

Spain's Manchego Tops The World!

The title of this year's **World's Champion Cheese** has just been announced with the honour going to a *Gran Reserva D.O. Manchego* of **Dehesa de los Llanos**, located in Albacete. It's a well-known highly respected artisan producer that's regularly been written about in Spain's gastronomy and wine publications - the latter due its famed wine bodega.

The award as World #1 is the first time a cheese from Spain has garnered top prize in the cheese world's largest and most respected competition held annually in Birmingham, England.

In one of the goat cheese categories, the semi-cured medium-hard cheese from **Quesería Artesanal Las RRR**, a small family-run producer in Maracena (just northwest of downtown Granada), Andalucía received bronze, putting it among the top seven in the world. In the 2011 competition **Las RRR** scooped up both silver and bronze.

This is great news and well-deserved! I first tasted their cheeses in Granada a few years ago - cheeses that remain under the radar even in Spain and not that well-known across Andalucía.

Granada has never gained the status it deserves when it comes to gastronomy - and it's always seemed that people from the province will shrug their shoulders with a "Well, what else is new..." and then gently smile knowing just what remarkable foods (and wines) they have.

The semi-cured raw milk **Las RRR** has a good firm, slightly crumbly but creamy texture and opens with a lovely richness ending in long-lasting creaminess in the mouth. Wonderful subtle acidity and sweetnut-chestnut notes while mineral and dry herbs keep in perfect harmony.

It's also interesting to note just how many cheeses from the Canary Islands won awards this year. Usually and traditionally, cheese fans and experts talk about the cheeses from Asturias and Extremadura - and with good reason. But a quick count tells me that the Islands led the way among the Spanish regions.

Again, this is no surprise. Some years ago, at the annual food expo **Salon de Gourmets** in Madrid, **Mr. Mariano Sanz Pech** introduced me to a range of goat cheeses from *Las Canarias*.

Mr. Sanz Pech is widely known as one of two, maybe three individuals in Spain to have fought and lobbied to save Spain's magnificent artisan cheese culture.

An agronomist by profession, he has spoken and written widely about Spanish cheeses around the world and is, of course, one of the country's influential competition judges.

Mr. Sanz Pech has been a trusted and highly-valued guest of the **Commercial Office of Spain (Embassy of Spain) in Toronto** to educate Canadians about Spanish cheese in public seminars. These literally launched both importation and awareness of Spain's cheeses in Canada not many years ago.

I was fortunate to learn from Mariano Sanz Pech in Canada and in discussion with him in Spain. I count him as mentor in all cheeses Spanish.

His leading me to these now internationally-renowned cheeses of the Canary Islands for whom he has worked as promoter and supporter, has again confirmed to me of his singular importance and knowledge in the world of cheese.