

SIDRA IS NOT JUST A DRINK, IT'S A LIFESTYLE

The French have their wine and the Scots, their whisky. But in northern Spain they've been raising a glass to cider for over 800 years. **Catesby Holmes** shares a *sidra asturiana* with the locals before this month's apple harvest

Photography **Markel Redondo**

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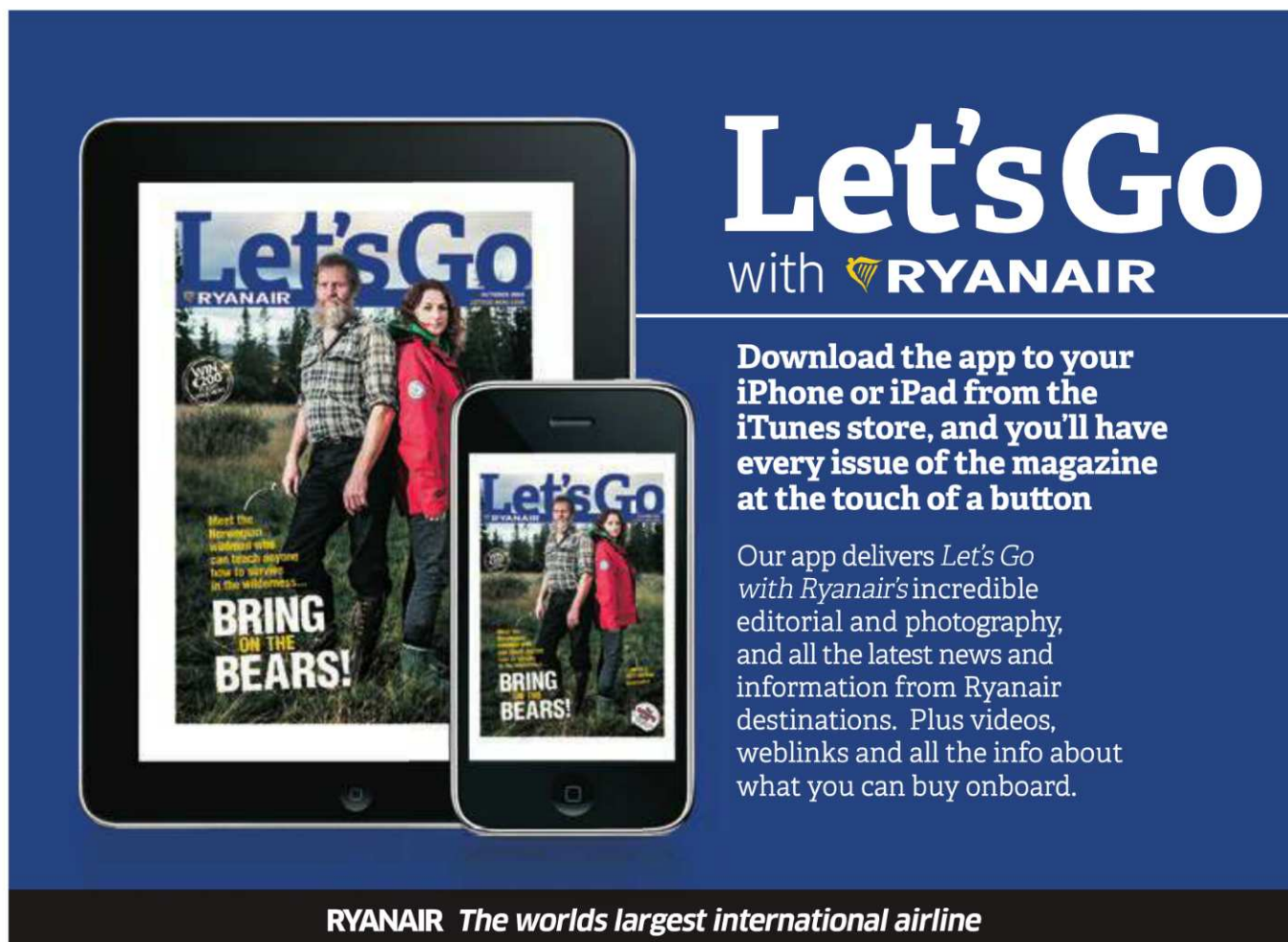





