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The art curator saving the world's rarest fruit

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Lucy Lovell



(Credit: Lucy Lovell)

Former Tate Modern director Vicente Todolí founded Todolí Citrus Fundació to preserve rare citrus varieties and compile a catalogue of farming knowledge to inspire future generations.

Our preconceptions of lemons are very rarely challenged. But on a crisp November morning on Spain's leafy Valencian coastline, Vicente Todolí is showing me the secret side of citrus – and it's unlike anything I've seen on supermarket shelves.

The most weird and wonderful specimens are arranged on a table in his Sun-soaked orchard. There's one shaped like an octopus with fat tentacles, a wart-covered citron the size of a newborn baby and a colourful pear-shaped fruit splattered in a tie-dye of green and yellow.

They're not at all what I was expecting, and they're not entirely safe, either. "You will get burned," Todolí warns, pointing at a grass-green bergamot. The oil is phototoxic, causing the skin to burn if it's exposed to UV light (it isn't dangerous to eat, but it is very acidic). "Want to taste?" he asks. I hold a slice up to the sun and eye it suspiciously; the golden segments light up like a stained-glass window. I tip my head back and squeeze drops into my mouth, being careful not to touch my lips. Eye-watering acidic needles stab my tongue. I'm reeling and wiping away tears, but Todolí is already on to the next fruit, squeezing the pearly contents of a finger lime into my hand. The little balls pop like lime-flavoured caviar in my mouth.

There are hundreds more unusual fruits to try at **Todolí Citrus Fundació**, a not-for-profit farm dedicated to researching and preserving rare citrus varieties. Hidden on a sleepy street in the town of Palmera, this is Todolí's passion project. He was born and raised on this farm, going on to study art history before serving as director at esteemed galleries such as **Tate Modern** in London and Milan's **Pirelli HangarBicocca**, where he works today.



Todolí Citrus Fundació is home to more than 500 varieties of citrus (Credit: Lucy Lovell)

Now, Todolí considers himself a fifth-generation orange farmer. He's fiercely protective of his old family farm, which is one of the reasons Todolí Citrus Fundació came to be. In 2010, a project was launched to raze Palmera's orange groves to make room for real estate. He tried to derail it through official channels and lost. "I was called a romantic enemy of progress," he recalls. But Todolí did not desist. Changing tack, he began buying plots of land. Some were abandoned patches of weeds and others were established orchards. He acquired around 4.5 hectares in total, an impenetrable fortress of precious farmland. "When I started it was a matter of urgency, I had to save the land," he says.

Around the same time, Todolí was working as cultural advisor to Ferran Adrià, former head chef of the iconic (and sadly closed) **El Bulli** (once-billed as the **world's best restaurant**). One day, the pair visited a garden on the outskirts of Perpignan which had more than 400 types of citrus trees, some exceedingly rare. The south of France is a little too chilly for citrus, so the trees are planted in pots. In summer they bask outside, and in October the gardeners heave them into a greenhouse to keep warm. During their visit Todolí asked, "How is it possible that they have done this amazing project with citrus, and in my area no one has done it?" Adrià replied: "Why not do it yourself?"

Todolí was inspired. He knew Palmera had the perfect microclimate for citrus; there would be no need for pots. Todolí Citrus Fundació is 3km from the sea and backed by a ripple of mountains. When the warm wind travels across the Mediterranean Sea, it becomes humid, and when it hits the mountains, it drops bathtubs of rain. The water trickles down the mountainside to Palmera, absorbing organic matter along the way. The fertile, nutrient-rich soil is known as alluvial soil, and Todolí is blessed with buckets of it.



Vicente Todolí was inspired by history's most illustrious citrus gardens (Credit: Lucy Lovell)

Palmera's crisp mornings also help to balance the flavour of fruit, Todolí explains. "In January it's one or two degrees in the morning and around 20C in the afternoon. That's what creates the balance between acidity and sweetness. If you're in Florida, for

example, it's too hot. They're sweeter but they're bland. In Japan, it's colder so they have more acidity. Here and Sicily are the perfect areas for citrus."

Plan your trip:

Tours cost €15 for adults and €10 for children up to 15 and are available from around November to April (depending on when the fruit matures). Book at todolicitrusfundacio.org. The closest airport is Valencia Airport; it takes around an hour to drive from Valencia city centre to Todolí Citrus Fundació.

