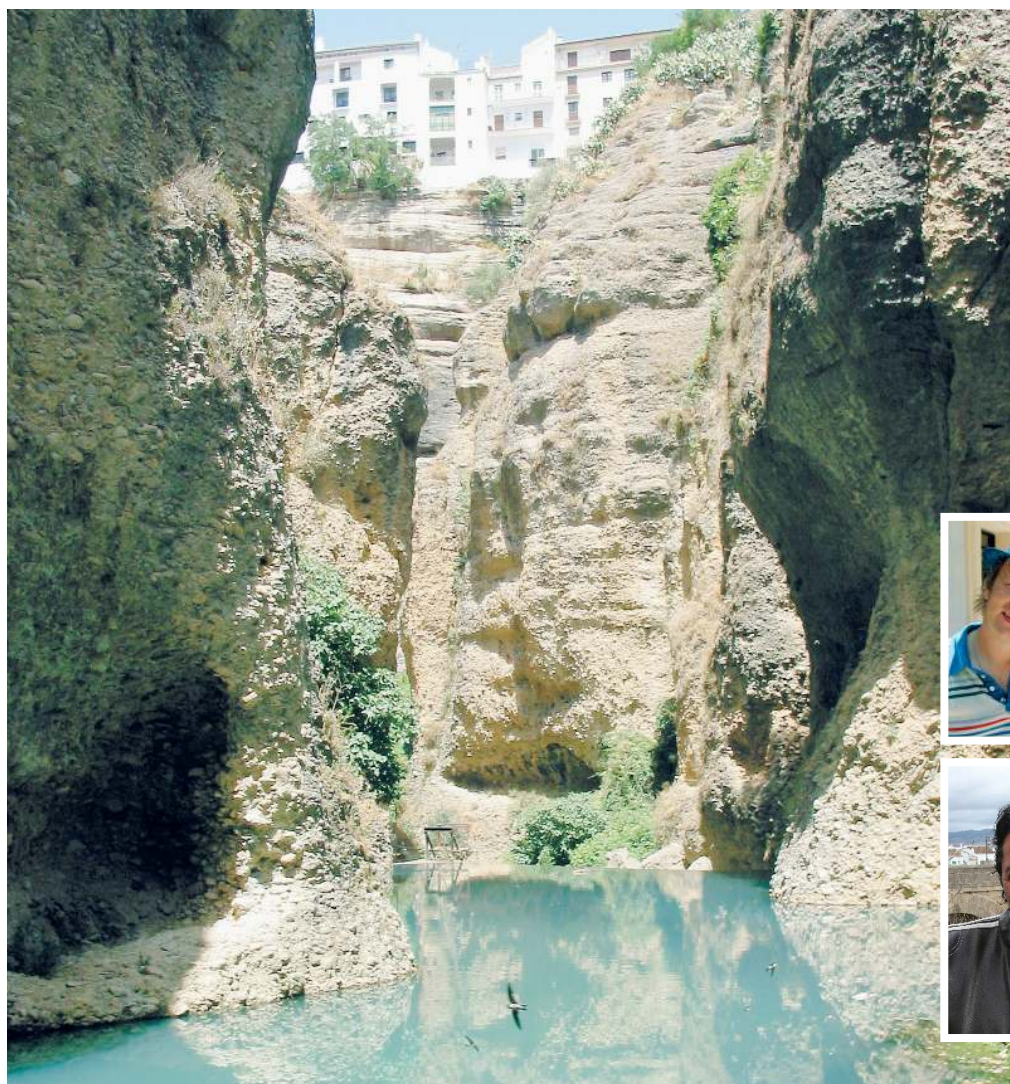


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Food for thought in City of Dreams

Words and pics by Jon Clarke

WHEN Jamie Oliver looked for the perfect place to film a documentary on Spanish food one would have expected him to have chosen a city like Bilbao, or perhaps Barcelona.

But the celebrity chef plumped for somewhere altogether different; Ronda, in the heart of Andalucía.

