



Chef's Table

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The Foods of Rioja

a view from the kitchen

When I was invited on a press tour of Rioja, Spain's primary wine region, I was excited on many levels. The main purpose of the trip was to explore some of the 500+ bodegas of Rioja, but every trip I take is, in my view, an opportunity to taste the flavors of the land I'm visiting. My culinary philosophy has always focused on micro-regional cuisines, studying the products, traditional dishes and wines of a specifically defined geographic, cultural or climatic area. While Rioja is best known outside of Spain for its wines, my journey also yielded many surprises and satisfactions on the culinary plain. The Spanish have always considered wine and food as inseparable companions, and thus their winemaking is an exercise in creating wines that complement the native flavors of the area.

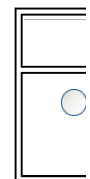
Although the vast majority of Rioja's arable land is dedicated to the cultivation of Tempranillo, Graciano, Garnacha, Mazuelo and other grapes, Rioja is also known for its amazingly fresh and mineral-rich vegetables. The white asparagus of Rioja is known throughout Spain, and when simply steamed and drizzled with olive

oil, it is a perfect appetizer to be enjoyed with a glass of white wine. *Piquillo* peppers and wild mushrooms (*setas*) also give texture and color to the savory caramelized lamb, beef and pork that emerges from the wood-fired *asadores* in every corner of the land.

Rioja has always benefited culinarily from its strategic location just to the south of the Basque country, known throughout the world as one of the most serious cooking cultures on earth. Much of the population of Rioja is made up of Basques who in fact consider the Ebro Valley, the Sierra Cantabria and the Sierra de la Demanda to be their homeland as well. It is no surprise to find that *merluza* (hake) is as popular here as it is closer to the Cantabrian Sea.

While the traditional foods of Rioja are embedded firmly in the palates of its people, they are also serving as the backbone for a new, adventurous and notable culinary revolution. Fine dining establishments in the region have long lived in the shadow of the famed restaurants and gastronomic societies of San Sebastian; but with young adventurous chefs like the Michelin-starred Francis Paniego and his protégée José Ramón Piñeiro serving their interpretations of classic Riojana cuisine, fine dining is making a name for itself in the Ebro Valley as well.

I had the good fortune of having a long, luxurious 14-course lunch at Paniego's **El Portal de Echaurren**, his flagship dining room set off from the older, more traditional dining room his mother Marisa Sánchez has run for 30 years in the Echaurren Hotel, situated in the small mountain town of Ezcarray. There Chef Paniego plays with local ingredients to create unique interpretations of classic Riojana cuisine; we had the *dégustacion* menu, and after a progression of 14 small courses, I felt decadently satisfied. I spoke with Chef Paniego, who is charmingly modest despite the renown his Michelin star has brought him. When I asked him about his food philosophy, he shrugged that he had none, just the desire to make good food with honest ingredients. He then spent several minutes detailing his love



of local wild mushrooms (setas), truffles, piquillo peppers and suckling lamb. He told me about his influences and culinary ambitions, and without missing a beat, shrugged and repeated that he doesn't really have a philosophy of food! I found his sincerity and modesty quite disarming -- it's all about his passion for discovering new ways to showcase the traditional flavors of the region.

The dish that struck me the most was one of the starters; Swiss chard batons lightly tempura-fried and served in a truffle sauce and a freshly grated almond powder. To use the rib of swiss chard this way reveals the commitment Paniego brings to his food, looking even to the bits usually discarded by less thoughtful chefs. Inspired by the fact that his mother never throws out any edible part of a food, Paniego uses the cooking liquid from pimiento peppers and makes it into a thin and delicate gelatin base for a salad of microgreen sprouts.



Paniego is also the consulting chef at the "City of Wine," where the Frank Gehry-designed hotel at the [Marqués de Riscal](#) bodega complex houses his restaurant. The pristine and sleek kitchen is run by Paniego's right-hand man, Chef José Ramón Piñero, another surprisingly young chef who shares Paniego's philosophy of honoring the past while creating dishes that excite the palates of international gastronomes. He gave us a tour of his kitchen, and while I did not get a chance to sample his dishes there, I did get to watch the staff preparing for the day's service, and snuck a taste of a simple phyllo cracker studded with sunflower seeds.

Another chef using the traditional ingredients of Rioja to create haute cuisine is Juan Nales at [Las Duelas](#) restaurant in the Hotel Los Augustinos in Haro, located at the crossroads of Rioja's wine routes. He starts with good quality products and sensitivity to their native qualities, applying the techniques he learned while studying in Madrid and in San Sebastian. While the focus is again on traditional Riojana dishes, there were some surprises in store: I had a starter of thinly sliced toro tuna with wasabi ice cream -- something you'd expect to see in a Japanese restaurant in New York, but which showcases the local tuna found just off the coast to the north.

Merluza confitada sobre Espárragos Verdes y pil-pil de Berberechos is Nales' nod to a traditional Basque dish, using their famous *pil-pil* sauce with a lightly

fried and oil-marinated hake over green asparagus. Venison with chestnut croquetas and a sauce of wild berries is an example of Nales' take on a typical dish served in high style, which of course went very well with a Torre Muga 2001, a new-world style wine whose black fruit aroma underscored with spicy hints of minerals matched the sauce perfectly. (It was also nice to be drinking this wine with Juan Muga, who had given us a tour of his family-owned winery earlier in the day, and who bought us to meet his friend Chef Nales.)

Perhaps the best example of traditional *asador* wood-fired grilling was our lunch at the [Meson Chuchi](#), an asador in the small town of Fuenmayor. *Chuletilla*, grilled baby lamb, *cabrito* (goat), and *cochinillo*, a suckling pig with the most exquisite crackling skin and falling-off-the-bone tenderness, are all cooked in the 25-year-old wood-fired brick oven. The chef works diligently all day in front of this hot fire to produce the grilled meats, redolent with the smoky flavor imparted from the encina, or holm oak. The acorns, or *bellotas*, from this same oak tree are fed to pigs which later become the famed *jamon iberico de bellota*, so the ham is perfumed throughout with the flavor and aroma of acorns. The wood-burning oven also produces full heads of roasted garlic which are gently squeezed onto the meats and served with roasted potatoes on the side.



The trip would not have been complete without one last night crawling through the famed [Calle Laurel](#) section of Logroño, which has numerous streets filled with tapas bars (or *pinchos*, as they are more commonly known in the North of Spain). We were blessed to be there in autumn, when the setas, or wild mushrooms, are in season. One bar in particular grills up very large wild mushrooms with garlic and olive oil, and when enjoyed with a glass of the surprisingly inexpensive yet quality Crianza wines, makes for a great snack.

Not satisfied with only the wild mushrooms, we had to have some of the *patatas bravas*, fried potatoes slathered in hot sauce and mayonnaise, as well as *pimientos del padron*, *morcilla* sausage, and the famed white asparagus of Rioja. This last dish was wrapped in a slice of ham with melted cheese and wrapped in a thin crepe. The perfect ending to a week of *dégustacion*!

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Our May 4/28 Up

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P.S. You can hear Chef Mark's interviews with Chefs Juan Nales and Francis Paniego on an upcoming ReMARKable Palate podcast, and episodes [#65](#) and [#66](#) feature the Wines of Rioja.



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