







## JANUARY

### On the farm:

Olive pruning time on our organic farm. The thickest branches are cut and prepped so the green wood dries out, ready to keep our open fires burning next year. Olive wood burns long and slow - the perfect fuel to warm the feet and heart in the colder months! The smaller prunings are finely 'minced' by a special attachment on our tractor and left between the trees to add organic matter to the soil and help retain precious moisture.

### In the vegetable plots:

Our organic vegetable beds are studded with the heads of different varieties of cabbage now, including red cabbage that we braise with apples and spices to accompany our outstanding local pork. Our winter crop of cauliflowers and leeks are also welcomed by the kitchen's busy hands while Rubén gets pickling the winter vegetables that will appear in our dishes throughout the year.





## **FEBRUARY**

### **On the farm:**

In the depths of winter, nature gives us a glorious gift - great swathes of frothy almond blossom. Clouds of pink and white flowers against clear blue skies transform the countryside in a breathtaking display that perfumes the air and attracts thousands of bees and other insects.

### **In the gardens:**

Secateurs in hand – it's time to prune and fertilize our roses. For over thirty years our gardeners have nurtured our beautiful rose gardens following the vision of Piers, who created them. Today, with over 50 different varieties from classic English blooms to modern hybrids, we have an abundance of colour and fragrance almost all year round.

### **In the vegetable plots:**

We are giving our soft fruit bushes lots of attention now to guarantee a bumper haul later in the year. Raspberries, black, red and white currants are all expertly pruned as well as our gooseberry bushes, which are rare to find in Spain but which our kitchen team love to use in our dessert menus.

February is the month that 'Calçot fever' grips our region. A type of sweet scallion native to Mediterranean Aragon and Catalunya, lunches of this seasonal veg are a local passion that brings friends and families together for a traditional shared feast. Roasted whole on the fire or barbecue, the blackened outer leaves are stripped off and the tender centers are dipped in delicious Romesco sauce (ground almonds, sun-dried tomatoes, roast red peppers, olive oil, garlic and paprika) and eaten whole.

### **On the hillsides:**

Before the end of the season, we try and take time off to go and help our local truffle man and his trained dog forage for the last black truffles on the estate – our chef Ruben can never have enough.





## MARCH

### In the orchards:

After last month's almonds our peach, plum, apricot and cherry trees spring into life with pale pink, yellow and white blossoms and the first fruit of the season, medlars, are ready to be picked.

### In the gardens:

Spreading manure and mulch is top of the list of jobs for our gardeners as they get to work on our cut flower beds. While fragrant little jonquils, daffodils, narcissus and the 'shy' heliboers that start to appear now are picked for fresh displays throughout the hotel.

Is there anything nicer under bare feet than soft green grass? We don't think so, but a lush lawn is a work of real dedication, so we start now oxygenating the soil, reseeding tired patches and fertilising to create the perfect cool oasis for summer lounging.

### In the greenhouse:

We seed zinnias, hormium salvia, statice, nigella, sweet peas and snapdragons now, the flowers from which Margarita will create wonderful flower arrangements every morning for the hotel, from late spring onwards.

### On the farm:

The pace of work is picking up on the farm now as we get the early cropping potatoes in and pick the wonderful baby broad beans. They are so sweet and tender that they can be eaten raw, which we cannot resist as we move with our baskets gathering between the rows.





## APRIL

### In the vegetable plots:

It's all hands on board or 'to the till' to plant up our two large organic plots with the middle and late cropping potatoes. We choose varieties according to their different culinary properties, floury or waxy etc, with our favourites being the versatile Desirée and Ratte that can be cooked whole in their skins. The onions, carrots, beetroot, leeks chard and spinach are ready to transfer from the greenhouse now. It's also time to plant all the wonderful fresh herbs for the kitchen - basil, coriander, sage, mint and rosemary as well as those we dry to make our restorative infusions according to local tradition - melissa, camomile and thyme.

### In the greenhouse:

The delicate seedlings for our multi-coloured peppers, aubergines, okra, tomatoes and lettuces are coming through in the greenhouse now, because night temperatures are still too low for outdoor sowing.

We often use seeds from Red de Semillas de Aragon, an organisation dedicated to preserving heritage varieties in danger of being lost as so many vegetable gardeners opt for easier modern hybrids.

For salads we have wonderful rocket that packs a real punch growing in the open and in the greenhouse a variety of sorrel leaves. If the weather has been good, we start to pull the first delicate pink rhubarb stems of the season.





## MAY

### In the gardens:

Where do we begin! In the garden with the riot of roses in bloom from the old English varieties which only flower once a year to the hybrids that continue throughout the summer. Our vases throughout the hotel are filled with their fragrance and colour.

