*Omar Allibhoy, chef ambassador of “Awaken Your Iberian Sense”*

**Omar Allibhoy: “In any dish you use it or add it, Iberian Ham will become the main actor”**

*Omar Allibhoy, often referred to as ‘the Antonio Banderas of cooking,’ is a renowned Spanish celebrity chef, successful food author, and founder of Tapas Revolution, the largest Spanish restaurant group in the UK. With a remarkable career shaped by collaborations with culinary legends like Ferran Adrià and Jason Atherton, as well as preparing meals for celebrities and even the Royal Family, Omar has earned critical acclaim. His cookbooks, including the best-selling Tapas Revolution, are celebrated for their delicious simplicity, while his latest work, Paella, honors to this iconic dish. As an award-winning chef and accomplished TV personality, Omar continues to inspire with his culinary expertise.*

*Since November 2024, Omar has been an ambassador for the "Awaken Your Ibérico Sense" campaign, which aims to highlight the richness and versatility of Iberian Ham. This campaign aims to inspire British consumers to discover the exceptional flavours of Iberian ham, promoting as a key part of Europe's culinary heritage.*

**1. Question: What makes Iberian ham unique compared to other types of gourmet products used in haute cuisine?**

**Omar Allibhoy:** Iberian Ham is truly unique because it represents the perfect harmony between nature, tradition, and time. What distinguishes it, in the case of acorn-fed Ibérico Jamón Ibérico, is the exceptional breeding of the Iberian pigs, their diet rich in acorns and the traditional curing process that can last up to 48 months. This creates a product with an unmatched marbling, complexity of flavors, and a melt-in-your-mouth texture that you simply can't find in any other cured meat. It's not just a product; it's a gastronomic treasure that tells the story of Spanish heritage.

**2. Q.: What organoleptic characteristics (flavour, aroma, texture) define Iberian ham and how do they make the difference in a dish?**

**O.A:** The sensory experience of Iberian Ham is extraordinary. First, you'll notice the beautiful deep red color with stunning white marbling. The aroma is intense and complex, with notes of nuts and aged meat. When tasted, it has a buttery texture that literally melts on your tongue, releasing sweet, nutty, and umami flavors. The fat has a unique characteristic of melting at body temperature, which creates an incredibly smooth mouthfeel. These properties make it a transformative ingredient in any dish - it can elevate a simple plate of scrambled eggs into a gourmet experience or add depth to more complex creations.

**3. Q.: How would you describe the experience of tasting Iberian ham for the first time? What should consumers look for in every bite?**

**O.A:** Tasting Iberian Ham for the first time is a moment of pure gastronomic joy, and its funny because this repeats every time you have a slice of Iberian Ham, not just the first time! I always tell people to approach it with all their senses. First, observe the color and marbling. Then, let it warm slightly to room temperature and smell the complex aromas. When tasting, let the ham sit on your tongue and slowly warm up - this is when the fat begins to melt, releasing its full flavor profile. Look for the initial saltiness, followed by sweet nutty notes, and finally, the complex umami finish that lingers. It's important to take your time and let each bite tell its story.

**4. Q.: Why do you think Iberian ham is such a prized ingredient?**

**O.A:** Iberian Ham is prized because it represents the pinnacle of artisanal food production. The combination of the unique Iberian pig breed, their free-range lifestyle in the dehesa ecosystem, their acorn-rich diet, and the expertise of master ham makers who oversee the long curing process - some taking up to four years - creates something truly exceptional. It's also a limited product; you can't rush or mass-produce true Iberian Ham. This rarity, combined with its extraordinary quality and flavor, makes it one of the world's most sought-after delicacies.

**5. Q.: What dishes or combinations of flavours would you highlight as perfect for bringing out the qualities of Iberian ham?**

**O.A:** While Iberian Ham is magnificent on its own, I love creating harmonious combinations that enhance its natural qualities. It pairs beautifully with sweet, creamy elements like fresh figs or melon, which complement its saltiness. I often serve it with crusty bread rubbed with tomato, the traditional 'pan con tomate'. For more contemporary pairings, I love it with scrambled eggs and truffle, or within famous “croquetas”, crispy on the outside, creamy and velvety inside with bits of intense tasting Iberian Ham, to die for! The key to matching Iberian Ham that works in the benefit of all parties and the final result is to let the ham be the star while supporting its flavors with complementary ingredients. Because at the end of the day, in whatever dish or récipe you use or add Iberian Ham to, it will become the main actor.

