

By Derek Workman

Horchata

the perfect summer drink

If someone were to tell you that there was an elixir that was 'warming, desiccating, expels flatulence, fortifies the bowels, alleviates colic, induces urine and menstruation, remedies nausea and dizziness and is used in rinses for ulcers of the mouth and gums' you'd probably think he was trying to sell you the old 'snake oil', which probably does nothing more than give you wind and turns your teeth yellow. But such an elixir does exist, and recent medical studies show that it is an excellent source of vitamins C and E and essential minerals such as magnesium, potassium and calcium; is loaded with highly beneficial proteins, unsaturated fats and enzymes that help digestion; has more iron than milk and doesn't contain harmful lactose, caseins, or cholesterol; is gluten free so dead good for diabetics and anyone with an allergy to dairy products, and is said to be good for sufferers of high blood pressure and helps prevent atherosclerosis and kidney insufficiency. Problem is, you have to come to Spain to get it where the magic ingredient from which the tonic is made grows.

Most people supping a cold glass of horchata at the height of the summer sun would probably think that it was no more than a look-alike milk that was particularly refreshing at that time of year. And they'd be right, but few of them would know that, as with many things in Spain, they have the much-maligned Moors for bringing the drink to their sunshaded tables – or at least the chufa, tiger nut to you and me (or earth almond, to the more poetic), which, along with water and a bit of sugar, is the sole ingredient of horchata.

second millennium. While I sit on the terrace of M6n Orxata's bar in the beautifully restored Mercado Col6n in the centre of Valencia, I sup from a long, chilled glass of thick horchata, and dunk a couple of fartons, the sponge finger biscuit that give English-speakers a giggle. The bar is a recent innovation in the life of M6n Orxata because the company got off to a smaller – much smaller – start. Think of the hot dog stands of New York and you have the idea of how the friends got their product to market, bringing up to date the old idea of the itinerant horchata salesman.

"When we started, the idea of the man selling horchata from a carrota (cart) in the street was long gone, except for during the main fiestas, and people would buy the drink from horchaterias and cafes and drink it there or take it home. They were usually suspicious about buying it in the street, assuming that it would be poor quality, so what we had to do was make it interesting to buy from a carrota. We designed bright carts that we put in the main tourist points in the city and they became very popular, once people realised that the product that we make is of very high quality."

It also helps having photos of the King, Prince Philip and film director Pedro Almodovar sampling your brew, although they never got the Pope to have a tippie when he visited Valencia for the World Meeting of Families in July 2006. They did a neat little wheeze, though, by making rosaries from tiger nuts, and give a few to everyone who buys a drink. Surprisingly, the nut that I and my friends used to gorge on as kids in England is barely recognised by the folk who have it growing on their doorsteps.

