

Cider-house rules

Nick Rider learns the ropes
of cider-sampling in **Oviedo**,
capital of Asturias



Getting there

Oviedo is a two-hour drive from Santander or three hours from Bilbao. Brittany Ferries serves both of these Spanish ports, with up to seven sailings a week from Portsmouth and Plymouth.



You order cider, and a bottle arrives with some wide, flat-bottomed glasses. Then, the waiter raises the bottle directly above his or her head, at full stretch, to pour the cider in a long golden arc

into the glass, held at a precise angle as low as possible in the other hand. Inevitable splashes – caught in strategically placed wooden tubs – all add to the pleasantly appley aroma.

This ritual is *el escanciado*, a very specific term for an essential part of enjoying the distinctive cider of Asturias in northern Spain. Theatrical it may be, but it's not just theatre. Traditional Asturian cider, *sidra natural*, has absolutely no added sugar and so is dry with a slight, sharp fizziness. As Carmen Ordiz, whose website (gdegastromonia.es) covers everything food- and drink-related in her home province, explains, the point of dropping it from a great height is to make it 'break', bursting hidden bubbles and opening up the flavours. "It's fundamental," she says. "Cider changes a lot when it's poured from 20 centimetres, or when it's *escanciado*." Then, you drink (not gulp) each cider serving smoothly in one go.

Mountainous and deep green, Asturias is natural apple country. Cider has been its favourite drink since Roman times, so a whole culture has grown around it. *Escanciar* is quite

1 *El escanciado* isn't only for theatrical purposes – it also unlocks the flavours

2 A moment of contemplation in the mountainous surroundings of Asturias

3 Santa María del Naranco, one of two early medieval churches located on Monte Naranco, Oviedo



an art, and there's an annual competition to crown the best *escanciadores* from the region's *sidrerías* (cider bar-restaurants) and *llagares* (cider-makers). Asturians like to go out a lot, drink a lot and eat a lot (portions are very generous), so every town has its choice of venues.

Oviedo, capital of Asturias, is a city that's both friendly and sophisticated, with an old town of interlocking squares and alleys and a venerable cathedral. Its greatest jewels – two of Europe's finest early medieval churches, built in pre-Romanesque style in the 800s – are located on Monte Naranco, north of the centre. Sightseeing apart, the city is a great place to enjoy the special Asturian approach to socialising.

Begin at Calle Gascona, just north of the cathedral, which is dubbed 'El Bulevar de la Sidra' and lined end-to-end with often-packed *sidrerías*. With so many on offer, it's hard to know which to choose. A good *sidrería*, according to Carmen, should have a broad range of ciders and a shortish food menu, instead of '40-plus dishes'. →

FOOD AND DRINK



A good *escanciador* won't look at the bottle or glass while pouring

Top tip

Let the waiters *escanciar* your cider. First-timers always make a mess of it! If you order a second bottle or more, empties will be left on the table – they're totted up when you leave.



TURISMO ASTURIAS - ALFONSO SUÁREZ, TURISMO ASTURIAS - XURDE MARGARIDE

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Cider-drinking is inexpensive and fun, and the foods to go with it have a full-on, generous quality; from *cabrales* (Asturias's powerful goats' cheese) and *fritos de pixín* (fried strips of monkfish) to grilled meats, tortilla and *fabada* (a rich bean and sausage stew).

Some of the big Gascona bars are not well-regarded by cider fans, but one that is is El Ferroviario, run by an expert young crew.

Labels to look out for include Gobernador, Peñón and Cortina, and Trabanco among the bigger producers. Asturias has more than 100 cider-makers, of all sizes. As well as *sidra natural*, many now offer refined champagne-style dry ciders (not served *escanciado*) and, a new fad, 'ice ciders' (*sidra de hielo*), made from frozen apple juice.

A major event on Calle Gascona is the 'Preba de la Sidra' (Cider Testing), to be held this year on 12th May, when individual *llagares* present their new products in front of different *sidrerías*. The year's best is chosen by public vote.

Away from the crowds on Gascona, there are many more tranquil cider outlets in central Oviedo. A short walk away on Calle San Juan is El Ovetense, a spacious *sidrería* that, Carmen says, everyone in the city has visited at some time in their lives. At the other end in scale, Casa Muñiz on Calle la Lila is a snug neighbourhood retreat with own-label cider.

And, if you're visiting the aforementioned ancient churches on Monte Naranco, why not rest your weary legs at the Vista Alegre? Located just downhill, it boasts a wonderful view over the city below. 🏰