

Taste Travel: A Guide to the Flavours of the Algarve

Some people arrive in the Algarve thinking about beaches and go home talking about food. It is no coincidence. Behind the postcard image — cliffs, turquoise waters and almost guaranteed sunshine — lies an entire pantry that rarely makes it into the photographs, yet defines the region just as much as its coastline does. This is an invitation to taste the Algarve slowly, starting with the bread and ending with a glass of wine.

Bread and Markets

Start at the market, preferably early, before the heat begins to dull the smell of fresh fish. Olhão and Loulé are home to two of the region's most beautiful markets — stalls piled with figs still carrying their leaves, almonds waiting to be shelled and freshly picked broad beans stacked without ceremony. This is where you truly understand the seasons: in June, the figs have yet to arrive;

by September, they are ripe, and the stalls begin to fill with grapes, almonds and pomegranates.

Algarve bread deserves attention of its own. In small bakeries inland, away from the coast, large loaves are still baked in wood-fired ovens, with thick crusts and dense interiors that need little more than a drizzle of olive oil and a piece of fresh cheese. This is not the soft bread found on supermarket shelves. It is bread made to last for days, to accompany a bowl of soup or form the base of a simple tomato açorda.

Olive Oil

Olive oil has been produced in the Algarve for centuries, particularly in the barrocal, the limestone belt between the mountains and the coast. Here, olive trees grow in calcareous soils and produce oils that tend to be gentler in flavour than those from the Alentejo or Trás-os-Montes.

It's worth taking a short trip to seek out smaller producers. Many sell directly from their farms or through local shops, often with the chance to taste before buying. A good

Algarve olive oil has fresh, green notes and a slight bitterness on the finish — the kind of thing that can turn a simple plate of tomatoes into something memorable.

Cheese

Less talked about than the wine, the region's goat's and sheep's cheeses deserve just as much attention. Small producers, many of them family-run, make both fresh and aged cheeses that find their way onto petiscos boards across the Algarve.

Fresh cheese served with a drizzle of honey and a handful of walnuts can be as good a dessert as anything to come out of a pastry shop. Stop by Avó Deolinda's stall at Sagres Market and try the wonderful cheeses she makes.

Fish and the Sea

No conversation about Algarve food can avoid fish. The cataplana remains one of the region's signature dishes: clams, prawns and white fish slowly cooked in their own steam with tomatoes, onions and white wine.

But there is plenty to discover beyond it. Look out for xarém, a traditional cornmeal dish often served with shellfish, or simply order grilled fish at a neighbourhood tasca — no elaborate menu, just the catch of the day written on a board by the door.

Olhão and Portimão remain two of the best places to see fish arriving straight from the boats. But if you can, head to our local fish auction early in the morning — not to buy, but simply to watch the ritual unfold: the rapid auctions, boxes packed with ice, fishermen negotiating before the sun is fully up.

Producers and Farms

Scattered across the Algarve's interior are small farms that open their doors to visitors: producers of honey, citrus fruit, dried figs and medronho, the region's traditional spirit, distilled from the fruit of the strawberry tree. Strong and aromatic, it is traditionally served in small glasses after dinner. Spending even an afternoon at one of these farms changes the way you look at what arrives on your plate that evening.

Wine

The area around Lagoa is the historic heart of winemaking in the Algarve, but today wineries can be found throughout the region, producing fresh whites that pair beautifully with fish and fuller-bodied reds made for grilled meat at the end of the day.

Many offer relaxed, informal tastings where an hour spent talking to the producer can teach you more about the Algarve than any guidebook ever could.

The Algarve you taste is different from the Algarve you photograph — and perhaps it is the more interesting of the two. You do not need a reservation at a Michelin-starred restaurant to find it. What you need is time, curiosity and the willingness to ask the person serving you, “What’s good today?”

More often than not, the answer is worth the journey.

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