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word of advice before venturing out on Asturias's *ruta de la sidra*, or cider trail: expect to get lost. As you wind your way up the craggy peaks and past the cow-dotted pastures of this green, wind-whipped province on Spain's northern coast, your GPS will provide limited, even errant, guidance. A further tip: forget

what you thought you knew about 'hard' cider. Here, on a two-day autumn drive, just as the farmers are beginning to collect their apples – not plucked but shaken off the tree then gathered from its base – during the annual October and November harvests, I discover a bright, dry and robust apple-based beverage ranging from lager-like and white wine-esque to Champagne-inspired. And I'm not alone. Asturians began brewing cider some 800 years ago, and judging by my fellow travellers on the route, the rest of the world is catching on.

Apple trees grow profusely in this part of the country, and Asturias contributes 80% of Spain's annual sidra production. (Interestingly, they seem to consume most of it too: 54 litres per person per year, far more than in neighbouring provinces).

"Sidra is not just a drink, it's a lifestyle," says stylish thirtysomething Yolanda Trabanco, whose great grandparents founded **Casa Trabanco** in 1925. Clinging to a steep Cantabrian mountain a 20-minute drive south of seaside Gijon, Trabanco was expanded in the 1980s by Yolanda's visionary father, who repurposed an abandoned railway tunnel to house several dozen massive sidra-ageing barrels. Freshly pressed juice arrives to fill them from the factory via an underground pipeline. Today, it's the biggest *llagar* (cidery) in Asturias, producing 3.5m bottles a year. And it's still family-owned, with Yolanda and her sister Eva focusing on events and brewing/oenology, respectively. Their grandparents even live on site – lucky visitors are sometimes invited to join them in their home for a meal of Spanish tortilla, chorizo, cheese and rustic bread.

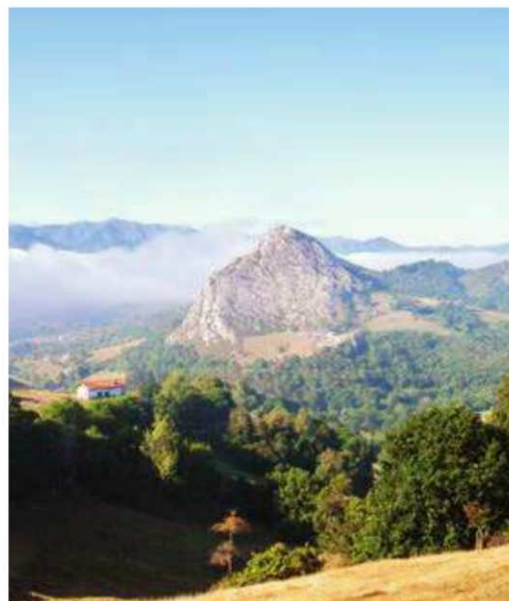
I lunch on cheesy risotto and sautéed cabbage with shrimp at Trabanco's bustling restaurant, which serves up regional dishes featuring ingredients sourced fresh from the garden. It's an appealing scene, packed with locals crowding around the picnic-style tables as veteran waiters pour sidra from overhead in the Asturian *escanciado* style. Yolanda even ►



LEFT, ABOVE AND PREVIOUS PAGE: SIDRA FANS RUB ELBOWS IN THE BUZZING BAR AND RESTAURANT AT FAMILY-RUN CIDERY CASA TRABANCO, FOUNDED IN 1925



ABOVE: CIDER GURU AND ASTURIAN CULTURE EXPERT PEPÍN SANCHEZ DIAZ
RIGHT: THE VIEW FROM UPSCALE CASA MARCIAL
BELOW: CASA MARCIAL'S CIDER SOMMELIER JUAN LUIS GARCIA



emerges in a waitress's black to serve tables. As I said, it's a family affair.