While at first this might seem a strange choice, for someone who has lived in the town for half a decade it makes perfect sense.

Ronda, quite simply, has been on the up for the last few years.

The third most visited place in all of Spain after Madrid and Barcelona, the town though is no longer just a destination for day-trippers



Turn to Page 12



HOT STUFF: Chefs Jamie Oliver (top) and Novelli rate Ronda's food, while (left) the Tajo

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12

Ronda special

Drinking wine from skulls since the Roman times

A haven for foreigners, many bloodthirsty, since the days of Christ

FOREIGN visitors have been heading to Ronda for over 2000 years.

One of Spain's oldest towns, in Roman times Ronda was completely independent and even had its own coinage, fittingly with a tondril of grapes on its flipside.

A bustling military bastion known as Arunda (which means surrounded by mountains) it became known, even in Rome, for its wines.

Renovate any old building and you are bound to find something of interest, if not Roman, at least Arabic.

Take the recent discovery at the 12 hectare finca of Morosanto, near Arriate.

Here, archaeologists have found a 'lagar' or grape-treading floor and pipes through which wine was transported to vats.

The discovery - among a series of columns, statues and a 21-metre Roman swimming pool and sauna - now means that historians can link the production of wine in Ronda to 3AD.

You can feel the weight of the Romans wandering around the old town, which is full of



stunning corners, arches and doorways.

One of its three main bridges across the Tajo (or Ronda's famous gorge) is often called the 'Roman bridge', although it is actually Moorish in origin.

Look west from any vantage point along the top of the Tajo and try and spot the flattened out hilltop where the Romans built their forti-

fied town of Acinipo.

An incredibly haunting place - particularly during stormy weather, when you really feel you are on top of the world - the impressive amphitheatre can be seen from miles around.

But before you take the drive up to Acinipo you should take a walking tour of the town, starting at the most inter-

esting part of Ronda, down at the Arabic baths.

Said to be the best preserved example in Spain, the baths have little changed since the 15th century, when Arabic Ronda was still holding out against the Christians on the extreme Western flank of the much beleaguered Kingdom of Granada.

The town only finally fell to Isabel and Fernando after a long struggle in 1485, seven years before the Moors were finally banished from Spain. An atmospheric place built mostly in the 13th century, a virtual reality film takes visitors back to the days of Arabic Ronda, when the Moors knew it as Runda.

It is about as good an introduction as you are going to get to any Andalusian town.

From here it is an easy walk up into the *Casco Historico*, which is a wonderful place to while away a morning.

You firstly head up through an evocative arch to the splendid Renaissance mansion known as the Palacio del Marques de Salvatierra, which has a portal of colonial images from Peru.

A few paces uphill and you arrive at the Casa del Rey Moro (House of the Moorish King), which is actually an 18th century mansion, once rented by *Withnail and I* actor Paul McGann.

Here once stood the palace of Moorish emir Badir, who drank wine from the skulls of the victims he beheaded.

The only part of the house which certainly goes back to Moorish days though is the amazing underground stairway (or Mina), which heads, via 365 steps down to the river below. It was carved into the rock to guarantee water in times of siege from the marauding Christians in the 13th century.

Coincidentally, anyone looking for a good museum, why not try the Museo Lara, where there is a cornucopia of local collectibles on display.



AT THE GATE: Ronda's biggest celebrities are its two bullfighting brothers Fran and Cayetano Rivera, here seen leaving the town's ancient bullring two years ago, while (top) a statue guards over a church in the old town

A City of Dreams for the foodies

From Page 11

from the Costa del Sol. Over the last few years it has become increasingly popular for lovers of good food and stylish hotels, as well as nature, walking and outdoor pursuits.

That is exactly why Conservative Party leader David Cameron chose it as a destination earlier this year, spending his time



VISITOR: Cameron

hiking, canoeing and horse riding.