For inspiration, he turned to history's most illustrious citrus gardens. He studied the Italian gardens of the Medici family in the 1500s and opulent Arabic palaces like the Alhambra. "For the Arabs, gardens appealed to the senses. It was a paradise on Earth, an immersive experience," says Todolí.

Likewise, the sights, smells and sounds of Todolí Citrus Fundació seduce visitors. Chirping locusts the size of frogs hop in the mallow and honeybees buzz between wildflowers. While licking sour juice from fingertips, there's a soundtrack of water trickling along an ancient Arabic irrigation route and the frenetic chirping of goldfinches in the aviary. The zesty scent of lemons perfumes visitors' hands for the rest of the day.

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There are other farms nearby, but they don't look like this. The surrounding countryside is an orderly grid of single-crop fields, with rows upon rows of orange trees. Spain is the world's leading exporter of citrus, shipping around 4 million tonnes a year. In order to produce such vast quantities, most farms lean heavily on monocropping, which can leave soil depleted and plants more vulnerable to disease outbreaks. Todolí Citrus Fundació, on the other hand, is a genetic diversity bank; a motley bunch of more than 500 varieties. Some of the rarest plants include ancient Valencian orange trees used as rootstock. The grafts were made around 150 years ago and Todolí cut the scion back to allow the roots to grow freely.

"It's like Jurassic Park," he says. "We can see resurrected varieties that were in extinction."



Tours include an exploratory walk and a tasting of seasonal citrus fruits (Credit: Lucy Lovell)

As well as tours of the farm, the garden comes alive with events throughout the year. Poets read stanzas on a stage decorated with lemons at the annual Poecítrics festival (14 June 2025), while Cine de Vanguardia is a celebration of experimental cinema.

Back on the tour, and Todolí's right-hand man Ton Gjekaj is waiting at the final tasting table. He has cut the last slices of fruit. There are wedges of passionfruit-tasting trifoliate orange, apple-sour calamansi and rosewater-scented Palestinian sweet lime, still warm from the Sun. I greedily eat them all, popping whole carpels into my mouth. I try to jot down the flavours but by now my notepad is covered in juice, my camera's buttons sticky.

“ *People think that citrus is what they see in the supermarkets. They don't know that it started eight million years ago – Vicente Todolí*

There's just time to peep inside The Laboratory, a high-tech kitchen and library. This is a hub of experimentation, used by experts from around the world who come to play with Todolí's extraordinary pantry. Chefs make ice cream from bergamots; bartenders pickle lemon rind for gin and tonics; and perfumiers extract oils from nearly extinct oranges.

Agustina Basilico Miara, head of beverage at London's Toklas restaurant, has visited three times and says she always goes home with new ideas. "It's incredible. Every time we go, we take as many people as possible from the restaurant," Miara says. "Especially after being in cloudy London, to arrive in an explosion of colours is super inspiring."



Buddha's Hand is named for its resemblance to the fingers shown on many Buddha representations (Credit: Lucy Lovell)

Miara uses leftover peel from the kitchen (like fragrant blood orange and chandler red pomelo) to make a tea, which she turns into a syrup. She uses it for a variety of cocktails, like her zingy take on the classic whisky highball. "We've also done a martini with chinotto. The vodka is infused with chinotto and then we candy the fruit," Miara says. "It adds another layer, like an olive brine element to the flavour, it's very aromatic."

After flicking through some books (every mention of citrus has been bookmarked, resulting in a pleasing rainbow of Post-it notes along the spines) we conclude the tour by tasting marmalade. The most delicious is made from Borneo lemon – not technically a lemon, but a cross between a pomelo and a key lime. Delicate and creamy, the marmalade tastes like well-balanced lemon curd.

For Todolí, this open-air gallery is his legacy. It's a place to challenge preconceptions, encourage biodiversity and foster local culture. "For me, it's like a museum where you don't have to refresh the collection because it changes every day," he says. "People think that citrus is what they see in the supermarkets. They don't know that it started eight million years ago, that it's one of the oldest fruits in the world. It has been so important in literature, poetry and art."

Todolí can see the art of citrus – and from his otherworldly orchard, he's helping the rest of the world to see it too.

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