

Mapping Mallorca

Exploring the island's exquisite food trails and savoring the scenery

By Paul Ames

THERE AREN'T REALLY any other old bakeries in Palma," says Sebastià Camps, as his daughter Francisca pulls a tray of hot pies from an antique bread oven. "There are some from the 17th or 18th centuries, but nothing really old like this place." Tucked away on a narrow lane in the medieval heart of Palma de Mallorca, the Forn de la Gloria bakery dates back to at least the 12th century, Mr. Camps explains. Infused with the comforting aroma of warm bread and pastries, the little shop is filled with piles of hard-crusted Mallorcan loaves and savory specialties like the *cocarroi* meat pasties or *coca de trempó*, an oblong, pizza-like pie topped with spinach, onion, garlic and tomato.

Gloria is best known for its *ensaimadas*, spirals of light, sugar-dusted pastry that form an integral part of the Mallorcan breakfast table. "They say *ensaimadas* were served when a pope visited Mallorca in the 17th century," Mr. Camps recalls, before adding with some pride, "We once made the biggest in the world, 20 meters across."

Mr. Camps's bakery may be timeless, but the island of Mallorca has reinvented itself several times in recent decades. From bohemian artists' colony in the 1950s to the epicenter of Spain's sun-sea-and-sangria mass tourism boom in the '70s and '80s, Mallorca has re-emerged over the past couple of years as a hip short-break destination and exclusive getaway for the rich and famous, replete with chic boutique hotels and a galaxy of celebrity residents.

The island has also undergone a culinary makeover. The posh new Mallorca has little time for the fish-and-chip shops, tandoori houses and döner kebab joints that sprang up to cater to the Brits and Germans who flocked to the package resorts. Instead, it has embraced a new wave of chefs who have mostly come from outside but have revitalized Mallorca's unique take on Mediterranean cuisine.

A great way to get to the roots of the local cuisine is to follow the so-called agrorutes, mapped out by the Balearic Island authorities to lead visitors to dozens of wineries, olive-oil presses, organic-fruit farmers and *ensaimada* bakers squeezed into the 3,600 square kilometers of often stunning scenery that comprise the island. There are also routes indicating traditional restaurants serving rustic island favorites like mountain rabbit with sweet white onion; the potato and lamb's liver fry-up known as *frito Mallorquin*; or *tumbet*—a red pepper, eggplant and potato bake. Other routes are dedicated to cheese dairies or *sobrassada*—a deep-red, paprika-spiced sausage that rivals *ensaimada* as the food closest to the islanders' hearts.

These self-drive trails take foodie travelers well away from the south coast beach resorts to the backstreets of medieval Palma, through forests of pine and holm oak, across the fertile central plain and up into the northern mountains, which plunge dramatically to the sea 1,000 meters below. Rather than follow the trail of a particular product, drivers can also take a regional route, visiting a range of producers in one part of the island. It can be pot luck if you don't call in

The road climbs steeply up the mountains, then descends seaward in a series of heart-stopping hairpins that provide a powerful reminder that it's best to swirl and spit any wine you're offered to taste along the trail.



Photograph by Edmund Hecht

advance, but on a couple of sundrenched days cruising the mountainous northwest recently, I found one vineyard and a famed *sobrassada* maker closed but received a warm welcome from half-a-dozen other places. Some charge a small fee for tours and tastings, others are happy to show visitors around free of charge. Unfortunately, the Web site with the agrorutes, www.illesbalearsqualitat.ca, doesn't allow for easy downloading, but maps can be picked up from tourist offices around the island and a GPS can come in very handy.

Easter is a special time to visit as the islanders take Holy Week very seriously. There are solemn religious processions where brotherhoods of penitents in brightly colored, high-pointed hoods file through the streets and joyful Easter Monday pilgrimages such as the one to the medieval Believer fortress overlooking Palma, where up to 20,000 participate with picnics accompanied by folk dancing and a funfair. The towns of Artà, Pollença Felanix and Sineu are also famed for their Easter festivals.

Chef Marc Fosh held a Michelin star at the exclusive Reads hotel in the lee of the mountains in the center of the island before moving to Palma last year. His new restaurant, Simply Fosh, makes full use of the island's store of natural ingredients while adding pan-Mediterranean touches with dishes such as black rice with cuttlefish, saffron aioli and a parmesan-fennel salad or slow-cooked pork belly with carrot and orange puree and rosemary jus (www.simplyfosh.com).

