

## Lots of Christmas Cheer

Pacharán, or patxarán, is a very well known Spanish liqueur &ndash; one of my own favourites &ndash; and it is especially popular at Christmas time. There are also some very exotic sounding cocktails based on pacharán:

Pacharán/cava, called San Fermin.

Pacharán/orange, called butano from those wonderful orange gas bottles we all love!

Pacharán/milk, vaca rosa, or pink cow

So, I thought this month, on the run up to Christmas, I'd talk about the plant which gives pacharán it's very distinctive flavour and that wonderful caramellised pink colour.

The prunus spinosa is widely distributed through Europe, though it is believed to have originated in Western Asia. It is a very tolerant plant which will grow almost anywhere except in very wet or acidic soils. In England, we know the fruits as sloes &ndash; which give us that other famous drink, sloe gin. In other parts of Europe, it is commonly called blackthorn or wild plum. As you can guess, it is a close relative of our domesticated plums and cherries though it is actually a member of the rose family, which explains its thorny nature!

It forms a very tough spiny shrub or small tree, to around 4m high, and it is usually found growing in rough ground, on the edges of woods, in wild hedgerows and it is a great survivor. Because of its adaptability, it is an extremely useful pioneer planting which provides good windbreak material and protection from the elements to more delicate souls! Birds and mammals love the shelter provided by its twiggy, dense branches &ndash; often nesting there. Insects are attracted by the smell of the flowers and thus pollinate to form the fruits. The flowers appear, rather unusually, before the leaves, in early spring, and they are white and sweetly fragrant. The dull green and toothed leaves unfurl later. The fruits, known as endrina in Spanish, are blue/black with a cloudy white sheen and they are ready for harvesting in late summer.

Traditionally they have great fame in various home cures and were particularly used for easing sore throats. Long used as a home brew, the endrina is high in vitamin C, is a tonic, a great digestant and it fortifies the stomach. Folk lore also says that it can prevent heart attacks &ndash; so we've lots of excuses to have the odd copita or two! The wood of the tree is useful for turning and is used for many small items within the home and, famously, for walking sticks.

The endrina has been known in Europe for many hundreds of years, and, as with sloe gin, has always been used to produce a great home brew. But it has, more recently, been cultivated large scale in Navarra, Aragón and El Pais Vasco for the making of pacharán. Commercially, the trees are spaced every 5m and if you want to try planting some, you'll need at least two for pollination. It's a very undemanding tree, happy on poor ground and, of course, once established, it will live without irrigation.

The fruits are harvested at the end of summer and macerated in aguardiente for seven or eight months, always kept in a cool and dark situation. This concoction is then filtered and diluted with a syrup made from brown sugar and water. Occasionally a few laurel leaves are added or roasted coffee beans for extra flavour &ndash; even, sometimes, poppy seeds or cinnamon sticks. These additions are, largely, what give the variations in taste between trade names and give great scope for experimentation when home brewing.

Try a bottle this Christmas time to help digest all that turkey &ndash; it's said to be best neat but I like it with ice and I have to admit that some of those cocktails sound tempting. Perhaps I'll try a San Fermin on Christmas morning instead of the more usual bucks fizz! Get planting now and, by next year, you could be brewing your own!

Salud &ndash; and a very happy and peaceful Christmas season to you all!

We are now taking orders for Christmas trees; call and see us at the garden centre for details.

Don't forget that we sell Gift Vouchers &ndash; an ideal Christmas present or, what about a copy of my book?

Several of you have asked if I would set up a garden club in Cómpeeta. To try and assess the interest in such a scheme, please ring or email me if the idea sounds good to you. My thoughts are to hold monthly meetings at the Garden Centre, during daylight hours. The format would be a talk about a plant of the month, a break for tea/coffee/cake then a questions and answers session. I'd be pleased to hear from you!