plate with little else.



Chuletón

Rape (Monkfish)

While the beef in Spanish supermarkets didn't seem like much to write home about, while dining on Chuletón with a cattle farmer visiting from Wagga Wagga, he commented that it was exceedingly good meat. Well, he would know!

Red wine is usually ordered but the popular choice is to help yourself to the tapped barrels of cider at the end of the hall. Pouring the cider is an art and involves holding the glass as far away from the tap as your arms will allow. Catching the stream of room-temperature fermented apple juice in your glass is the goal, but this can take practice. This method of pouring supposedly aerates the cider before drinking. Whatever the reason, it makes the experience fun.





Desserts are simple, usually Cuajada (sheep's milk yoghurt that's been set) or caramel flan. The meal typically finishes with an Idiazabal cheese platter accompanied by walnuts and membrillo (quince jelly). Final drinks are usually Patxaran, a sweet sticky dessert liqueur made from sloe berries.

Although the quality of the food is high, it's the atmosphere that makes the Sidreria such an experience. The enjoyment of sharing a bench seat with those you've never met and dining in the openness and fun is an eye opener. Many great nights can start this way in Vitoria-Gasteiz or Pamplona, making new friends over a communal meal and continuing into the medieval centre of town after.

Although the lighter dishes of the warm southern regions of Spain may be better known, the food of Northern Spain is distinctive and rewarding. Knowing where to eat can be difficult and it's not easy for visitors to separate the good from the bad. Sidrerías generally deliver a great dining experience and, if approached with openness and a good spirit, can be an interesting alternative to more common dining options.





Bio:

Nick Williams spent four years living, working, and enjoying food in Northern Spain. Nick's partner, Maria, returned with him to Melbourne where they now offer Spanish home cooking lessons.



Pouring Cider