With the rising temperatures and soft rain showers, the weeds grow apace so our gardening team have the daily task of keeping them down while welcoming the flowering shrubs, abelia grandiflora, teucrium, ceanothus and lavender that are bursting into fragrant life.

### Down by the river:

We forage for elderberry blossom on the bushes that thrive near water to make a delicious light cordial – so good with cava, the Spanish sparkling wine, or simply added to fizzy water for a refreshing drink. Added to desserts it adds a delicate floral flavour.

We grab our gloves to hunt the countryside for wild asparagus, hidden amidst long grasses and prickly bushes, the slender stems have a particularly intense flavour that we adore. It's also the time to gather the last of the highly prized morilles wild mushrooms.

### In the orchards:

The first cherries have to be picked in a race to beat the birds which love them so much – particularly the blackbirds and thrushes.

### In the vegetable plots:

Our first lettuces take centre stage – little gems and the delicious flavoursome local Maellana variety – can be picked now as well the asparagus tips from our beds.





## JUNE

### **In the vegetable plots:**

Summer is in full swing and there's an abundance of everything for our chefs – apricots and rhubarb, cherries, baby sweet corn cobs, chard, spinach, baby beetroot, lettuces, spring onions, green and purple beans,

Time to painstakingly harvest the green chickpeas which are so delicious and well worth the man hours we dedicate to shell them. They are a key ingredient in many of Ruben's dishes. Traditionally garlic is planted on the longest day and lifted on the shortest in December so in they go at some point this month.

### **Down by the river:**

Then, on the mystical night of Midsummer, the longest day of the year celebrated in Mediterranean Spain as Saint John's fiesta with bonfires and other rituals, we go down to pick the green walnuts with which the delicious local liqueur 'vino de nueces' is made.

### **In the garden:**

Out come all our geraniums, delicate blue plumbagos, and other plants too delicate to risk the lower night temperatures up till now.

### **By the pool:**

The lemon and grapefruit trees start to fruit now around the swimming pool providing dramatic contrast to the beautiful blue and white agapanthus.





## JULY

### In the gardens:

Our cut flower garden reaches its zenith – a brilliant palette of colours in a riot of zinnias, sweet william, in Spanish the Poet’s Flower, fennel for colour and aroma, the feathery white ammi heads, nigella or Love-in-a-mist (what a great name!), delicate sweet peas, cornflowers and so many more. We cut them daily which encourages further flowering. If the summer is hot, watering morning and night is a major part of our team’s effort to ensure everything remains pristine.

### In the vegetable plots:

Esteve, our expert organic gardener comes up with baskets groaning with courgettes and their flowers, aubergines, green peppers, lettuces and tomatoes – every variety from delicious little cherry tomatoes, to the most prized variety ‘rosa de Aragón’ – huge, beautiful pale pink colour and utterly delicious particularly when combined with the wonderful fresh goat’s cheese from nearby Peñarroya, our own extra virgin olive oil and fresh fragrant basil. True luxury! The small round tomatoes de ‘penjar’ (colgar in the local language meaning to hang) are the ones used for the now universally renowned pan con tomate and can be kept for eating throughout the winter. We either plait their stems or often use recycled egg boxes to keep each tomato separate to ensure they last the winter.

Esteve plants successively to ensure a constant supply of veggies for our restaurant. Few restaurants can offer their guests such amazingly fresh produce literally from plot to plate in a matter of hours, not even days. Being totally organic means we never use chemical sprays so, undesirable insects such as voracious cabbage white caterpillars and aphids (they just love artichokes and broad bean plants) have to be controlled by companion planting of marigolds, basil and others that deter pests naturally and we also use non-aggressive sprays of neem oil. It’s a tightrope balancing act that demands constant vigilance.





## AUGUST

### In the vegetable plots:

The watermelons and melons are at their sweetest best now - and we can't get enough. Bursting with juice and naturally refreshing, they are the wonderful in summer salads, a perennial favourite on the breakfast tables and perfect when paired with the famous Teruel jamón, which is cured in the perfect conditions of this high region, 600m from sea level in clear, dry, unpolluted air.

### On the farm:

Blackberries come early in Spain, so when any of the team go for a walk, they have a bag ready to pick any they come across in a promising patch. Many dark purple stained fingers have to be scrubbed before coming into work.

Our neighbour the shepherd brings his flock to graze on the stubble fields below the hotel after the grain harvest. We love the sound of their bells and the whistles and calls of the shepherd to his dogs.