**6. Q.: How do you find inspiration for integrating Iberian ham into modern recipes without losing its traditional essence?**

**O.A:** My approach is to respect the traditional essence of Iberian Ham while finding new ways to showcase its versatility. I draw inspiration from both my Spanish heritage and my experiences in modern kitchens. Sometimes it's as simple as adding delicate shavings to finish a contemporary dish, or incorporating it into unexpected combinations like a simple stir-fry or a sophisticated salad. The key is to never overshadow the ham's natural qualities but rather create new contexts that highlight its exceptional character.

**7. Q.: What advice would you give to someone who is trying Iberian ham for the first time?**

**O.A:** Take your time and make it an experience. Let the ham come to room temperature before tasting - this is crucial for experiencing its full flavor profile. Start by appreciating the visual aspect - the beautiful marbling and color. When tasting, place a slice on your tongue and let it warm naturally; I know it’s hard but don't chew immediately. This allows the fat to melt, releasing all its complex flavors. Pay attention to how the flavors evolve from salty to sweet to nutty. And most importantly, enjoy it with good company - sharing Iberian Ham is part of the Spanish way of life.

**8. Q.: How can British consumers tell the difference between an authentic Iberian ham?**

**O.A:** Very easy, you only have to look to see if your Iberian ham has any of the 4 quality standard seals: black, red, green and white. You can also tell them apart by their external appearance: a thin, stylised shank and their characteristic guitar shape. The slices should be deep red in colour and have a nice marbling. If you have tasted Iberian ham before, you will be able to tell it apart just by its balanced flavour with hints of nuts and toasted bread, and its lingering aroma capable of filling any room.

**9. Q.: Iberian ham is not only a foodstuff, but also a cultural symbol of its place of origin. What does it mean to you to work with a product that arouses such a strong sense of belonging?**

**O.A:** It’s an honour an a privilege. As a Spanish chef in London, working with Iberian Ham is like being an ambassador of my cultural heritage. This product represents centuries of tradition, the connection between land and gastronomy, and the patience required for true artisanal food production. It is the jewell of the Crown. Every time I serve or talk about Iberian Ham, I'm sharing not just a product, but a piece of Spanish culture, tradition, and passion for good food. It's a bridge between my roots and my current home, allowing me to share authentic European gastronomy with food lovers all around the world.

**10. Q.: How do you think the sustainable production of Iberian ham contributes to preserving the dehesas and the biodiversity of the rural areas where the Iberian pig is reared?**

**O.A:** The production of Iberian Ham is intrinsically linked to the preservation of the dehesa ecosystem - a unique landscape of oak forests that's vital for biodiversity. The traditional free-range rearing of Iberian pigs helps maintain these ancient woodlands, as the pigs naturally fertilize the soil and help with seed dispersal. This sustainable farming method supports not just the pigs, but countless species of birds, insects, and plants. It's a perfect example of how traditional food production can actually enhance and preserve natural ecosystems while supporting rural communities. On the case of Iberian pigs, although the production is very small, it’s impact is inmense in vast tracts of land.

**11. Q.: What does it mean to you to be an ambassador for Iberian ham and to have the opportunity to present it to such select consumers as British consumers?**

**O.A:** Being an ambassador for Iberian Ham is both a privilege, an honor and a responsibility. It allows me to bridge two cultures I deeply care about - my Spanish heritage and my adopted British home. British consumers have a sophisticated palate and a growing appreciation for exceptional food products. Being able to introduce them one of the best hams, the Iberian ham, explain its rich history, and share proper tasting techniques is incredibly rewarding. I see my role as not just promoting a product, but educating people about European gastronomic culture and the importance of preserving traditional food production methods.