Tuck in at the Tuna Fiestas!

You haven’t tasted tuna until you’ve tried wild atún rojo de almadraba, brought to the southwest coast of Spain courtesy of the Atlantic bluefin after the first full moon in May. Their arrival is celebrated with gastrofests in the Big Four almadraba towns of Cádiz province, whose time-honoured fishing method delivers these ocean giants in peak condition to the world’s top restaurant tables. All you need is a map and a healthy appetite to join in this great gourmet gig, as Belinda Beckett reports.

PHOTOGRAPHY DAVID CUSSEN AND AS CREDITED

THE LEISURE tuna

T he dish set before me looked more like fruit than fish. It was the shape and colour of an orange, topped with a small green leaf and presented in a miniature fruit crate. That was the whole idea! Paripé de Mandarina (Mandarin Deception) turned out to be tuna tartare, cunningly disguised in a sphere of mandarin gelatine. A gourmet trick that delivered on humour as well as flavour, like all the ingenious creations on the menu at last year’s Ruta de Atún in Zahara de los Atunes, named for its most prized commodity: the Atlantic bluefin.

During festival time there are nearly as many fish aficionados on land as there are tuna in the sea. And no wonder. With a tapa priced from as little as €1,50 (or up to €3,50 with a beer, soft drink or chilled manzanilla), it’s a no-brainer for fish fanciers! Last year in Zahara, a tiny maritime pueblo of 1,300 residents that seems to have more restaurants than locals to eat in them, 36 chefs sold 79,241 tapas – not bad in an economic crisis!

Extraordinary innovation is the principal ingredient of the festivals, when restaurants outdo each other to present outstanding dishes: tuna burgers and lollipops, tuna wrapped in gold leaf, tuna boats floating on a sea of blue sauce, bite-sized tuna pizzas presented in miniature printed boxes, liquid tuna wittily named Gin Tunic! Only the finest local ingredients are used to create astonishing pairings showcasing the latest culinary techniques: tuna with apple, with tomato marmalade, with PX sherry; tuna carpaccio, confit and sous vide.

Along with sherry, Iberian pork and retinto beef – all from the southwest corner of Andalucía – almadraba-caught tuna is raising the game in Spanish gastronomy. The secret to this ocean delicacy is timing and the unique method of bringing these giants safely out of the water by ‘almadraba’ trap nets offshore, a technique dating back 3,000 years to Phoenician times. Zahara boasts one of the ‘big four’ Atlantic almadrabas in Spain, along with Tarifa, Conil and Barbate which hold their own festivals. In 2010, Barbate welcomed 50 celebrity chefs to the festivities: gastronomic geniuses of the calibre of Ferran Adrià, Dani García and Ángel León, dubbed the Chef of the Sea for his amazing repertoire with fish and seafood at Aponiente, the only Michelin-starred restaurant in Cádiz province.
Almadraba-caught tuna is raising the game in Spanish gastronomy

For these top chefs, May’s full Moon is a red letter day. They can begin to showcase the new season’s recipes starring this ‘pata negra of the sea’. Only now, as the bluefin pass through the Gibraltar Strait en route to their Mediterranean spawning grounds, are they in such peak condition. They have grown fatty overcoats while wintering in the depths of the Atlantic, which give the flesh its rich flavour and juicy quality. The Spanish confusingly call it atún rojo (red tuna) because the meat is the colour and texture of fillet steak. On their return journey in late summer, after the rigours of reproduction, the bluefin are skinnier shadows of their former selves.

Cervantes wrote about the Andalusian almadrabas in his novella, La Ilustre Fregonera. You may have seen one of these large floating structures which appear off the Cádiz coast in late March, one kilometre out to sea. Often mistaken for fish farms, they’re quite the opposite – complex labyrinths of netting, several kilometres long and more than 30 meters deep, that guide wild tuna into a large central trap.

Tuna fishing is a controversial subject as Atlantic bluefin went into astronomical decline in the 1980s and 90s through over-fishing. They’re still on the endangered list although the selective almadraba fishing method is considered more sustainable. The majority of the tuna shoals escape the nets completely, immature fish can wriggle through the mesh and live to spawn another day and only the best specimens are taken when the nets are hoisted out of the water.

