

FOODIE TRIPS

OREGON FARMERS LEARN FROM SPAIN

By Leslie Cole, *The Oregonian*



By LESLIE COLE / Photography by VINCENT WEST

We'll bet you a fistful of spring morels that your last vacation wasn't this good.

You didn't fashion your own treasure hunt through Spain, traipse from Michelin-starred restaurants in Catalonia to cooking classes in San Sebastian, eat pintxos, the Basque equivalent of tapas, in a seaside bar, explore subterranean wine cellars in Rioja and ancient Andalusian villages perfumed with smoky hams.

Two recipes from Manuel and Leslie's trip



Not long ago, to enjoy a plate of sizzling, pimientos de padron, you had to go to a tapas bar in Spain. Now, just head to Viridian's stall at the Portland Farmers Market to buy a basketful (in season later this summer). Heat a heavy skillet, glug in some

good olive oil, fry the peppers quickly until blistered and hot, then sprinkle with sea salt and serve.

Manuel Recio and Leslie Lukas-Recio did. And you will eat better tomorrow because of it. Since the couple took up farming six years ago on Grand Island in Dayton, **Viridian Farms** has made a name with chefs and eaters by growing the most interesting produce in the Willamette Valley.



Snapshots by Manuel Recio and Leslie Lukas-Recio

Selling to restaurants and at the Portland Farmers Market, they bring things we thought we could live without until we tasted them, such as thumb-size fried peppers called pimientos de padron, fat stalks of white asparagus, fruity dried espelette peppers from the Pyrenees, a lemony tasting French green called ficoide glacial. Europe, especially Spain -- where they met as students and fell in love -- is where they look for ideas on what to plant, inspiration on what to cook, what the grandmas and the avant-garde are saying about food.



WISDOM OF THE MARKET

While earlier trips to Spain, France and Italy were for sussing out growing practices and new varieties, this one was for culinary research. Lukas-Recio, the fourth generation in her family to earn a living from the land, loves going to markets to ogle the glorious displays of fresh fish, cheeses and produce, but especially, she says, to talk with vendors. "They're so knowledgeable. Some are farmers, some are resellers, but they're all steeped in the growing techniques." On a morning visit to Bretxa market in San Sebastian, they found fat, red Dulce de Espana peppers, which Basque cooks grill whole, and learned that in Spain, the best is never the biggest in the bunch: Small artichokes offer more flavor.



If we're eating, this must be Spain

Visits to gleaming produce markets in Madrid and Barcelona bookended the three-week trip, in which the farmers wended their way through Catalonia and Basque country, into Navarra's vast farm country and the mountain villages in Andalucia, where figs grow like weeds and the streets are perfumed with the scent of acorn-fed cured ham. They watched armies of avant-garde chefs conjure foams and wafers at Michelin-starred restaurants, but also learned lessons from produce vendors and everyday cooks, such as if the skin starts to lift from peppers as you fry them, it means they're greenhouse grown.



Learn more

Manuel Recio and Leslie Lukas-Recio have traveled widely in Spain on their own, but for this trip and its gastronomic focus, they consulted with Jane Gregg of Epicurean Ways, 866-642-2917, epicureanways.com.



KITCHEN CONFIDENCE

Seeing how the Spanish vanguard and home cooks use traditional ingredients helps the farmers talk to chefs when they return home to Oregon. This trip, they arranged for a private class with Haritz Aranburu, a chef in Cofradia Vasca de Gastronomía, one of the exclusive Basque gastronomic societies in San Sebastian, who improvised an entire menu around market vegetables. One revelation: traditional dishes such as squid in its own ink can be reinterpreted with produce as the star. Above, the chef and the two farmers stuff, dredge and fry the separated layers of an onion, a delicious stand-in for the squid.



Golden-skinned cooking apples from the market, cored and splashed with hard cider, melt into a bed of pastry for an impromptu dessert, opposite page, while for a winter vegetable stew, the chef cooks each component separately to achieve perfect taste and texture, before combining them and adding a final flourish of cognac and fire.



FOOD IMITATING ART

"My theme of the trip," Lukas-Recio says, "was food is art, cooking is art, production is art, growing is art." By eating widely and talking to chefs and shopkeepers wherever they travel, the farmers make discoveries and learn new ways to look at things they already grow. Here in Oregon cooks use borage for its flowers and leaves, for instance, but the Spanish also use the stems to make a quick pickle or a confit. In the arid Rioja region, they found shelling beans that "almost taste like chocolate." They visit wineries on every trip, Lukas-Recio says, in part because "we've always wanted to talk about our produce like a winemaker talks about wine."



To eat calcots, hold them from the top and peel off the two outside layers, which should have been charred by the coals, to reveal the white onion flesh. Dip in sauce and lift high to the mouth. -- From Viridian Farms

Peel, dip, eat

Maine has its lobster. Catalonia, especially the city of Valls, has the calcot. These mild spring onions are the center of spring festivals called calcotadas, where they're thrown on the grill over hot grapevine prunings, blackened, peeled and eaten -- head tipped back -- with a romesco-type sauce called salbitxada (see recipe, below. Soon you can throw your own celebration of messy fun without leaving Portland. Viridian Farms will harvest its first crop of calcots in late spring and sell them at the Portland Farmers Market.

CALCOTS WITH SALBITXADA SAUCE

Viridian Farms sells calcots at the Portland Farmers Market, or you can use good-sized spring onions with long green stems.

Calcot preparation: Cut roots off the calcots or spring onions to remove any soil. Prepare a hot grill and arrange the calcots evenly in a line on the grill grate. Turn gradually so that they turn crisp and charred on the outside and are cooked through inside. (Indoors, they can be cooked in an iron frying pan or a griddle pan.) Serve on hot tiles (as they do in Catalonia) or on warmed plates with a bowl of salbitxada.

SALBITXADA SAUCE

Makes about 4 cups

4 tablespoons blanched almonds
4 fresh mildly hot peppers, such as Spanish guindillas or Anaheim chilies, seeded and chopped
8 cloves garlic, peeled and chopped
4 ripe tomatoes, peeled and diced
2 tablespoons chopped parsley
2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
1 cup olive oil
Salt and pepper to taste

Toast almonds in a 350-degree oven for 5-7 minutes. In the bowl of a food processor or a mortar, place cooled toasted almonds and process or pound until coarsely ground. Add peppers and garlic and pulse or mash into a paste. Add tomatoes, parsley and vinegar and process. With food processor running, drizzle in olive oil and process until sauce is thick. Add salt and pepper to taste. Serve with grilled calcots.

WHITE ASPARAGUS CONFIT

Preparing asparagus this way preserves the integrity of the delicate white asparagus flavor for use in other dishes. If you can find them, use thick stalks of white asparagus for this recipe, known as cojonudos in Spain.

1 pound white asparagus, washed, trimmed and peeled
Olive oil

Set peeled asparagus spears in a deep pot and add olive oil to cover, about 2-3 inches deep. Bring to a slow boil over medium heat, then reduce heat and simmer for 5 minutes. When stalks are fork-tender, drain, reserving oil, and cool to room temperature. Eat the asparagus confit on its own or add it to salads or other vegetable dishes. Chill reserved oil and use for sauteing vegetables.

-- From *Viridian Farms*

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