

FOOD & DINING : COUNTER INTELLIGENCE

Basque in its glow

It's like walking down a street in Spain's San Sebastian area, sampling pintxos and drinking Txakolina wine, savoring the new world of

May 26, 2012 JONATHAN GOLD | RESTAURANT CRITIC



Pulpo Gallego is beer-braised octopus with fingerling potatoes and pimenton... (Katie Falkenberg / For the...)

San Sebastian's old town may be the most food-intensive neighborhood in the world, with street after street of pintxos bars and taverns and roaring restaurants, and hundreds of counters heaped with shellfish, hams and roasted meat -- the answer to a tapas lover's sweatiest dream. You stumble down the

crowded streets of this Basque city, stopping in one bar for its anchovies, another for its famous cuttlefish, another for the delicious spider crabs, washing each down with a glass of cider or thin, acidic Txakolina wine.

One of the avant-garde-leaning bars in this city -- with the closing of El Bulli in Catalonia, Spain's San Sebastian area is perhaps the current center of the world's modernist cuisine -- features a sous-vide pigeon breast with splashes of beet-juice "blood." Other bars specialize in sardines, foie gras with apples, griddled squid, mushrooms, clams or especially delicious potato salad. You could eat San Sebastian pintxos, Basque-style tapas, for a month without being bored.

There have been old-line Basque American restaurants in Southern California for more than a century, of course. Most of them can be found in Bakersfield (and San Francisco has Piperade, a very good modern Basque restaurant). But these places aren't really pintxos bars -- and not really anything you might recognize from trips to Getaria or Bilbao. (Bar Pintxo in Santa Monica, named after a tapas bar in Barcelona's central market, is more generally Spanish.) Basque cooking is as codified and specific as the cuisines of Tuscany, Rome or Provence, with a history going back more than 1,000 years.

For The Record

Los Angeles Times Monday, May 28, 2012 Home Edition Main News Part A Page 4 News Desk 1 inches; 40 words Type of Material: Correction

Racion: A review in the May 26 Saturday section listed incorrect hours for Racion restaurant in Pasadena. It is open 6 to 10 p.m. Tuesdays through Thursdays, 6 to 11 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, and 5 to 10 p.m. Sundays.

For The Record

Los Angeles Times Saturday, June 02, 2012 Home Edition Saturday Part E Page 3 Food Desk 1 inches; 37 words Type of Material: Correction

Racion hours: In a review of Racion restaurant May 26, the hours were incorrect. Racion is open 6 to 10 p.m. Tuesday to Thursday, 6 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday, and 5 to 10 p.m. Sunday.

So, when I wandered into Racion -- a new Spanish restaurant snuggled into a narrow Pasadena storefront that until recently was occupied by the Michelin-starred trattoria Tre Venezie -- a few weeks ago, I was expecting a menu of abstracted tapas -- the usual parade of sausages, vegetables and paprika-caked squid served in superheated clay dishes. I was not anticipating crisp, gooey chicken croquettes; lamb meatballs glazed with caramelized tomato sauce; or pintxos (bruschetta, more or less) of crab salad accented with anchovy, squid griddled with lemon and onions or sliced tongue with pickled scallions. There were cured meats -- Serrano ham, an airy liver mousse, slivers of house-cured duck ham -- served on a slab of slate, and squid bodies stuffed with sausage. The wine list included not one but three Txakolinas, as well as the hard-to-find **Rueda from Belondrade y Lurton, which is among the most delicious of all Spanish whites.**

The restaurant featured neither cod throat, which seems to be on every menu in Basque Spain, nor pil pil, nor spider crabs. But it seemed real.

Tenacious team

If you've spent much time in L.A.'s online food world in the last couple of years, you may have run across Loretta Peng and Teresa Montano, a proprietor-chef team whose struggles to open Racion have been lovingly, painstakingly chronicled in their blog.

They met while working for Susan Feniger and Mary Sue Milliken on their Border Grill truck. They moved to New York City to revamp the restaurant Colors and moved back to start up their own restaurant, a stylish tapas bar positioned in the vast conceptual space between the Bazaar by Jose Andres and old-line places such as La Paella.

They'd fallen deeply in love with pintxos in the old quarter of San Sebastian, so they found a place in the Art Deco Eastern Columbia building on lower Broadway in downtown Los Angeles and researched grease traps and wine.

A Kickstarter fundraising campaign failed. Contractors were inconclusive. Community-redevelopment loans were slow to come through.

The opening in Pasadena was a surprise to almost everyone. I had been following the blog for more than a year, but I had no idea that Racion had anything to do with Montano and Peng.

But there it is, cheerful, airy and minimal, where Tre Venezie had exuded old-world claustrophobia. There's a sleek, dimly lighted bar area in front where you can have a quick snack and a sherry or two, or carafes of sangria and plenty of that Txakolina. The bright, bustling dining room is in the rear.

The idea may seem contrarian, but some of the best restaurants in Los Angeles have been opened by chefs who are more enthusiastic than knowledgeable about a particular cuisine. Mark Peel and Nancy Silverton had spent only a month or two in Italy before they opened Campanile in 1989, but it

was apparently long enough. Milliken and Feniger had spent scarcely more time in Mexico before opening Border Grill. Josiah Citrin had a passion for but not much experience in haute French cuisine before he opened Melisse.