

Spain's Taste of Christmas

Throughout Spain, nothing says “Merry Christmas” like a tray piled high with crunchy or chewy, nutty turrón. We visit the turrón town of Jijona near Alicante to find out what makes a Spanish Christmas sweet.

We're standing in the impressive foyer of one of the world's largest turrón manufacturers. From afar comes the thunder of galloping hooves. Could this be Santa and his antlered teammates, sweeping by to pick up the first of many Christmas deliveries in their HGV sleigh?

Actually, no. What we are observing is an unstoppable force of nature – a full coachload of retired Spanish folk pouring through the hastily opened glass doors for their annual turrón pilgrimage and Christmas shopping trip. The smell of roasting almonds and honey fuels their Christmas spirit and noise levels rise almost beyond EU-accepted safety levels. Soon however, the chatty groups are sternly called to order by the teenage receptionist and marched off on the factory tour. Three more coachloads are expected today; clearly, it's turrón time again.

“Take half a kilo of ground almonds and the same of icing sugar, plus six egg yolks and a kilo of orange blossom honey...” Turrón is a shamelessly indulgent dessert. During the festive season throughout the Spanish-speaking world, an elaborate arrangement of different varieties is served on the best silver or china with a glass of sparkling cava to end the traditional family meal.

The word “turrón” probably originates from the Spanish ‘torrar’ which means ‘to grill’. But the origins of turrón itself can be traced back to almost seven centuries of Moorish occupation. As early as the 1300s, turrón was being produced by Arab and Sephardic Jewish communities in Jijona, and by the late 1400s it was already being exported as far away as Japan.

By the 20th century, production had spread far beyond Jijona and neighbouring Alicante to Toledo, Zaragoza and especially Barcelona. Unhampered by centuries of tradition, these ‘upstarts’ were willing to experiment, with delicious results: there is now a growing market for turrón flavoured with rice, hazelnuts, pistachios, liqueurs, coconut, chocolate and even cheese!

In the handsome Museo de Turrón at the El Lobo plant, we gawp at the serene wax model señoras patiently sorting almonds by hand; the hunky stone pestle and mortar that must have exhausted many a mediaeval turrón grinder, even a wooden yoke and bristling iron contraption for the mule-powered crushing rollers. A handsome horseless carriage was used as late as Christmas 1998 to “rush” vital turrón supplies to Spain's Prime Minister and Royal Family. Incredibly, turrón manufacture only became fully automated after the 1940s.

However, though much has changed, the basic ingredients of classic turrón remain the same for the two different types, ‘duro’ or hard turrón associated with Alicante and the ‘blando’ or soft version linked with Jijona, that more closely resembles marzipan. The El Lobo brand, and especially the top-quality ‘1880’ range made at this state-of-the-art factory, are for turrón purists.

The first and most important ingredient is the almond, and it quickly becomes clear that not all almonds are born equal. California almonds are cheaper, but frowned upon for being thin-skinned and liable to damage. It’s the native Marcona variety, with its perfect balance of sweet taste, high oil content and easy peeling qualities that is sought after by the best manufacturers, in spite of rising prices. A ‘Supreme’ quality Alicante or Jijona turrón, (as defined by the IGP Regulating Council, the region’s quality control watchdog), has to contain a whopping minimum 64% of almonds to earn its status.

Honey is next, and the hills in this region are home to happy bees who spend their working days collecting pollen from frothing oceans of orange blossom. The honey they make gives the local turrón a distinctive flavour, and again, quality and quantity are carefully controlled by the IGP. The high-quality ‘1880’ brand made here stipulates 10 percent pure honey in its classic turrónes.

For hard Alicante turrón – the most popular type, especially abroad, almonds are peeled, dried and then toasted. Honey and sugar are heated and mixed with the toasted almonds and some egg white. The mixture is cooled in rectangular or round moulds, then cut into slabs and packaged in decorative bars, cartons, tins or extra-special wooden boxes.

For soft Jijona turrón, the same mixture is squeezed while still warm between powerful granite rollers. The master *turrónero* then supervises the mixture as it bubbles for between two and four hours in giant cauldrons called *boixets*, each cauldron pounded by a mechanical pestle and mortar to release the exquisite almond oil that will flavour and protect each bar.

Within the basic hard and soft groupings are ever more delicious and intensely rich varieties, including the ‘Yema’, marzipan enriched with egg yolk and often topped with burnt caramel; ‘Turrón Fruta’, with its layer of vivid candied fruits, or the highly-prized ‘La Piedra’, extra smooth, flavoured with cinnamon and lemon rind. (See sidebar for list of varieties).

Export Manager Juan José Morón tells me that October, November and early December are frantically busy, as production gears up and extra staff are taken on to satisfy Christmas appetites, to the tune of 2 million kilos this year! In recent years, turrón has become very popular in other Hispanic-speaking regions such as parts of North America and Central and South America. Sending a small hamper of turrón to loved ones abroad is also popular these days, “it’s like they’re joining the family for the traditional Christmas Eve supper,” he said.

