

THE ALMOND TREES OF MAJORCA



THE MAJORCAN LANDSCAPE'S BEST MOMENT ARRIVES IN JANUARY, WHEN THE FLOWERING ALMOND TREES BECOME ONE OF THE ISLAND'S BEST-KNOWN WINTER IMAGES. AT NIGHT, THEIR Iridescent PHOSPHORESCENCE GIVES THE AIR THE REMOTE, UNDEFINED QUALITY OF THE GERANIUM-PINK OF THEIR FLOWERS.

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The many perspectives of the island of Majorca produce a true anthology of landscapes: in one hour—as one chronicler wrote—you go from marshland to maize-covered plains shaded by almond trees; olive groves alternate with fig trees, like an echo of the fields of Palestine; there is the outline of the Moorish farmhouse, of the citadel and of the slender palms; there are the market gardens with their splendid laurels. Between the plain and the mountain, between vines and olive trees, enchanted valleys and narrow gorges. The coastline is also very varied, with its soft beaches and the steep cliffs that look out over the endless sea as from farthest Thule. Perhaps the best moment is when January arrives and the flowering almond trees present one of Majorca's best-known winter images. Although its cultivation is recent, promoted by the enlightened 18th century Societat Econòmica d'Amics del País following the devastation of the vineyards by phylloxera, the almond tree arrived in Majorca through Greece and the Mediterranean islands. Ancient sources speak of the almond tree in Mesopotamia 5,000 years before the birth of Christ. Nowadays, six million Majorcan

almond trees—though they may now have to be replaced with more profitable trees—produce a third of all the almonds harvested in Spain. At night, as they blossom in the mild January weather, their iridescent phosphorescence gives the air the remote, undefinable quality of the geranium-pink of their flowers.

When September comes round, the air is filled with the clatter of canes beating against the branches of the almond trees, like some earthly ritual, and suddenly the voice of man rediscovers the memory of an ancestral cadence and we hear him sing—alone on the terraces carved by the hand of man or beside the lonely road—, like a hand striking the heart, a snatch of some Moorish tune. The almonds fall into the bulging nets and everything returns to an island of the past, timeless and remote, for ever poised between survival and death, with its ancient, skeletal almond trees.

When they flower, in January, the more than seventy species turn the arid landscape into an elegant floral tapestry. It's hard today to find the labour needed for the almond harvest in Au-

gust and September. The writer and painter Santiago Rusiñol described the moment when the almond flower falls onto the green grass, and the grass, which has no flowers, uses those of the almond tree, and the earth becomes a carpet. Then the fields appear covered in snow, but the snow is warm, it lives and breathes, it covers the fields with a mantle so that the spring can come to life again. At any rate until the beginning of the nineteenth century, the almond tree was not such a common sight in the fields of Majorca. In 1784, a study carried out by the Societat Econòmica d'Amics del País incentivated the creation of municipal nurseries, and since then the importance of the crop has grown steadily and exportation has started. It's the first tree to flower on the island each year, and they say the Majorcan almond is one of the sweetest and tastiest there is. It's interesting that when the Majorcan priest Juníper Serra went to evangelize California, he planted Majorcan almond trees there that still blossom today. With Mediterranean perspicacity, it's hardly surprising that the Majorcan almond should go into high quality sweets and ice-creams. ■



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