It is also why Fatboy

Slim and Zoe Ball came for a week of R&R last year and why the sister of Trinnie Woodall from TV programme *What Not to Wear* has recently bought a house there.

Chef Jean Christophe Novelli has owned at least two homes.

On top of this Piers Morgan has recently been to the town to film part of a documentary, arriving just

days after racing drivers Michael Schumacher and Damon Hill, who had been testing cars at the nearby Ascari race track.

The *Britain's Got Talent* host noted in particular his surprise at the area's "striking beauty".

"Piers said it shattered any misconceptions he previously had about the country," a friend told *the Olive Press*.

Ronda special 13



THE 'CONO' MOMENT: Tajo bridge where Novelli fell for Ronda

WHILE Ronda's main allure is still undoubtedly its historic core and incredible location amid soaring mountain scenery, it is rapidly becoming known for its modern cooking, designer wines and chic hotels.

The home of bullfighting, and once the stomping ground of the likes of Orson Welles (who is buried there) and Ernest Hemingway (who described it as the perfect place to spend a honeymoon as 'there's nothing to do'), today you are more likely to find Germaine Greer or Adrian Brody sipping a glass of wine on one of its hotel terraces.

Celebrity chef Jean Christophe Novelli is a regular visitor for its excellent range of restaurants and foods. He told *the Olive Press* how he was house-hunting in the town, having opened a restaurant in Marbella.

The former *Hell's Kitchen* star, 46, is looking to buy one of the old town houses right on the Tajo.

"I want to wake up and look out at the gorge and the amazing view. One day I am going to live in Ronda."

In particular he claims the town was one of the reasons he was able to get over the most stressful time of his life having split with his second wife and lost his restaurant business in the UK.

"I was at a low ebb. I had lost everything," he revealed. "I remember parking the car outside the Parador and walking over to the bridge. I wasn't sure what to expect, but remember shouting out f*** (or experiencing the 'cono' moment as the Spanish describe it).

"It was great. We went out for tapas, wandered the

Chic, and great for the stomach

"Even the water is unique," explains Jean Christophe Novelli



TASTY: Ronda has great local produce

streets and went running and cycling. I fell in love with the town. It was not just the location. The cooking was amazing. Let's face it, all the proper tomatoes, wild herbs growing all around you, the olive oil and wine are incredible – even the water is unique!"

This is certainly reflected in the excellent range of tapas bars and restaurants in Ronda (see page 20).

Aside from well established Tragabuches, which was the first restaurant in Andalucía to win a Michelin star, there are at least a dozen other excellent places to eat.

Much of this is to do with the huge range of good local ingredients. In particular the hams and chorizos from nearby Montejaque and Arriate are famed, while the superb goats and sheep cheeses from Grazalema (Payoyo) and Cuevas del Becerro (Rey Cabra) are served in the top restaurants in Madrid.

But it is the wine industry, which has become the area's Great White Hope. There has been a recent influx of winemakers taking advantage of the area's microclimate that has seen Ronda producing some of Spain's most exciting new wines. So good is the wine that there are now nearly 20 vineyards here, and in 2000 Ronda got its own appellation.

Aside from the internationally known Ramos Paul, which is the largest vineyard in the area, there is the fantastic organic vineyard of Federico Schatz, who produces nearly a dozen different wines.

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WHERE TO STAY

Dream on in the City of Dreams



Appropriately called the City of Dreams there are plenty of excellent places to stay in the town. In the heart of Ronda, one of the most charming places to stay is the historic townhouse San Gabriel.

The hotel, which was the first in the old town, counts on its own bodega and library, plus – best of all – a cinema, where guests can watch a range of films.

Once stayed in by Bob Hoskins, it has won various awards for its environmental stance.

Nearby, another equally charming hotel is the Alavera de los Banos, in a sleepy spot, right next to the historic Arabic baths.

The boutique hotel has a wonderful back garden overlooking wide open fields and yet it is only five minutes walk to all the town's best restaurants and bars.

