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Spain is the world's second largest tourist destination, with people flocking for the beaches, the sun, the rich culture and the fine food. In the north-eastern region of Catalonia however, the growth in craft breweries has brought a new focus: beer tourism. **Malin Norman** explores.



**O**n finishing the Barcelona half marathon a few years ago, I went in search of somewhere to replenish the energy deposits and stumbled upon Garage Beer Co. Sitting by the bar and munching on a tasty platter of serrano ham and local cheese, I devoured an equally impressive IPA from the brewery. Chatting to the bartender, I found out that just around the corner is BierCab, one of the highest rated beer bars in the world, and that there were another 80-or-so beer venues scattered around town. Spain is perhaps not a country that people immediately associate with beer, but in Catalonia at least, beer is booming.

Spain is one of the hottest places right now, at least in terms of popularity. According to EXCELTUR (Alliance for Excellency in Tourism), Spain is the second most visited country in the world with around 82 million visitors per year. And of all its regions, Catalonia is the most popular with almost a quarter of the tourism market. The north-eastern region is well-known for its architecture and rich history but Catalonia is also recognised for its gastronomy, with internationally acclaimed fine dining venues and vineyards. In 2016, the region, which includes Barcelona, was named European Gastronomic Region of the Year. So it really should come as no great surprise that around 80 percent of the country's craft beer is also produced here.

There are more than 100 breweries in Catalonia and interestingly, almost 90 percent of them provide tastings at their facilities, clearly realising the potential of beer tourism. And it works both ways, for the tourism industry can clearly see the benefits of beer. Earlier this year, the Catalan Tourist Board invited a number of international beer writers for a beer-inspired tour. Beer historian and writer Martyn Cornell was impressed by the emphasis on food pairing. "Catalonia has a great deal to offer as a beer destination, not least the obvious enthusiasm of those involved in the craft beer scene," he said. "Its traditions as a centre of gastronomy, of great food, clearly



influence its craft brewers, who seem much more interested in the combination of craft beer and good food than in many other centres of craft beer brewing."

## POESÍA LÍQUIDA

Catalonia's most established beer expert is long-time beer blogger Albert Barrachina, a BJCP judge and the brewer at Art Cervesers. He explains that both the home brewing trend and the craft beer movement kicked off earlier here than in the rest of Spain, and was heavily inspired by the US and Italy. And there's the crucial influence of the late Steve Huxley. The English expat, homebrewer, author of the Spanish beer bible *Cerveza: Poesía Líquida* and contributor to Garrett Oliver's *Oxford Companion to Beer*, was the 'father' of many homebrewers and brewers in Catalonia.

Barrachina emphasises that despite its growth and recognition by international beer connoisseurs, the craft beer market is still fairly modest in comparison to some other countries. "We have a big job in educating the bar owners, the retailers and the end consumers about what we are doing," he admits. However, close collaboration between brewers has resulted in a noticeable improvement in quality. "The beer quality has taken a big step forward. Go to the breweries and taste their beers, in Barcelona and elsewhere. You will discover lots of curious things and special recipes, and of course have a good time!"

Joan Villar-i-Martí, another prominent beer writer and manager of Barcelona Beer Festival, elaborates further on the growth of the beer scene. "Just like other countries without a remarkable brewing tradition, some years ago a small community of people started building what we have today; more than 100 breweries, a wide variety of 'new wave' beers that are conquering even the most demanding palates, and lots of exciting places in which to find them."

## AWARDS AND INNOVATION

One of the major players is Edge Brewing, named best new brewery in the world in 2015. Its beer ambassador Robin Barden highlights the importance of the



Sampling the wares at the Barcelona Beer Festival



There are around 200 beers to taste at La Fira del Poble Nou



The founders of La Fira del Poble Nou take a moment to toast their festival