

# CHEESES IN SPAIN:

## Diverse, Flavorful, with Unique Stories to Tell

María Mora | La Quesera



María Mora (Alicante, 1984) and her family moved from Southeastern Spain to Bilbao, located in the Basque Country, when she was two years old. Fast forward to today: she is the owner of a very successful business, *La Manducateca* in Bilbao, Spain, which features cheese as its star product, in addition to what María calls its “dance partners”: select wines and craft beers, jams and jellies, chocolate, and of course, splendid fresh bread. Her clients trust her, often putting their choices in her hands by saying “choose whatever you like for me, everything is great at La Manducateca!” They become regulars because she introduces them to new cheeses, and carries many classic ones.



Hacienda Guijoso, from Pago Conesa (Castilla-La Mancha).

María’s love for cheese was present throughout her life, but at 20, she has a distinctive memory of trying a Comté cheese from neighboring France. It impressed her so much that she thought about how she could live on cheese her whole life. This isn’t far from the truth. Today, she doesn’t *only* eat cheese, but it is what puts food on her table, and the element that enlivens the tables of her faithful customers, their families, and their friends.

Trained as an economist, María saw a market for a specialty gourmet goods shop, which she opened in 2015 with the goal of highlighting a variety of high quality products that are not found in regular supermarkets. She takes this commitment seriously, regularly visiting

artisanal cheese producers and attending nationwide fairs to learn about the latest trends in cheese. A current favorite is *Xiros*, made in Galicia, which is similar to a Camembert. Traveling to the south, she also likes a sheep’s cheese from Murcia called *Abuelo Ruperto*, and speaks marvels of what she calls “the jewels that the owners of *Quesos y Besos* make in Jaén,” which won the prize for the best *fromagerie* in the world in 2021, showing that people are watching what is happening in Spain, a country known for its great diversity of regional cuisines, including a myriad of outstanding *quesos*.

For María, cheese is personal. She hosts regular tastings at her shop, focusing on ensuring that people enjoy themselves, have a good time, and are surprised by trying unfamiliar cheeses, ultimately inspiring them to try more on their own, and innovate with unique pairings at home. María pays attention to certain qualities when selecting the products that she features, noting that a cheese must be “technically well done, with nuances that make it evolve over time (and also when we taste it), and have a good story that we can tell.” She is also a dedicated researcher, regularly reading about her sector, visiting other stores, and talking with experts.



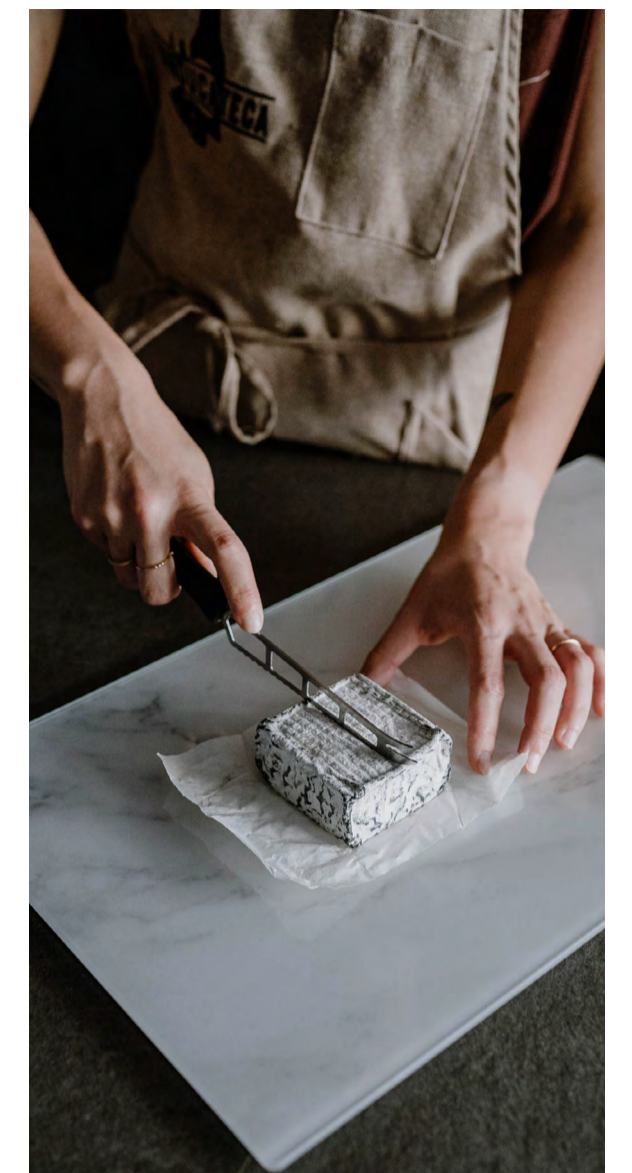
Cheesemonger María Mora, at the entrance of her centrally located shop in Bilbao, Spain.

We asked María what cheese she would create if given the opportunity, and she said it would be “discreet, but with personality, not too intense so as to be tiring, but exciting enough to want to continue eating it, and ideally made by a small family-owned business.” María’s woman-owned business carries on the legacy of women who often received the fresh milk from male farmworkers and were responsible for producing the cheeses. The enthusiasm María displays for her work is contagious, and she points out that “today, there is an important movement of women creating top quality, innovative cheeses for the *haute cuisine* sector, which is so great!”



Savel, from Airas Moniz (Galicia). Best Cheese in Spain, 2021.

Communication and stories are clearly important to María, who always takes time to talk to each of her clients and teach people new things. Cheeses like *Manchego* (Castilla-La Mancha), *Drunken Goat* (Murcia), *Idiazabal* (Basque Country), *Cabrales* (Asturias), or *Mahón* (Balearic Islands) are increasingly more accessible in the United States. María refers to these as “classic” cheeses for the traditional way in which they are made, making them a sure bet for any cheese board. She explains that each one narrates the history of the region from which it hails: *Mahón* takes you to the stunning island of Menorca with its Mediterranean breezes, and *Idiazabal* will transport you to the vibrant green mountains of the Basque Country. When paired with the right dance partners like María encourages us to do, cheeses can excite us and invite us to delight in combinations that will make us come back for more.



Valleoscuro, from Quesos y Besos (Andalusia).



Marcela T. Garcés and Yuri Morejón are the owners of *La Centralita*, a culinary studio located in New York’s Capital City focused on gastronomic richness from all over Spain.

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