Outside of Ronda, in the most privileged of spots is fantastic Molino del Santo, a rural retreat, which was one of the first of its kind in Andalusia.

Run by English couple

Pauline and Andy, the hotel, which has been open for over 20 years, has the knack of keeping guests happy with just the right mix of comfort, good food and character.

The award-winning hotel has a good environmental record and prides itself on employing staff from the nearby village of Montejaque.

Also out in the countryside near Ronda is the stylish Fuente de la Higuera, which was chosen by David Cameron and Adrian Brody among others for their recent Ronda holidays.

In the same valley is the more modern Hotel Don Benito, which has excellent good value rates and its own tennis and paddle court, which is popular with guests and locals alike.

Last but not least, on the other side of town, Finca La Guzman is a charming old cortijo, that has been lovingly converted by upstanding English businessman Peter Macleod.

Sitting in lovely countryside just off the El Burgo road, the hotel serves food for its guests in its leafy back garden.

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16 *Ronda* special



Doors to his

There are many fascinating stories behind the closed doors of Ronda. Equally appealing is the life in the city in present times. This is a selection of doors worth the attention of tourists both of Ronda as well

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18 *Ronda* special

By Doug Wills

RONDA may be the jewel of Andalucía's white towns, but for a growing number of travelers, it's all about the road. In this case, the back roads, bike loops and hiking trails. For a new generation of travelers, Andalucía is not about bull-fighting, flamenco or sangria on beaches. Andalucía's new cathedral is its mountain areas, in particular the Serranía de Ronda and nearby Genal Valley and the Sierra de las Nieves and Grazalema Natural Parks.

Today, Ronda and the Sierras of the South are rising. The protected mountains, valleys and trails of the Serranía are becoming a top destination for hiking, cycling and mountain excursions in Western Europe. But the city is at a crossroads. Does it want to be Yosemite or Niagara Falls? Does the area want to mix commerce and landscape with higher levels of harmony or hang tacky ornaments on its pristine mountain areas, fouling water resources with golf courses and condos? An estimated 10 to 15 per cent of 60-plus million people who visit Spain in 2008 chose sustainable forms of outdoor tourism and spends up to 4.26 billion euros on eco-tourism, according to government figures. Sustainable travelers don't do half-day bus tours, buy a t-shirt, and then shuttle back to Marbella. Sustainable travelers stay longer, seek-out top restaurants and artisans, and pay a premium for specialized outings.

Ronda, a town of 40,000 people, is today the third most visited city in Spain (behind Madrid and Sevilla).

Sustainable travel is an important engine in Ronda's growth and why the town is on the up. The seeds of Ronda's out-

The peak of outdoor Spain

In appreciation of Alastair Boyd, the father of conservation in the Serranía de Ronda



BIKING: A top bike ride to nearby Zahara

door renaissance were planted more than 50 years ago, by a writer Alastair Boyd, a lover of all things Arcadia.

He was like the American hero John Muir. Both men were born in Scotland and loved their mountain excursions.

In Boyd's case, it was the Sierras of Spain. In Muir's case, it was the Sierras of California.

Muir was the father of America's national parks, a conservationist and a writer. Muir had a way words that stirred emotions and stoked politicians into action. His stories helped create parks like Yosemite in California and Yellowstone in Wyoming. America has no Roman ruins, no Greek columns, and no Spanish-Arab landmarks like the Alhambra. It's monuments

are its national parks. "Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, and over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is like going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountains and national parks are useful, not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life." Muir wrote in 1911. Some 50 years later, Alastair

Boyd - aka Lord Kilmarnock - had similar notion and did his own Muir-turn for Spain.

Boyd ran a local bar in Ronda in the 1950s and an English language school in 1960s.

By most accounts, Boyd was a mediocre businessman. His real passions were horse treks through the mountains, and writing about the people of Andalucía.

