

FOOD & TRAVEL

Cooking lessons Catalan style



NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Snacks of olives, ham, and pan con tomato.

By Niecee Regis | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 21, 2015

In the northeast corner of Spain, the autonomous region of Catalonia is renowned for its sophisticated cuisine that combines ingredients from the Romans, Moors, and New World. In the heart of Barcelona's historic district, travelers enamored with Catalan cooking can take hands-on classes — in English — to learn traditional dishes under the



guidance of experienced chefs at Cook & Taste.

An eight-burner stovetop is the centerpiece of the long wood table where nine students are sitting, wine glasses in hand, nibbling on green and black olives, Iberian ham, and pan con tomate, in which tomatoes adorn crusty bread.

“Tomato bread is one of the most simple and most delicious of dishes from this area,” says chef Sara Camps, a Barcelona culinary school graduate who has worked at Cook & Taste for three years.

Petit and ebullient, Camps, who comes from Minorca in the Balearic Islands, begins to make the dish. She rubs a cut tomato over toasted bread while demonstrating — so easy! — how to make the popular snack. “Farmers grow special tomatoes for this dish. They have to be very soft and ripe.”

On the wall behind Camps are more than a dozen knives, arranged by size, on a magnetic strip above stainless steel sinks and counters. Butcher block cutting boards are stacked near jars holding cooking utensils, flour, sugar, and a metal olive oil dispenser with a long narrow spout. It isn’t long before we are putting these tools to use as we chop, mix, knead, and saute the evening menu: romesco sauce to accompany grilled baby artichokes and asparagus; fideua, a seafood paella made with short noodles; crema Catalan, a Spanish version of the French dessert creme brulee; and, most unusual, Catalan-style flatbread topped with a mixture of spinach, pine nuts, raisins, and salt cod confit.

The participants pay about \$72 for the four-hour workshop, which includes a sit-down meal with wine. My fellow students are tourists from the United States and Canada, and though most of us didn’t know each other at the start, we become friends as the afternoon progresses. Classes that include



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Cook & Taste chef Sara Camps helps visitors make specialties.



market visits are about \$14 extra; two-hour “express” class costs \$39.

The classes were started by Bego Sanchis, a Spanish economist living in Barcelona who was looking for another challenge. “I always loved cooking and I had to give it a try,” she says. In 2004, Bego and business partner

Joseph Codinach opened the school on the third floor of a building on La Rambla, Barcelona’s pedestrian street. Six years ago they moved to a storefront with space for several large classrooms; four professional chefs teach two morning and two afternoon classes.

We begin by preparing the crema Catalan, a rich, creamy custard with a caramelized top made in individual, shallow terra cotta dishes. Camps heats whole milk with grated lemon peel and cinnamon to a temperature just below a simmer before whisking in frothy egg yolks and sugar. “You can make it with sheep’s milk or goat’s milk for a stronger flavor,” she tells us.

As the dessert chills, we tackle the flatbread, a simple dough of flour, yeast, water, and olive oil. To prepare the topping, some students chop spinach that will eventually be sauteed with raisins (soaked in wine) and toasted pine nuts. Camps slowly heats olive oil infused with rosemary, garlic, and chile pepper, before turning off the heat and placing pieces of cod in the pot. “This was dried and salted cod. It soaked in a water bath for six days,” she explains, “We changed the water every day.” When the cod is translucent and flaky, we layer it on the crisp, freshly baked bread, along with the spinach mix. Camps adds a sticky drizzle of reduced sweet wine, creating a dish that exemplifies Catalan cuisine’s pairing of seafood with fruit, mixing savory with sweet.

The nutty and smoky romesco sauce is a blend of ripe tomatoes with garlic, locally grown nyora peppers (red bell peppers can be substituted), stale bread, almonds, hazelnuts, olive oil, and sherry vinegar. Served with a variety of dishes, including



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Crema Catalan.

roasted vegetables and fish, the sauce, say many classmates, could be eaten simply by the spoonful. “You can also use pine nuts. Or add fresh fennel or mint as a sauce for shrimp,” says Camps.



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Catalan-style flatbread topped with spinach, pine nuts, raisins, and salt cod confit.

Our entree is seafood fideua, a dish similar to paella that substitutes short lengths of thin roasted noodles for rice. Camps uses a traditional wide and shallow paella pan set on a special double burner. As the dish simmers, we move to a dining table, where we sample our first course dishes and toast our hard work. Eventually the fideua comes to the table with large shrimp, heads and tails intact, garnishing the top.

Cook & Taste provides printed recipes (everything is written in grams) so participants can recall what went into the dishes and make a stab at re-creating them. But, unlike home, after the meal here you can leave the dirty dishes behind and stroll along the twisting streets of Barcelona.



Seafood fideua.

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