## SEPTEMBER

### On the farm:

At La Torre del Visco September means FIGS in capital letters. The luscious black variety with deep red centres prevail but we also have a few green fig trees with sweeter pale pink flesh. Best to protect arms from the scratchy leaves and hands from the sticky milk of the fresh fruit, as the fig-picking operation goes on every day for the whole month. We poach them in local moscatel wine, make ice creams and dry them to make 'pan de higos' which was traditionally eaten as a source of energy throughout the winter, but which we serve with our cheeseboard. And, of course, to make jam... lots and lots of fig jam.

Jerusalem artichokes are ready towards the end of the month, so we get our forks out to dig them from the shallow earth before the wild boars get to them – they love them too.

Almonds and hazelnuts are ready to be harvested towards the end of the month, so we get busy with the nets under the trees to catch the falling fruit as we beat the branches in the traditional way with long poles carved from the hazelnut wood. Our kitchen has a myriad of uses for these local stars!

### In the vegetable plots:

The last of the tomatoes are bottled or dried in the sun to enjoy during the winter months.

### In the gardens:

Asters are in abundance now so appear in our daily flower arrangements for the rooms.





## OCTOBER

### In the vegetable plots:

Autumn is in the air and the buzz of summer gives way to a calmer mood and golden light. Pumpkins of all shapes and sizes are hauled into the kitchen to make soups and pies while we always grow a few giant varieties, Big Bertha are the best in our opinion, to be used for Halloween decorations.

Kale, broccoli, onions and the first cauliflowers are now ready and we think you can really taste the difference our organic methods make to the flavour.

### On the farm:

The main agricultural activity as the season turns is devoted to the first picking of olives to be put in saltpetre, herbs and water. Although every household has its own recipe passed down through generations, for preserving the olives nearly all use the herb 'ajedrea' or in the local tongue 'saborije' found amongst the rocks down by the river with a flavour similar to oregano.

### In the orchard:

Pomegranates with their beautiful jewel-like red seeds split when they are ripe and we have to beat the birds to them as well as the harvest of quinces, the huge heavy golden fruits in the shape of a pear with which we make the quince jelly served with local cheeses throughout Spain. Traditionally, they were also used to perfume the clothes drawers.

### On the hillsides:

If we've been lucky and it's rained at the end of August, the foraging for wild mushrooms is a major preoccupation, particularly for our chef Rubén, a true fanatic, who sets off in any spare time he has with a basket and a special knife to cut them carefully to leave the spores that will ensure a good crop the following year.





## NOVEMBER

### On the farm:

The first few weeks of the month are totally occupied with harvesting the main crop of olives – we have 2000 trees – empeltre and arbequina varieties. Every evening we take the olives directly to be pressed in batches exclusively for us. This daily turnaround means the olives have no time to oxidise and we can ensure optimum flavour – a wonderful piquant olive oil for salads and for use in dishes throughout the kitchen.

The experts love the herbal undertone of our oil due to the wild fennel and other aromatic plants that grow amongst the olive groves on our farm. Once the harvest and pressing is complete, we bottle and label some to sell to our guests, though the main supply is for the kitchen for the coming year. Like the local farmers, we often leave a few trees until December to harvest for an oil that is milder in flavour.

November sees the ploughing and seeding of our winter crop in the large valley field below the hotel – winter barley or a nitrogen-enriching forage crop of vetch and oats.

### Off the estate:

We offer guests the unique experience of accompanying our organic beef supplier Fernando Robres and his family as they move their cattle from the summer pastures up in the high Maestrazgo region down to the milder Mediterranean pastures for the winter – an ancient practice known as transhumance. The experience includes returning to the hotel to enjoy an exclusive tasting menu created by Ruben to showcase the incredible organic beef.





## DECEMBER

### In the vegetable plots:

We lift the garlic around the shortest day of the year, and for the restaurant we bring in the brussel sprouts, parsnips, baby turnips, leeks, carrots and salsify.

The rest of the vegetable patch is protected with straw and mulch to protect from the frosts.

### In the orchard:

Persimmons hang like luminous orange-red Christmas decorations from the leafless branches of the persimmon tree with its distinctive sculptural trunk. We make sure to pick them quickly to enjoy them at their best.

### In the mountains:

Up in the Ports de Beceite, the range between La Torre del Visco and the Mediterranean, you can see beautiful 'madroño' (arbutus arbutus or strawberry tree) which uniquely bear both fruit and small white fragrant flowers simultaneously. You can either eat the fruits raw or use them to make a delicious liqueur.

Mistletoe found in many of the pine trees of the forest around us, is the origin of the name El Visco - mistletoe in the local dialect – and the centrepiece of our identity. We cut sprigs of it now to decorate the hotel in festive tradition.