If the Sierras of Spain was a temple, Boyd was its high priest. "Every man should have his own sierra," Boyd wrote in his first book *The Road from Ronda* in 1967. It's easy appreciate the Ronda area that Boyd describes. 3000 to 5000 foot mountains of granite and marble. Valleys made smooth by extinct glaciers. Forests of pine, oak and cork trees.

On several excursions, my family picked fat figs the size of lemons

Over the last ten years, some of our favorite excursions are the switch-back roads of Genal Valley (52 km loop from Ronda), the ice cold rivers that spill out of mountain caves like Cueva de Gato, near Benaoján (24 km loop from Ronda), and the towering cliffs of El Bosque (a El Capitan look-alike) through the pine for-

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Ronda special

19

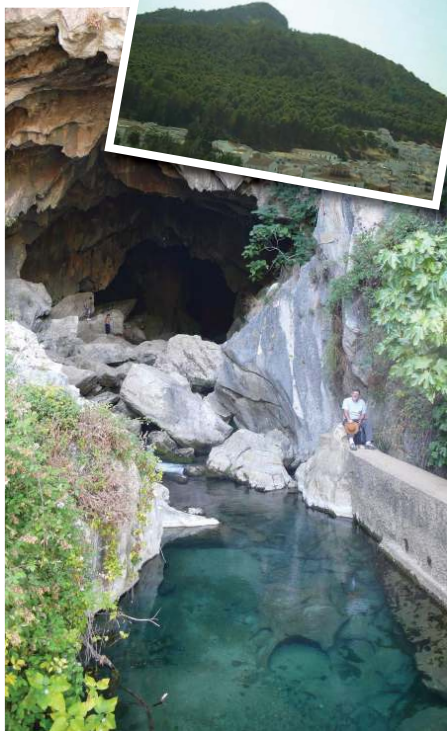
ests of Grazalema (40 km loop). On several excursions, my family picked fat figs the size of lemons. We saw several fig, almond and chestnut trees wedged in rocky perches, a testament to their tenacity.

For us, the outdoor experience around Ronda tends to re-boot your DNA. Last month, we made a return trip to the Genal Valley, about 18 kilometers from Ronda. There is only one main road through the Genal Valley, about 40 kilometers long, that connects about seven mountain towns. The road is narrow, roughly paved, and barely wide enough for two cars. And that is way most locals want it. On summer weekends it is full of cyclists and in the evening it transforms into strollers lane for the seniors of the area, who smile and wave at passing cyclists.

Some 50 years after Boyd's first book, I am heartened that it is being embraced by conservationists today. Boyd was an old soul with progressive ideas. He understood the value of protecting open spaces like John Muir. He also knew how to speak truth to power. His shadow life as a member of the English House of Lords brought sunlight to unchecked development in the Ronda area. But at some cost. Long court fights reportedly took a toll on Boyd's health. He died at 91 in March this year.

To mark Boyd's life, the Olive Press thought it would be fun to encourage readers to take a series of bike rides around the area, using the services of local bike guide, Cycle Ronda owner Ferry Staleman. These circular excursions retrace parts of Boyd's original travels and head to neighboring towns like Arriate, Setenil, Ronda la Vieja, El Gator and Grazalema, each within easy reach of Ronda.

The first heads from Ronda to Arriate and then on to Setenil, before heading back via Cuevas del Becerro (51kms). The second heads first to the ancient Roman settlement of Acinipo before heading back via an ancient route known as Ruta de la Bandoleros (47kms). The third heads to Benaolan and up the Guadiaro valley to Jimena and finally Atajate (52kms).



VARIED: Boyd promoted local beauty spots such as Cueva del Gato and the hidden village of El Gator (inset)

Father of conservation

Alastair Boyd was born in 1927. The son of a Scottish lord, Boyd was educated at Cambridge and for nearly 20 years, lived in Ronda in the 1950s and 1960s. In Ronda, Boyd worked as a bar owner, language school owner, and writer. By most accounts, including his own, Boyd was a bad businessman with a serious case of wanderlust. During that time, Boyd traveled by horseback from Ronda throughout the Sierras of the Southern Spain. In Spain, Boyd wrote two books about his



travels, arguing for greater protection for mountains of Andalusia. "Every man should have his own sierra," Boyd wrote in *Road from Ronda* in 1967.

