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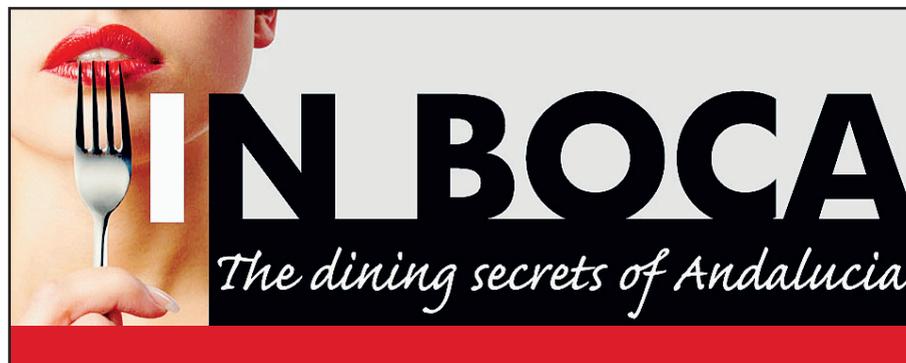
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Up at the lake

FEW restaurant terraces offer a view like this.

Perched above the stunning Zahara reservoir, the vista seems to go on almost forever, well at least to the classic white town of Olvera which cascades down a distant hill like a wedding cake.

Sandwiched between the Sierra de Grazalema and Serrania de Ronda, the Arabic stronghold of Zahara wasn't a bad place to open a hotel and restaurant. Sitting high on a promontary with a Crusader castle looking down, this is one of



Andalucía's most evocative places to explore and the nearby walks are celebrated around the world.

Opened by savvy Londoner

Mona and her New York beau Stefan Crites, they have created what could be one of Andalucía's greatest escapes.

While well connected both in the UK and on the Costa del Sol, the couple decided they wanted to find the perfect rural area to bring up their two young children, Casim, 9, and Mahalia, 5, who are normally buzzing about at weekends.

And with Al Lago they have cleverly managed to infuse upmarket cosmopolitan flair with the best of Andalucian cooking. The frequently changing menu - that is currently entitled 'from orchard and farm' - has a heavy emphasis on fresh



vegetables and fruit. Indeed, the couple have recently acquired a nearby smallholding, where they are busily growing and planting dozens of different vegetables, all 100 per cent organic.

"It is coming on bit by bit as this is only our first

year," explains Mona. "But there'll be plenty of plums, tomatoes and lettuces gracing our tables this summer... well, what the rabbits haven't eaten!"

Having learnt his trade in New York, much of it under celebrity chef Sam de Marco, Stefan (above) can certainly please the palate. His *ajo blanco* with watermelon granita is legendary, as is his seared duck breast in Malaga wine with pears, apple and new potatoes. The home-made liver pate with quince and raisins soaked in Pedro Ximenez is a great starter and I particularly liked the local trout stuffed with Iberian ham as a main.

I'm sure the rest of the desserts are good, but I never manage to get past Stefan's super rich New York style vanilla cheesecake that sits at the top of the list.

The couple are infuriatingly capable and nothing stands still. There are always plenty of plans for expansion, on top of the new *huerta*, frequent additions to the wine list, and the recent opening of five charming bedrooms upstairs.

You will certainly enjoy the flamenco shows on Saturdays - introduced by the bilingual Casim - and whole weekends are occasionally given over to 'Indian feasts', inspired by Mona's subcontinent upbringing.

But, back to that terrace, which, quite frankly, is impossible to beat on a hot sunny day.