A quota of 657 tonnes has been set for Cádiz this year but, as the average tuna weighs 200 kilos (and 15-foot tuna weighing 500kg are on record), that’s not as many fish as you might think: a few thousand, a fraction of what the catch once was – 15,000 in 1997, 70,000 in the industry’s heyday – not nearly enough, say the 500 families who depend on the tuna for their livelihood. The festivals are helping to raise awareness of this centuries-old tradition. It has disappeared completely in neighbouring Chiclana where the old almadraba of Sancti Petri closed down in 1971, with the loss of 2,000 jobs.
The levantá (raising of the trap) is a thrilling spectacle if you’re not squeamish. Several will be held between April and June, dependent on wind, tides and sea conditions and decided by the almadraba’s ‘captain’. At the appointed time, the fishermen surround the circular trap in their vessels and start hauling in the nets. As the boats move closer together, the trap becomes a seething cauldron of frenzied fish. Almadraba is Arabic for ‘place of fighting’ and the name’s well-justified. Nowadays cranes and winches, rather than hooks, are used to land the fish on the boats where they are expertly slaughtered to minimise suffering.

Only 20 per cent of these magnificent specimens will end up on the tables of Spanish restaurants. The rest will be destined for Japan. Every year during the season, Japanese ships queue up in the bay to buy tuna directly from the almadrabas. It’s a highly prized ingredient of sushi and sashimi and sells in Japan for phenomenal sums. The current record for a 221 kilo bluefin sold at auction in Tokyo is equivalent to €1.1 million! The average 200Kg tuna in Spain would fetch around €5,000. Even so, the Spanish fishermen who battle as fiercely as Hemingway’s Old Man and The Sea to land their quarry generally can’t afford to buy it.

Until recently, there was little chance of witnessing a levantá unless you were well-connected. However, the tuna festivals have generated such growing interest in the art of the almadraba that the inaugural licensed levantá excursion was organised last year by Ignacio Soto of nautical tours specialist, Nature Tarifa (www.naturetarifa.com). Anne Manson, who runs a cooking school in Vejer (www.anniebspain.com), was lucky enough to be on it.

“For 20 minutes we watched the ferocious splashing of these majestic fish as they were hoisted out of the ocean, then the sea returned to its rolling calm, as if nothing had happened,” she recalls. “I felt a sense of loss, knowing that most were going to be butchered and preserved at -60 degrees for their journey to Japan. But I was blown away by how well-executed it was – a perfect example of sustainable fishing. Only the tuna are caught, and only the biggest kept; the rest are returned to the ocean. It’s not in the fishermen’s interests to take more.”
Back in Zahara, the final preparations are being made for the VI Ruta de Atún. Last year’s festival netted €400,000 over the weekend alone – a welcome boost for the local economy at a traditionally quiet time of year.

“For most towns, May is the month for communions and weddings but we’re only a small fishing village,” says restaurateur Gaspar Castro, President of local traders association ACOZA, the organisation responsible for this shining example of entrepreneurialism in action.

“At the same time, it’s one of the best months to eat fresh red tuna, caught in our unique way. We’ve been making a party of it since 2009 and it’s really paying off.”

It’s all so well organised. Everyone gets a map with the location of each restaurant and its speciality tapa, divided into colour-coded zones, plus a sheet of paper drawn up with boxes to get stamped as you eat because tuna isn’t the only temptation. There are some enticing prizes for enjoying it too: consume 12 tapas for the chance to win one of three prizes worth up to €500. Eat all 36 and a stay for two at the posh Hotel Meliá Atlanterra could be yours!

If high drama is your bag, there’s plenty of it with tuna tastings, sherry pairings, show cooking, street parades and a demonstration of tuna filleting that’s pure theatre, complete with buckets of blood! It’s called a *ronqueo* after the ‘snoring’ noise the knife makes when separating flesh from bone. It takes experts with cleavers and sharp knives under 10 minutes to reduce one silvery tuna into 17 choice cuts. The ventresca (stomach) is sold in steaks at around €40 per kilo, the morillo (a muscle in the head) costs more and the female eggs sell for over €80 per kilo.

“Hardly any goes to waste which is why we call the tuna el cerdo del mar,” Gaspar told me. Even huevos de leche are relished, though they aren’t for the faint-hearted (being tuna sperm). Gaspar swears they’re “very tasty” although, as his restaurant was responsible for last year’s Mandarin Deception, should we believe him?

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**Tuna Totem**

The Atlantic bluefin has been chosen as the mascot for a new private tourism initiative that will promote the attractions of five resorts along the tuna route. Launched by the Cádiz-Estrecho Fisheries Development Group, The Millennial Tuna Route will highlight the history, culture, traditions, gastronomy, natural environment and leisure activities in Conil, Zahara, Barbate, Tarifa and La Línea. The new portal will provide a marketing and advertising platform for local businesses that have a relationship with tuna, the sea and the area under four headings: Roots, Life, Flavours and Emotions.

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Tuna parade through Zahara

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