"You can't not be affected by what's available here on the island, there are some great products," says Mr. Fosh, a Londoner whose cool, urban restaurant is one of the most sought-after tables in the capital. He doesn't need to go far to find his ingredients since Palma's Olivar food market is just around the corner, providing a sensory assault course with its halls filled with a bewildering variety of locally caught fish, kaleidoscopes of seasonal fruit and veg, plus charcuterie counters laden with piquant *botifarron* blood puddings and *varia negra*—a spherical black sausage the size and consistency of a greased cannon ball.

Mr. Fosh says his cooking has been transformed by his contact with the natural products on the island where he's lived for 14 years, but he notes that the interaction has been two-way. "The restaurants and the chefs who have come in and opened up and tried to push Mallorcan gastronomy forward and to freshen it up a little bit have had a big influence on local growers," he says. "The wine industry has come on amazingly over the past 10 years as well. Olive oil is a great example as well of that change."

Following the agrorutes enables visitors to discover these culinary treasures for themselves. I headed northwest out of Palma on an early spring morning along a country road that winds through citrus groves laden with fruit and almond trees blanketed with white blossom. It took just minutes to reach the first vineyards on south-facing foothills of the Serra de Tramutana mountains.

The Bodega Son Puig is a magnificent country house built around a tower that dates back to the Middle Ages. Ramon Alabern Montis says his family took over the estate in 1926 but he only recently revived its wine-making tradition, blending local grapes like Callet and Premal Blanc with French and Spanish mainland varieties such as Chardonnay and Tempranillo (www.sonpuig.com). Mr. Alabern Montis offered a tour of the house and a taste of his fine red and white wines while explaining the history of the place in a mixture of Spanish and Mallorquí—a dialect of Catalan that is spoken on the island. Like the language, Mallorcan cooking carries influences from the Catalan coast, but locals love to stress the unique nature of the island cuisine. When I mentioned



to Mr. Camps that my hotel had offered an *ensaimada* stuffed with *crema Catalana*—the renowned Catalan version of crème brûlée—he politely but firmly insisted that what I had been served must surely have been *crema Mallorquí*.

Leaving the Son Puig vineyards, the road climbs steeply up the mountains, then descends seaward in a series of heart-stopping hairpins that provide a powerful reminder that it's best to swirl and spit any wine you're offered to taste along the trail.

The ancient village of Banyalbufar occupies a spectacular site perched above the Mediterranean. Stone terraces carved into the hillsides around it were once famed for their Malvasia wines, a fragrant tippie so admired by the kings of Aragon that it is reputed to be one of the reasons Jaume I decided to conquer Mallorca in 1229. Disaster hit 100 years ago in the form of the phylloxera insect pest that spread from mainland Europe and wiped out production, until a group of local farmers revived the tradition in the 1990s by importing vines from Italy. Since then they have earned high marks for their Cornet brand from Spain's wine bible, the Guia Peñín (www.malvasiadebanyalbufar.com).

