



Travel

Santiago de Compostella :: A Real Foodie's City

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Our food correspondent, Richard Frisbie, was recently in Galicia on a food pilgrimage. He braved Santiago's inclement weather in search of a foodie's Holy Grail - the perfect octopus dinner.

Strolling through the picturesque ancient streets of Santiago de Compostella can be a pastime in itself. When last in Galicia, a friend and I did just that, wandering the cobbled streets seeking our muse. It was February and the camellia trees were in bloom in the square. Equally colorful umbrellas blossomed in the gray mist. Naturally, a light rain was falling, helping to earn Galicia the nickname "Green Spain". It was 50 degrees, a day made for a quest in search of the elusive perfection that can be octopus.



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Bar-hopping for Tapas



We restaurant- and bar-hopped through the city, chasing countless tapas with the local beer and wine. My friend grew up in Galicia going to school in the capital city, Santiago, so everywhere we went we found ourselves greeted and joined by people he knew. Our conversations were almost all about food. My friend is in the hospitality industry. His friends are all chefs and

restaurateurs. Santiago is a foodie's city, and we were traveling in the inner circle.



Free Tapas with Drinks

Some of the tapas bars serve free tapas when you buy a drink. They attract a young crowd, part of the 50,000 students attending college there. Each bar is known for their tapas. One, **O Catro**, offered a large smoked mussel in mustard sauce, spicy enough to hasten the order of more drinks; another, **Abella**, gave us a plate of fried sliced potatoes topped with slices of pork loin. For the price of a drink, roughly \$1.50 to \$2 US, one could almost make a dinner out of it.

Other bars have a variety of tapas for sale for a few Euros each to enjoy with their reasonably priced drinks. The selections and quality varied, but there was something good to eat in each.



A Foodie's Inner Circle

We enjoyed the camaraderie of the crowds and the food for several hours before ending up at **O Celme do Caracol**, a restaurant with a good name that catered primarily to the locals. The owner, German Gonzalez Pose, went to school with my friend. In a city where a friend of my friend is my friend also, I was quickly included in the intimacy old school chums share. In their company I was amazed how different the city looked from the inside, when one sees it as a native, not a tourist, with a few guys talking over plates of food, sharing wine, and lies, and laughter.



The Freshest Sardines

The conversation looped from old school days, to lovers, past & present, and business, real guy talk, but it always came back to food. At one point German briefly disappeared, to return with a handful of sardines. He showed off their freshness, the clear eyes and shiny, unbruised bodies. Then he was gone again, this time to cook them so we could taste the bones-and-all freshness. "Don't eat the head," he told us. "It's too bitter. It will ruin the taste of the rest." His enthusiasm and passion for cooking is infectious. Our group grew as old friends and friends of friends were attracted to our table, as moths to a flame, drawn to the shy smile and sparkling eyes of our host.



Homemade Seasonings

Next he brought several bowls of salt and explained the uses of each. An herbed salt he created is made like this:

Start with 2 lbs of Saltina, a large grain sea salt. Add 10 garlic cloves and a bunch of chopped parsley. Wrap in a linen dish towel and dip in boiling water. When cooled enough to touch, squeeze out water and remove the mix from the towel. Grind the ingredients together in a wooden mortar & pestle. This herbed salt, moistened and dried, has a larger crystal that really "pops" in your

mouth when sprinkled on vegetables or seafood. It can also be ground finer to intensify the flavors. German is the first chef I met who makes his own seasonings.

Traditional Galician Octopus



It was he who served us the best octopus I've ever tasted. I love octopus. I've watched it boiled, dipped three times into a copper pot of boiling water before leaving it to cook for 20 minutes, then saw the cook use shears to cut the tentacles into small slices to be served on a wooden platter. It's a common

Galician way to prepare and serve octopus, and it is delicious. That's not how German cooked it. He follows an old family recipe that delivers much better taste and texture - truly the best octopus recipe.



Grilled Not Boiled Octopus

It goes like this:

Bake a 5-6 lb octopus at 350 degrees in a convection steam oven set at 80% mist, for 50 minutes, in a pan with only a small onion. Remove from oven and cool. It will keep in the refrigerator for 2-3 days tightly covered in a water bath. When ready to serve, salt (see recipe above) and grill about 4 minutes, turning once to crisp. Besides seafood, Galicia is known for the best potatoes. Peeled and parboiled with bay leaves, a sliced mound of them serve as a bed for the crunchy but tender tentacles, the whole topped with a great traditional Galician sauce.



Secret Family Recipes

German is truly a generous man. Besides feeding us, he graciously shared his family recipes. Usually after a demure smile he'd say "it is a secret family recipe, but I will tell you", then he'd carefully translate the Spanish terms and techniques into English for me. By the end of the evening he gave me permission to publish them for the first time. Here's the recipe for the Galician sauce, really an oil, that can be used on many dishes:

First he said "Take olive oil, garlic, hot and sweet paprika, and simmer it with a whole onion. Then remove the onion." When pressed, he elaborated: one gallon of olive oil, 5

heads of garlic cut in half and one whole onion - skins and all - add 100 grams sweet paprika and 10 grams hot. (The paprika amounts can be adjusted depending on the spiciness you enjoy, but should not exceed 110 grams total.) Simmer a long time (40 minutes) then cool with the onion and garlic left in until room temperature. DO NOT STIR. (He confided that most people ruin the sauce either by stirring it or not letting it cool thoroughly.) Gently remove the garlic and onion, pour off the oil and reserve, being careful to leave behind the paprika which has settled to the bottom. Discard paprika, it will make the oil bitter if it is stirred in. The oil will keep at room temperature. Store in a squeeze bottle and apply liberally to just about any dish you want. It would even be great as a dipping oil with good crusty (think Galician) bread.



The Taste of Friendship

German offered "if you live in Miami you'll have to refrigerate the oil. Otherwise, keep it in a cool place in your kitchen and use it often. Think of your friends in Galicia when you taste it."

On my first trip to Galicia I remarked how comfortable I felt there. I said "I love the food, the wine and the people." My host at that time told me "You are of Irish descent. Your ancestors settled this section of Spain's coast centuries ago. When you come here, you are coming home."

I thought of her words this trip as I sat in the restaurant with my new friends, stuffed with the bounty of Galicia. I will remember the delicious food, and treasure the warm friendships I made around the table at O Celme do Caracol, as I remember the other dinners on my trips to Galicia, and the friends who shared them.



O Celme do Caracol

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German Gonzalez Pose will soon be opening a tavern next door to his family-style restaurant. Both are just down the street from his parent's restaurant, **Los Caracoles**, where the escargot is made with snails they farm themselves. You have to try them!

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Richard Frisbie is a bookseller and publisher in New York State whose food & wine travel articles appear in LGBTQ and regional periodicals, as-well-as at Gather.com and Travellady.com online. He accepts free copies of books for review, restaurant meals to critique, bottles of wine and liquor for tastings, and all-expense-paid trips in exchange for articles about the destinations. He is paid for

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