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SEVILLE



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WHEN PIGS FRY

Forget fairy tales—in this Spanish city, pork needs praising.

BY LEIGH NEWMAN



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Seville makes you think of the scent of orange trees, of lemons, of fresh jasmine on the vine, hand-painted tiles and serpentine ironwork, Moorish bell towers and baroque Catholic churches. But there's a more earthly indulgence, literally the fat (and meat) of the land: Andalusian pork. Rich and salty, thinly sliced or thick, air-cured or grilled, pork is perhaps the only underrated delight in this city that dates to the second century B.C. And there are endless variations on it: Dark red-meat Ibérico hams; onion- or rice-filled blood sausages; cutlets and tenderloins; and plain old chops, dressed in lemon and olive oil.

Pork is basically a visitor's back-road into Sevillian life. Wild Iberian pigs wander the dry mountains outside of town, growing flavorful on wild acorns. After slaughter, they're buried in sea salt for about 18 to 20 days, then air-cured for at least two years. (Major advantage of pig over equally popular local seafood: You can preserve meat in this sun-broiled climate without ice.) Artisanal tradition leads to a fanatical approach to buying pork (the hoof on a leg of ham must be dark; meat must be soft with fat); serving it (thin slices handled by professional cutters); and, of course, eating it (at every meal). If America

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Go hog-wild inside arched doorways.

produced ham this tender, we'd all be eating McPork sandwiches and ham-flavored potato chips (a favorite in Spain). A fellow diner at the tapas bar Sol y Sombre shares his view. "Why do we eat ham?" he asks. Chew. Chew. Swallow. "We love ham." His logic's primal, the way all logic behind food should be. You love it. You eat it. And you keep eating it until it's gone.

SWINE AND DINE

It's seven o'clock in the evening, and dinner is still three hours away. Crowds of locals and tourists alike hum along store-lined Calle Sierpes, browsing for a set of Tupperware or a souvenir Spanish shawl. Suddenly, horns begin to blare, and a legion of flag-bearing teenagers in gold-trimmed uniforms marches past. Behind them, a huge velvet-covered platform—covered in white carnations and topped with a towering silver-crowned Virgin and child—floats by. A brass band follows, playing music that's both bright and grief-stricken. For 10 feet, the procession inches forward and stops; after 45 minutes, Maria finally crosses the square.

Now it's eight o'clock; time for a *cerveza* and a snack. Residents drift through a small square just off Calle Sierpes. I follow them to Bodega

Extremeña, a tiny five-person neighborhood bar. Three sides of the place are open windows. Huge, terra-cotta olive oil urns, topped with glass, serve as tables. The bartenders chat up the customers, the customers chat up each other (most of them in their 30s, with neckties loosened), and everybody leans over homemade yellow ceramic bowls of olives to scream out orders for a little plate of this, a little more of that. First choice is *salchichon*, a black-peppercorn-studded sausage served, like just about everything, with bite-size breadsticks called *picos*. It's spicy, with an almost lemony kick and a hard pepperoni-like texture. For a more adventurous followup, try some *morcilla*, or blood sausage. This dark, oiled pork is so rich that only a few bites (washed down with beer, almost more popular than wine) is enough to satisfy. But not quite. You've earned a rest (one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi) in the tapas procession, but now it's time to order again. Call for *puntas de solo millo*, which is pork cutlet coated in olive oil and grilled right on the brick bar. Served with potatoes and hot sauce, this dish is more of a mini-dinner than a snack (and like most of the food here, spicy and hearty, but not outstanding). But this isn't over yet. Order the *torta del casar*—excellent cheese melted into a gooey, ripe puddle and topped with walnuts and dried figs. I scoop it onto some bread and pop it into my mouth—the best bite I've had all evening (\$10 for two, not including wine; opens at 8 P.M.; Calle San Esteban; 011-34-954-417060).

THINGS LOOK FISHY

It can be hard to tear yourself away from the twisty streets around the Cathedral and the Alcázar. (The two symbols of the city—a mixture of both Christian and Arab architectural influences—are a synthesis of opposites in Sevillian culture.) I wouldn't urge anyone to cross the Guadalquivir river unless it was worth it. Jaylu is reason enough. It's

precisely why Sevillians think about food, dream about it, and plan where to go to get more. At first glance, you might miss this unassuming spot on the tree-lined Lopez de Gomara Boulevard. Inside there's a small, spare, ivory-colored bar and dining room, but get a table outside, where you can scan the crowd and feel the heat break as the sun sets. Though simple both in decor and dishes (linen-covered tables, chrome-and-rattan chairs), the food is utterly elegant. Here you'll taste some of the most delicately flavored ham around. Served on a paper-covered plate, the vermilion pork arrives in transparent, bite-size slices. The result is salty, but not so it kills the flavor; chewy, but it still melts on your tongue. And if you're in the mood for seafood, eat it here. In the old city, most of the catch is frozen or several days old. (Nobody admits this, but you can taste it.) At Jaylu, you practically smell the ocean in every crustacean. I start with a creamy shrimp salad, dressed up with chopped egg and parsley, but the huge, grilled prawns are even better. They're served warm, with gazpacho. I pop off the head and suck out the juice (something it's only safe to do with the freshest shellfish), then concentrate on the plump body meat. I'd like to order more, but I'm stuffed (\$50 for two; opens at 8 P.M.; Lopez de Gomara; 011-34-954-33-9476).

Holy Sow!

Forget the food at Becerra for a second; there are still three compelling reasons to eat here. First, it couldn't be better-located—across the street from the intricately detailed city hall, a half-minute walk from the Cathedral (note the tomb of Christopher Columbus), and the Alcázar's palaces and gardens. Second, you can eat a serious dinner with locals. Lastly, Becerra isn't simply a place to collapse; hours spent at the restaurant are an extension of your time at the Alcázar or Cathedral—and they're just as

meaningful. The bar is buzzing: Maybe that's because it's Saturday night and everyone's out before—or until—Sunday's 9 A.M. mass. Or maybe it's just the bar. Blue-flowered tiles line the powder-blue walls. Massive oak cabinetry covers the bar and ceiling. Becerra has the hearty feel of Bodega Extremeña, but it's a cleaner, light-filled place, with a more well-heeled clientele (women sit in dressy numbers and heels, men in suits). It's also a step up in terms of food. My plate of ham isn't as good as Jaylu's, but some of the best I've tasted in the old city. Surrounded by a healthy layer of fat, and sliced very thin, it goes down great with a glass of manzanilla—a cold, dry liqueur that's almost as strong as white wine. Then it's time for a full meal with 30 other diners and waiters in jackets and bow ties. I first taste *huevas de merluza*, or hake fish roe—a tiny white roe stuffed into sausages and sautéed in olive oil with shrimp and thick slices of browned garlic. Each slice resembles a soft, hot potato chip. The hake roe is a little fishy, the shrimp fresh and pink but a little small. What nudges the experience into the happy-palate zone is my entrée, *presa de paleta Ibérico*—a traditional pork tenderloin. One of the local customs dictates that the pork be served pink, and that's fine by me. A sweet sherry sauce covers the tender-on-the-inside, seared-to-a-crust-on-the-outside meat, giving it a perfect finish. Just in case I'm hallucinating about how good this is, I look around. Just about every Sevillian in the place has ordered the same thing. Plates are cleared, stomachs settle, and the waiter offers dessert—little tin ramekins filled with a syrup-soaked, egg-yolk custard. Its name? *Tocinillos de cielos*—literally the bacon of heaven (\$50 for two; opens at 8 P.M.; dinner from 10 P.M.; Gamazo 2; 011-34-954-421-30-39). **TH**

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