FACTFILE: THE PICKS OF THE NEARBY SERRANIA

RONDA is literally circled by two national parks, the Sierra de las Nieves to the East and the Sierra de Grazalema to the West. Both are full of wonderful walks and pretty towns to visit. Here are a few suggestions for excursions out of the town.

RONDA LA VIEJA (ACINIPO)

A 15-minute drive from Ronda at the top of one of the highest hills in the area the Roman's built their ancient city. It still has much evidence of

or to enjoy the tapas at the local bars that include El Almacen, one of the finest in the whole Serrania. Independent from Ronda, since the 16th century it has been staunchly communist since the death of dictator Franco and has some excellent local fiestas, including *Dia de la Vieja* in the Spring and last weekend's clever *Fiesta en el Aire*, an Inside Out festival with excellent music.

SETENIL DE LAS BODEGAS

Only 20 minutes drive, the historic Roman town of Setenil de las Bodegas is a real eye opener and amazing for photography. Built in a dip in the rolling landscape north of Ronda, it was built on a series of caves, which served to keep the wines of the Romans cool in summer, hence its name. It is best to leave your car outside the town, wander up to the old fortress before heading right down to the bottom (with the famous cave overhang) for a fine tapas lunch at a couple of excel-



their ingenious race, with a large part of its amphitheatre intact and a lot more to look at, not to mention the views. The visitor centre is only open for the morning, but one can always climb up to the amphitheatre out of hours.

WINE

Near to Acinipo and en route are a series of Ronda's best vineyards. We would recommend a visit to either Federico Schatz or Los Fruales, both of which are close to the town.

HORSE RIDING

Take a ride out into the nearby Sierras, like David Cameron did. Best bet is Picadero la Granja (see advert)

ARRIATE

The nearest village to Ronda is Arriate, a thriving, bustling place, known for its hams and open, friendly locals. Just a ten minute drive, it's a great place for a wander, to take a coffee

lent restaurants. Next door are a couple of shops selling local olive oil based shampoos and soaps, which we provide in your bathrooms.

EL BURGO

Take the mountain drive of a lifetime up alongside Sierra de las Nieves national park all the way to the stunning hidden mountain town of El Burgo. Only a 30 minute drive, the road was once the main track to Malaga for donkeys and bandits and has some of the best views in Spain. Set in its own stunning valley, this austere town has a very sleepy feel, but has a couple of good spots for lunch, not to mention great walks right from the door.

GRAZALEMA AND ZAHARA DE LA SIERRA
Grazalema and Zahara are two of the most evocative towns around Ronda. Both set in spectacular scenery and with some lovely sites, Zahara has a



towering castle above it and a great restaurant Al Lago, while Grazalema (a beautifully conserved gem) was once the centre of the wool industry and you can still buy delightful rugs and bedspreads.

VALLE DE GENAL

Just 20 mins away, between Ronda and the Costa del Sol, is a fabulous valley full of delightful former Arabic villages, with some lovely walks and a number of good restaurants, particularly in Benalauria and Alpandire, where you will find Casa Grande and La Molienda.

BENAOJAN AND MONTAJAQUE

If it is wonderful mountain scenery you are after and a couple of towns famous for their bandits then this pair are worth a visit. Montajaque has a cave with the oldest cave paintings in Spain, while Benaolan was once the centre of the ham and sausage industry. There is a fabulous walk from Benaolan Estacion down the river and railway line to Jimera de Liber, from where you can get the train back. At each end is a great lunch spot, with Quercus and Molino del Santo. The whole walk, among many others is written about in Guy Hunter Watts' book *Walking in Andalusia*.