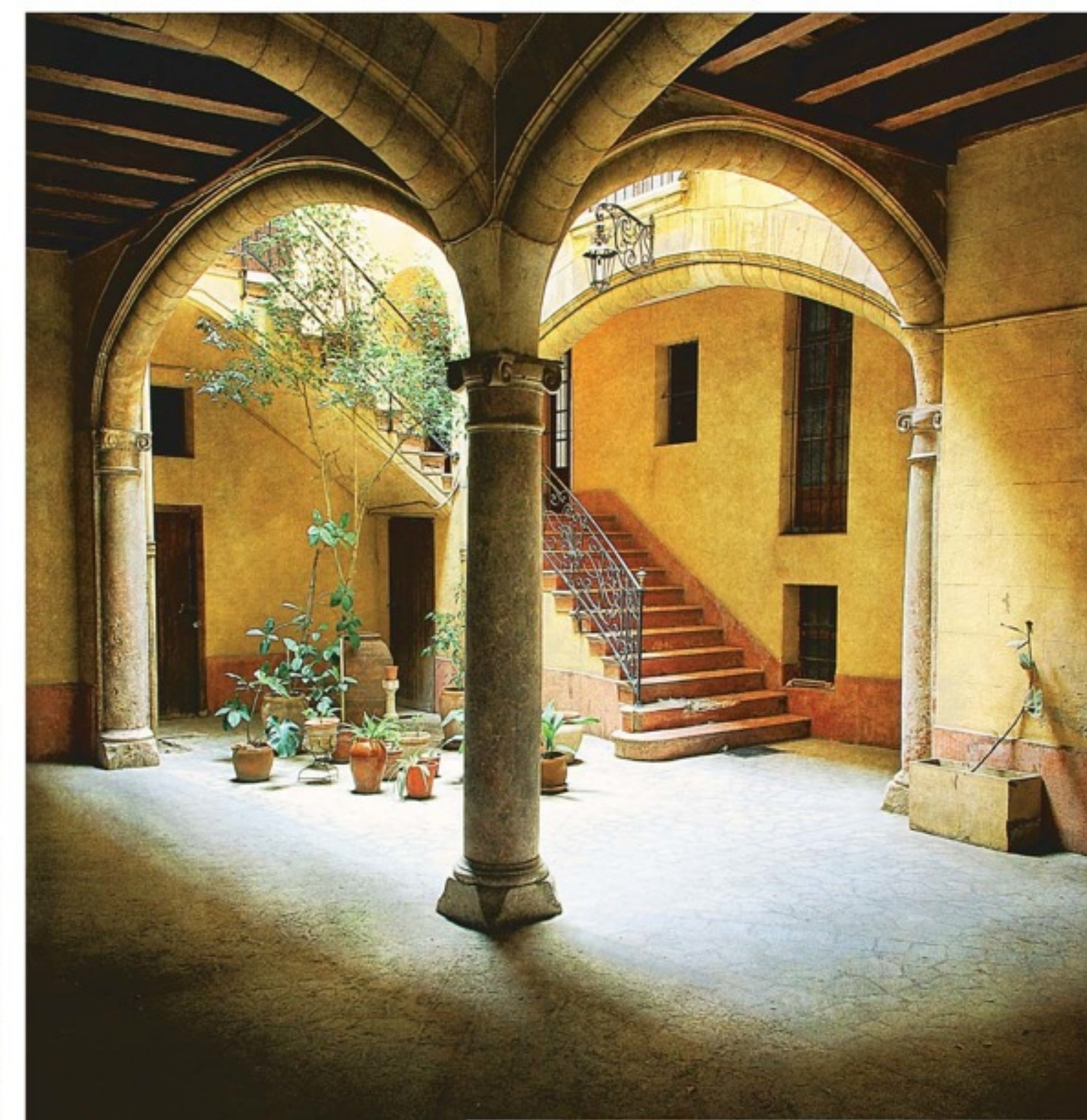
"After the vines were killed off, people turned to growing potatoes and tomatoes on the terraces," says Pau Pujosa, one of the five founders of the Malvasia cooperative. "Producing wine here is hard work because everything has to be done by hand, you can't get out on those terraces with tractors, but we wanted to do it because we knew we could make a quality wine." The road along Mallorca's north coast from Banyalbufar to the great gorge and beach of Sa Calobra has to be one of the most scenic in Europe. It swerves past Chopin's old home in Valldemossa, the little town of Söller set amid orange and olive trees, and the terracotta village of Fornalutx. At sunset, each curve offers a different vista of rugged peaks stained red or gold, or the sapphire waters below.

Amid all this splendor, the village of Deià stands out. Against a soaring mountain backdrop, this cluster of stone houses around the little hilltop church sits above a rocky cove and offers magnificent views up the coast. Deià has been an artists' retreat since the 1920s, when the British poet Robert Graves set up home here. These days, it's encrusted with celebrity homes and some discreetly luxurious hotels. Photos of recent guests at the plush La Residencia hotel include the likes of Bono, Gwyneth Paltrow and the hotel's former owner, Richard Branson, while Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones, and composer Andrew Lloyd Webber are among the stars with homes nearby (www.hotel-laresidencia.com).

Deià has naturally become one of the island's gastronomic hubs, with a knot of upper-crust eateries like Xelini, El Olivo, Jaume or Béns D'Avall, which has the tables with the best view. Currently top of the tree is Es Racó d'es Teix, run by German Michelin-star laureate Josef Sauereschell (www.esracodesteix.es).

After 26 years on Mallorca, Mr. Sauereschell encapsulates the spirit of many of the chefs who like to give an international twist to local cuisine that has inspired them. "Any decent cook would have to take advantage of all the great products he's got around him on this island," Mr. Sauereschell says. "There are some things I like to use from outside, like foie gras or truffles. ... But the fish here is great, the fruit and vegetables are great, the meat like young lamb, suckling pig. The wine and olive oil are of the highest quality. You just have everything here."

—Paul Ames is a writer based in Brussels.



Opposite page, coastline near Banyalbufar; this page, clockwise from left: terrace of Hotel La Residencia; interactive fun at Palma's Simply Fosh restaurant; the patio of the Forn de la Gloria bakery in Palma; *ensaimadas*, the typical breakfast bun from Mallorca.