In fact, most Asturian cideries are still family run, says Francisco José Sánchez Díaz ('Pepín' for short), my delightful and insightful sidra guru. His *ruta de Pepín* tour is a must for any cider-centric, or merely culturally curious, traveller. On a half-mile circuit around the Onís farm where Pepín raises Asturian heritage ponies, sheep and chickens, I finally learn why waiters decant sidra with the bottle raised high and glass held down low (naturally uncarbonated sidra must be 'awakened' as it crashes against the inside of the glass); how to drink like a local (quickly, in a single gulp, from a shared glass); and what to do with those last sips once they go flat (dump them onto the floor). Spain is a convivial place, and cider-house rules encourage further camaraderie – as Yolanda had told me, sidra is "a friendly drink".



Historically the stuff of working men, sidra was guzzled in great quantities in *sidrerías* that doubled as social clubs (and often labour union headquarters). Its popularity declined during the Franco years, when the dictator outlawed sidra production and consumption, but resurfaced when Spain transitioned to democracy in the 1980s. Today, sidra is a fact of life for all Asturians, high-brow and low. In Arriondas, at the extraordinary, two-Michelin-starred restaurant **Casa Marcial**, the sommelier may pair your pesto-drizzled hake with Emilio Martinez *sidra de mesa*, a crisp, dry cider that recalls white wine. While deliciously divey seafood shacks like **El Planeta** in Gijón serve €2 *sidra natural* alongside fried calamari. On New Year's Eve, partygoers toast with bubbly *sidra achampañada*.

International demand for the stuff began to grow in the prosperous 90s, buoyed by increased tourism and the European Union's recognition of the region's artisanal production with a ►

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'designation of origin' similar to that enjoyed by French wines. Once known for their milk and cheeses, local farmers began to plant more orchards, increasing sidra production and selling apples to the bigger llagares. The result is a visibly changed landscape: fewer goat-grazed pastures, more trees – and a new type of tourism. "You can't live off cider alone, but it definitely helps," Pepín says, perhaps with Spain's budget austerity and high unemployment in mind.

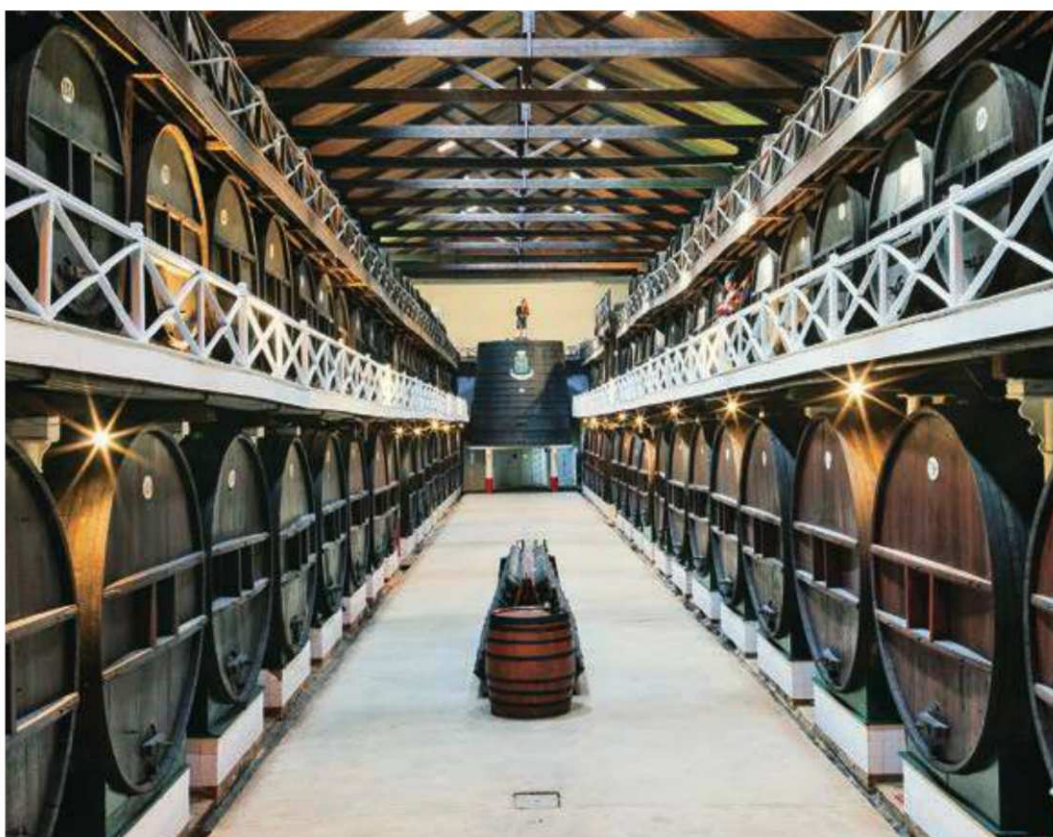
Today, Asturias, a rural province with a population of one million, is home to dozens of registered llagares and hundreds of cider producers, from unassuming farmsteads to multinational outfits. I glimpsed several of them, driving the ruta de la sidra. **El Gaitero** is Asturias's oldest, founded in 1889. It's both a major operation – thousand-gallon stainless-steel tanks, sleek branding, a second factory in Argentina – and a family business. Tano Collado, a fresh-faced oenologist, took over El Gaitero's quality control from his uncle and father before him. That's typical, says Maria Cardin, the cidery's business director (and great granddaughter of its founders). "Many of our employees have relatives who have worked here," she says. "Mothers and aunts in particular, since