INDIAN EVENINGS EVERY SATURDAY 6.30pm

Bar la Bola

Menu for only 7.50 euros

Main courses of Chicken Bhuna, Madras or Korma or mixed vegetable curry, all with rice or chips - a drink plus tea or coffee

C/ Espinel 80, Ronda - Tel: 952 914 219

Bar Polo
Cafe

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Private parties



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20 Ronda special

WHERE TO EAT

Tapas and more

RONDA is, without a doubt, the food capital of Andalusia.

While Malaga has its fair share of good places to eat, and Marbella is not spoilt for choice, the City of Dreams, as dubbed by Dutch poet Rilke, offers an incredible range from Michelin-star dining, to some fabulous cheap and cheerful euro-a-tapa joints as good as anywhere else in Spain.

No less than four out of the 70 restaurants listed in the book *Dining Secrets of Andalusia* (Santana Books) are in Ronda.

From the exclusive, vanguard Tragabuches, which was Andalusia's first Michelin-starred restaurant, to its antithesis, the soulful, unpretentious Almocobar, there is plenty on offer.

One great new addition to the Ronda restaurant fra-

ternity is Meson Rondeno, which serves up a delicious *parillada de carne* for just 10.90 euros a head, as well as some delicious paella dishes.

Another, rather grander option, is Duquesa de Parcent, in an elegant townhouse with breathtaking views of the famous Tajo bridge.

If you are looking for pizza La Vita e Bella in Calle Nueva is a good bet, while Cafeteria La Bola, run by Indian Lalit, does excellent special curry nights on Saturdays.

Just up the road is the superb cafe/bar Buenos Aires, run by a characteristic Argentinian Omar, who has a great eye for detail and serves up excellent authentic Argentinian dishes all day.

But, best of all, why not simply head out for a tapas tour starting at the superb quality Siete de Copas, which sits on a side road below Tragabuches restaurant.

With a great philosophy it serves up largely organic food – not to mention selling its own veg to local customers – and on weekends it gets busy with a variety of concerts.

Next up is the very charming El Porton up a small alley opposite the bull ring. Here, Pepe and his sidekick Javier have been serving up delicious tapas for over two decades.

These include, Ronda's classic; a quail egg with jamon on toast, and if you want something more substantial why not go for a plate of mountain meats and cheeses for just 10 euros.

From here head across the



CHARISMATIC: Mates since childhood running El Porton, while above, the grand dining room at Duquesa de Parcent

Plaza Socorro to the two tapas bars Bodega Socorro, which is run by a father and son, and the more modern, impressive Rincon de los Amigos, where most tapas are just one euro a throw.

Just around the corner in Calle Lorenzo Borrego is Patatin Patatan, a celebrated local bar, usually busy and serving up some excellent tapas

Further up Calle Molino, in Calle San Jose is a simple place called Bar Antonio, which also has numerous tapas and small bocadillos for just one euro each.

Heading down to Barrio San Francisco, first of all, you will find one of Andalusia's best restaurants Almocobar beside the famous Arabic gate of the same name.

Over the square though you will also find two excellent tapas bars, Bodega San Francisco, which is busy throughout the year, with its tables in the square, and Bar Benito, which serves up a fine selection of sherries and traditional tapas to boot.



SERVICE WITH A SMILE: At Bar Antonio

For something a little different why not head to Bar Polo, attached to Hotel Polo, where anyone wanting to see international football games will be rewarded with a big TV and Sky digital. For night owls, or if you need somewhere to check your emails, why not head to Bar Central Corner, a stylish spot, which gets very popu-

lar on weekend nights, and always has some excellent music playing in the background.

For the more ambitious there is also Los Caireles, a converted cinema in Arriate, where most weekends there are superb concerts. This atmospheric place is well worth checking out if you have the time.



Ronda special

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ORGANIC: Healthy vegetables to eat or to buy at Siete de Copas, cutting ham at Bodega Soccoro and the head chef at tasty Meson Rondeno



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