

STORY BY ROBERTA MUIR

Don Quixote's Lunch

One of Spain's finest and tastiest cheeses comes from the legendary plateau of La Mancha.

Manchego is the rich, tasty cheese made from the milk of sheep that graze in the harsh landscape south-east of Madrid, the setting for *Don Quixote*. Indeed, Spain's best-known cheese is mentioned in the country's best-known book. It can only be produced in the provinces of Toledo, Ciudad Real, Cuenca and Albacete – all in the Castilla-La Mancha region of central Spain. It must be made from the whole pasteurised or unpasteurised milk of Manchega sheep and aged for at least 60 days (the longer the aging, the harder it gets). Its name was awarded protected designation of origin status in 1984.

La Mancha is a vast high plateau, 600-800 metres above sea level. The name comes from the Arabic 'Al Manchara' meaning dry, flat land, and it is a harsh land with fiercely cold winters and searing summers. Flocks of sheep and goats thrive on the scrub brush of rosemary and thyme, which imparts a distinctive flavour to their milk.

Spain has a long tradition of sheep farming, with archaeological evidence of it as far back as the 2nd century BC. During the Moorish occupation,

La Mancha was often in dispute between the northern Christians and the southern Muslims and semi-nomadic Christian shepherds called *mestas* displaced Muslim herds with their own. Following the expulsion of the Moors in the 12th century, there was a strong push for agricultural development, especially in the reclaimed areas. The *mestas* were formed into a powerful organisation that established settlements along large tracts of grazing land in the Castilian plateau.

Until the 19th century, Spain was a big exporter of wool, and cheeses such as manchego were traditionally made by shepherds in small quantities for their own consumption. With the increase in popularity of plant and man-made fibres in the last 150 years, the flocks have been turned over largely to dairy production.

Making manchego

The rich milk from the Manchega ewes is coagulated at 28-32 degrees Celsius with animal rennet. The curd is then cut finely, into 5-10mm pieces, and slowly reheated to about 40 degrees

Celsius, before the whey is drained off and the paste is put into cylindrical moulds and pressed for several hours. It is then rubbed with dry salt or immersed in brine, or both, and aged for at least 60 days (and sometimes more than a year) at a humidity of 75-85%.

The resulting cheese has a closed rind that varies from yellow to black. As with many of the cheeses of central Spain, the sides have a zig-zag pattern, traditionally created by the *esparto* grass rings used to hold the young cheeses in shape. These days, the pattern is created by the synthetic moulds used for industrially-produced cheese. The top and bottom are embossed with ears of wheat (La Mancha is a big wheat producing region), which are engraved on the small wooden boards used to press the cheese. The weight of the finished cheese can range from 1-3.5 kilogrammes, but averages about 3 kilogrammes. It has a dense, firm texture; is perforated with tiny uneven holes; and has the ivory to pale yellow colour typical of sheep's milk cheese. It is slightly oily on the palate, with a lingering buttery taste, slightly salty and piquant

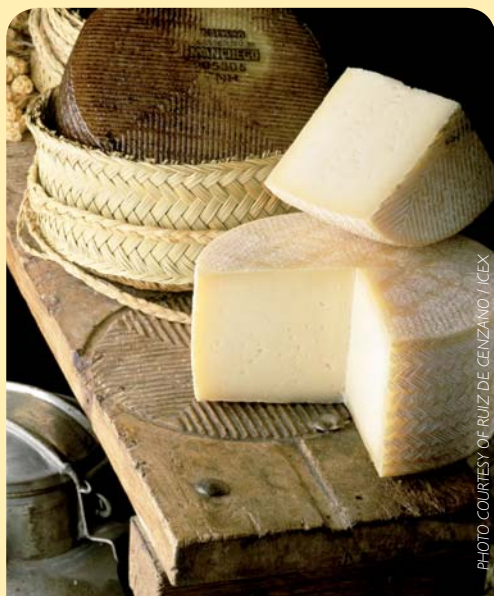


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(once again typical of sheep's milk cheese), with a slight nuttiness in the aftertaste.

Varieties

Farmhouse (artisan) manchego is still made from unpasteurised milk, although much of it is now industrially produced from pasteurised milk; both are entitled to use the protected designation of origin (PDO) name 'Queso Manchego'.

Manchego ranges from semi-curado (aged only for the minimum two months and with a fresh, soft and mild flavour and texture) to curado (hard, crumbly and sharp and aged for longer than two months). After three months, the cheese starts to become dry and should splinter when cut.

Other Spanish sheep's milk cheeses, made outside La Mancha, have the shape and markings of manchego and are called manchego-style cheeses, but are not allowed to use the PDO 'Queso Manchego'.

Buying and storing

Manchego was mentioned by Cervantes in his novel *Don Quixote of La Mancha*; and all authentic Queso Manchego bears a label with the silhouette of the man of La Mancha, Don Quixote, and his sidekick Sancho Panza.

Usage

Manchego is popular as part of an array of tapas, with bread, olives and jamon. Shave it over salads dressed with Spanish extra virgin olive oil (see recipe below) and serve with fino or manzanilla sherry, or at the end of a meal, serve it with crusty bread, quince paste (another typical Spanish product) and a glass of Spanish red. ■



Manchego, fennel, orange & walnut salad

Serves 4 as an entrée

Ingredients

150g manchego
2 heads baby fennel
2 oranges
60g shelled walnuts, coarsely chopped
100g frisée or baby endive lettuce leaves
60ml extra virgin olive oil
30ml sherry vinegar
30ml orange juice
(reserved from segmenting oranges)
salt flakes and freshly ground black pepper,
to taste

1. Discard the outer segments of the fennel and shave the rest finely with a sharp knife or Japanese mandolin slicer.
2. Using a sharp knife, cut the top and bottom off the oranges to reveal the flesh. Hold each orange upright and cut down its side to remove all skin and white pith. Hold each peeled orange over a bowl, cut down either side of the membranes to remove the segments. Drop them into the bowl and, when they are all removed, squeeze the remaining membrane over the bowl.
3. Shave the cheese into long thin slivers with a potato peeler or Japanese mandolin.
4. Place olive oil, vinegar, orange juice, salt and pepper in a screw-top jar and shake well to combine.
5. Place lettuce and fennel in a bowl with dressing and toss well to coat.
6. Arrange cheese slices on a serving platter or individual plates, top with salad, then orange segments and walnut pieces. Serve with a cold manzanilla sherry.