Time to make the ultimate sacrifice and sample the product. I try a ‘tortita’ from the 1880 range. It’s a miniature round of hard turrón that comes wrapped in gold foil in a scarlet lined box. I bite through the snowy rice paper covering, powdery-fragile as angels’ wings, then crunch into the wickedly tasty mixture of fresh roasted almonds and honey. It’s very good and very, very bad.

Suddenly, I understand the anticipation of that eager coachload, now bearing down on us from the other end of the large shop. I ask one elderly gentleman what favourites he will be buying. “I come every year with my wife,” he tells me. “She gets all the varieties she likes, and for the grandchildren.” How much will she be buying? He puts one hand in front of his waist and the other way above his head. That much.

Another customer tells me she still arranges a selection of turrón on the same tray her mother used every Christmas. She doesn’t wait for Christmas Eve supper, but just leaves the tray on the table for guests to help themselves all day. Do mums make turrón at home? No, people are busy and everyone buys these days, she tells me.

We leave the factory and head on to Alicante. At Christmas, just off the city’s elegant Rambla Mendez Nunez, old-fashioned sweet shop windows explode with gold and scarlet ribbon adorning gleaming cartons, bright tins and glowing wooden boxes of the sweet stuff. ‘El Abuelo’ brand, with its sprightly granddad logo, is a small but popular manufacturer who started up early last century. The ‘Tecló’ shop, first opened in 1912, has hardly changed its décor or packaging since then. Our purchases are carefully wrapped in pretty blue and white paper by a grandmotherly assistant – another charming touch that makes us feel like Edwardian shoppers.

The turrón mania gathers pace around the same time Christmas pud starts to stack up in British stores. One weekend in November, as if by magic, mountainous displays of shiny-packaged temptation will appear in Spanish supermarkets large and small as this national obsession takes hold. A few weeks later, in millions of steamy kitchens, tonnes of turrón will be chopped into dainty squares and arranged on trays. Countless corks will pop and sparkling cava will gush into delicate glasses. Another season of plenty will be celebrated in style, and the sweet-toothed will raise their glasses to Jijona, home of their favourite Christmas treat.

BOXOUT:

Rectangular or round, crunchy or fudgy, everyone has their favourite turrón. Here's a roundup of the leading varieties:

Hard/"Duro" Turrón (Alicante)

Classic Turrón de Alicante

The original crunchy turrón, with toasted Marcona almonds added to heated orange blossom honey, sugar and egg white. The resulting creamy goo is left to cool in bar moulds before cutting and packaging.

Turrón Guirlache

Crunchy whole roast almonds suspended in brittle mahogany caramel between delicate 'lids' of rice paper.

Chocolate Turrón

Increasingly popular with Spanish munchers, this is really just chocolate with almonds embedded in it.

Tortas/Tortitas

The classic hard turrón ingredients handmade into round 'cookies' to keep the almonds whole. Variations include hazelnut and pine nut tortas.

Soft/"Blando" Turrón (Jijona)

Classic Turrón de Jijona

The original fudgy turrón with ingredients as for the hard variety, but much squidgier thanks to the 3-4 hour grinding and cooking process that transforms it to the right melting consistency.

Turrón Yema/Yema Tostada

A 'marzipan' turrón, enriched (!) with egg yolk. The 'tostada' version also features a thin top layer of burnt caramel – talk about gilding the lily!

Turrón "La Piedra"

The name refers to the traditional millstone used to grind the turrón mixture for this extra smooth version, flavoured with cinnamon and lemon rind and packaged in a handsome black wooden box with scarlet seal.

Turrón Fruta

Another 'marzipan' turrón, studded with big chunks of preserved fruit.

TURRON TASTE TEST!

Which is Spain's favourite turrón? We conducted a quick, unscientific sample on the streets of a small town near Granada:

Chocolate turrón:	30%
Alicante (Hard) turrón:	30%
Jijona (Soft) turrón:	25%
Turrón teetotalers: (The "too sweet for me" brigade)	15%

UK SUPPLIERS:

UK Distributor:

Hider Foods at www.hiderfoods.co.uk

Distribute to leading fine food retailers all over the UK, including branches of **Selfridges**; **Waitrose Food & Home** branches (200g Turrón de Alicante only)

In London:

Garcia & Sons, Portobello Market
(00 44) 207 221 6119

Sidebar:

RECIPE:

Classic Turrón de Yema: (Soft Egg Yolk Turrón)

300g ground almonds
300g icing sugar
6 egg yolks
grated rind of 1 lemon
1 tspn ground cinnamon, or to taste

Mix the ground almonds with the egg yolks

Make a syrup by melting the icing sugar slowly over a low heat

Add the cinnamon and lemon rind

Cook until the mixture begins to turn a golden brown

Add the almond paste and cook slowly, stirring continuously

When the mixture is thick and rich, but not sticky, press into a rectangular mould and leave to cool, storing in the refrigerator

Unmould after one or two days and serve. END