before mechanisation we employed hundreds of women to label and cork the bottles."

Here, during the harvest, you can watch as red, green, and yellow apples are delivered by farmers to El Gaitero's riverside factory in Villaviciosa, then washed and sorted, crushed and pressed, all in about two hours. Aged for four to six months, at a kilo of apples per bottle, 240 million apples a year are transformed into a delicacy destined for glasses in Spain, the US, Mexico, Venezuela, and even China.

The target market is more domestic at nearby **Finca la Rionda**, a relative newcomer ►



ABOVE AND RIGHT:
EL GAITERO, THE OLDEST
CIDERY IN ASTURIAS,
PROCESSES 240M
APPLES A YEAR,
MAKING IT BOTH
A SPANISH HOUSEHOLD
NAME AND A MAJOR
CIDER EXPORTER



APPLE SCIENTIST
ANTONIO TORRES
CABELLO CREATES
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BLENDS FOR CLIENTS

to Asturias's cider scene. In 1997, Antonio Torres Cabello, a Caracas-born male model who had lived in Madrid and Tokyo, returned to Asturias, his parents' native land, to buy out a great uncle's dairy farm. Today, he has 10 hilly hectares planted with 14 types of apples, from which he produces custom blends for private clients. An innovator, Torres Cabello researches apple diseases and good growing practices, and he collects his fruit with a self-designed tractor attachment designed to handle Asturias's rugged terrain. The taste of his sidras? Divine.

In size, look and strategy, La Rionda is poles apart from El Gaitero or Casa Trabanco, a difference that demonstrates the breadth of this increasingly sophisticated industry. And those are just the three I unearth on my short drive. Many more cideries await discovery, tucked away among Asturias's rushing rivers and narrow canyons. So rent a car, ditch the GPS, and go wherever the meandering mountain roads take you. Oh, and one last piece of advice: take along a travelling companion and make them designated driver. ■

ROUTE GUIDE

There's no official or direct way to drive the ruta de la sidra, though lacomarcadelasidra.com has some useful route maps. Cideries are scattered throughout Asturias, particularly along the N-634, AS-114 and A-64 roads. Either Villaviciosa or Gijón make a good base.

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La Salgar, Arriendas,
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casamarcial.com

FINCA LA RIONDA

Tornón, Villaviciosa,
tel: +34 661 645 930,
fincalarionda.com

LA RUTA DE PEPIN

La Torraya,
Sirviella, Onís,
tel: +34 608 784 763,
pepin.es

SIDRERIA CASA

TRABANCO

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Lavandera, Gijon,
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