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# From the Tate Modern to rare oranges, meet the curator redefining Valencia's citrus | Euractiv

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8-10 minutos

It is a familiar impulse. We travel far searching for something extraordinary, while overlooking what is right on our doorstep – and in Valencia, Spain, that could mean looking past the vast sprawl of commercial orange orchards.

Just a few kilometres from where I spent every summer, near the city of Gandia, on the coast of Valencia, an internationally renowned art curator has built one of the world's most remarkable citrus collections.

Vicente Todolí is better known in art circles than agricultural ones. The Spanish curator, who grew up locally, once led the Tate Modern in London and is now artistic director of Pirelli HangarBicocca contemporary art gallery in Milan.

In 2012, Todolí started a project of a different kind in Palmera, a village of barely 1,000 people in Valencia's La Safor region.

The Todolí Citrus Foundation is dedicated to the research and conservation of fruit biodiversity, with a five-hectare orchard cultivating around 500 rare, historic, and once-thought-lost local and international varieties.

Spain is the world's [largest exporter](#) of citrus, responsible for around 24% of global exports, with the Valencian community at the heart of production. Between September 2025 and January 2026, the region's citrus shipments were [valued](#) at €1.4 billion.

The most familiar varieties in Valencian households each winter include early-season oranges like Navelina, prized for their sweetness and lack of seeds, and later varieties such as Valencia Late, which stretch the season into spring and are widely used for juice.

## Valencia's Eden garden

On a bright March morning – crisp, cold, and washed in the unmistakable Valencian light that [inspired](#) painters like Joaquín Sorolla – I visited the orchard. The fellow arrivals were mostly foreigners, French, British, even Cuban, and only a handful of Valencian locals tagging along.



Citrus' tasting. Credit: Ricardo Gómez-Acebo.

Through nearly two hours of tasting, smelling and touching, the orchard is a sensory overload.

Finger limes – an Australian variety – burst like citrus caviar; *Citrus maxima*, pomelo in English, the ancestor of modern oranges, carries a floral note reminiscent of geranium; bergamot lingers with an almost intoxicating scent.

Some fruits, like kumquats, are eaten whole, peel and all. Others surprise purely by shape, with one fruit looking like the twisted fingers of Buddha's hand.

The ensemble feels like a work of art – citrus as the subject – with the view of the trees framed by the Mondúver mountain range and the surrounding fields, composing a landscape that feels almost painted.

It quickly becomes less surprising why an international art curator chose to build this particular Valencian citrus garden.



Todolí's orchard in Palmera. Credit: *Euractiv*, Sofia Sanchez Manzanaro.

### **Rooted in memory**

The project is not a detour from Todolí's art career, but a return to his roots.

Like many Valencians, he comes from a family of citrus growers, in a region where such fruits have long defined both the economy and the landscape.

The original family plot, just outside Palmera, was once at risk of being swallowed by a construction project, part of the real estate boom that transformed much of Spain's Mediterranean coast from the 1990s onwards. Instead, Todolí proposed turning it into a living citrus archive.

The initially modest family field has kept expanding, absorbing neighbouring abandoned plots until it reached almost five hectares. "A small beast that we need to tame," says Óscar Olivares-Fuster, the Foundation's technical director, a citrus geneticist, and a close collaborator with Todolí.



Vicente Todolí. Credit: Ricardo Gómez-Acebo.

Olivares-Fuster himself is an unusual figure.

By day, he works as a civil servant in nearby Gandia, the closest city to the farm. By evening, he transforms into an orchard steward and citrus researcher. He holds a PhD in citrus and spent several years in the US, another citrus powerhouse.

Todolí, he says, is no distant patron and has a restless researcher's instinct, constantly digging through archives and historical texts.

That curiosity has led to the recovery of long-forgotten varieties. One example is the [\*Lumia de Valencia\*](#), a fruit linked to the old Kingdom of Valencia that disappeared in Spain, was later traced in Italy through Jesuit writings and French botanical records, and only recently brought back to the Spanish Mediterranean thanks to the foundation's work.

Some of these varieties survived for centuries in the gardens of the Medici family, a powerful banking dynasty from Florence during the Renaissance.

When those gardens opened to the public in the late 20th century, nurseries were able to propagate their genetic material, making it possible for projects like Todolí's to bring them back into cultivation in their place of origin.



Todolí's citrus at Villa Medici, in Rome, Italy. Credit: Caterina Borelli.

### **More than a museum**

For all its beauty, the orchard is far from a museum piece. Its work is scientific and increasingly practical in addressing the challenges of modern agriculture.

Commercial citrus has been bred for convenience – easy to peel, seedless, suitable for transport. But intensive selection has also weakened resilience, Olivares-Fuster explains. Older, more “rustic” varieties, like the ones kept by the foundation, often retain traits that have been bred out of modern fruit.

Those traits can be useful when it comes to finding solutions for new diseases, such as citrus greening, which has [devastated](#) orchards in places like Florida, where the geneticist once lived, and could find optimal conditions to establish itself in the Mediterranean.

Climate change is another threat.

In Valencia, orange blossom now comes roughly two months earlier than when Olivares-Fuster was a child. “Two months in 40 years. That is enormous.” According to him, if citrus is to remain viable in the region, growers will need varieties better adapted to heat, stress and shifting seasons.

The Foundation already works with research centres and universities, and some of its genetic material is already being studied for disease resistance. In those genomes, he says, may lie part of the answer to current and future challenges for Valencian citrus growers.



The Foundation's orchard. Credit: Ricardo Gómez-Acebo.

### **Niche markets**

At the same time, the project explores more immediate ways to support the sector by creating niche markets for rare citrus, and opening opportunities for younger farmers in a region struggling with ageing growers and land abandonment.

One of Todolí's obsessions, Olivares tells me, is improving the range of high-quality processed products made with Valencian citrus fruit. "It's an illness of Vicente's, and he's passed it on to me," he jokes.

Traditionally, Valencia has focused on exporting fresh fruit, while juices and marmalades were made from lower-quality produce. Todolí's approach turns that logic on its head by using his exceptional citrus to create high-end products.

Olivares is currently working on a citrus-based vermouth with a producer in Catalonia, in north-eastern Spain. Another collaboration has produced a small-batch gin using five non-commercial citrus varieties.



Citrus food and drink products. Credit: Todolí Citrus

I leave the orchard carrying what could reasonably be described as an unnecessary amount of *kumquat* marmalade, along with an equally unjustifiable stash of *cidra canarone* chocolate.

Once these niche markets are developed, the foundation looks for small – often young – farmers who can grow the fruit, making rare varieties commercial.

“I enjoy these projects enormously,” Olivares quips. “But in the end, there has to be a product, and someone has to grow it. That doesn’t have to be us.”

Todolí’s orchard might not be so much about artsy, old, rare fruits, but about looking into the agriculture of the future. And it suggests that future-proofing may lie not in discovering something new, but in rediscovering what was already there.

(adm, jp, mm)