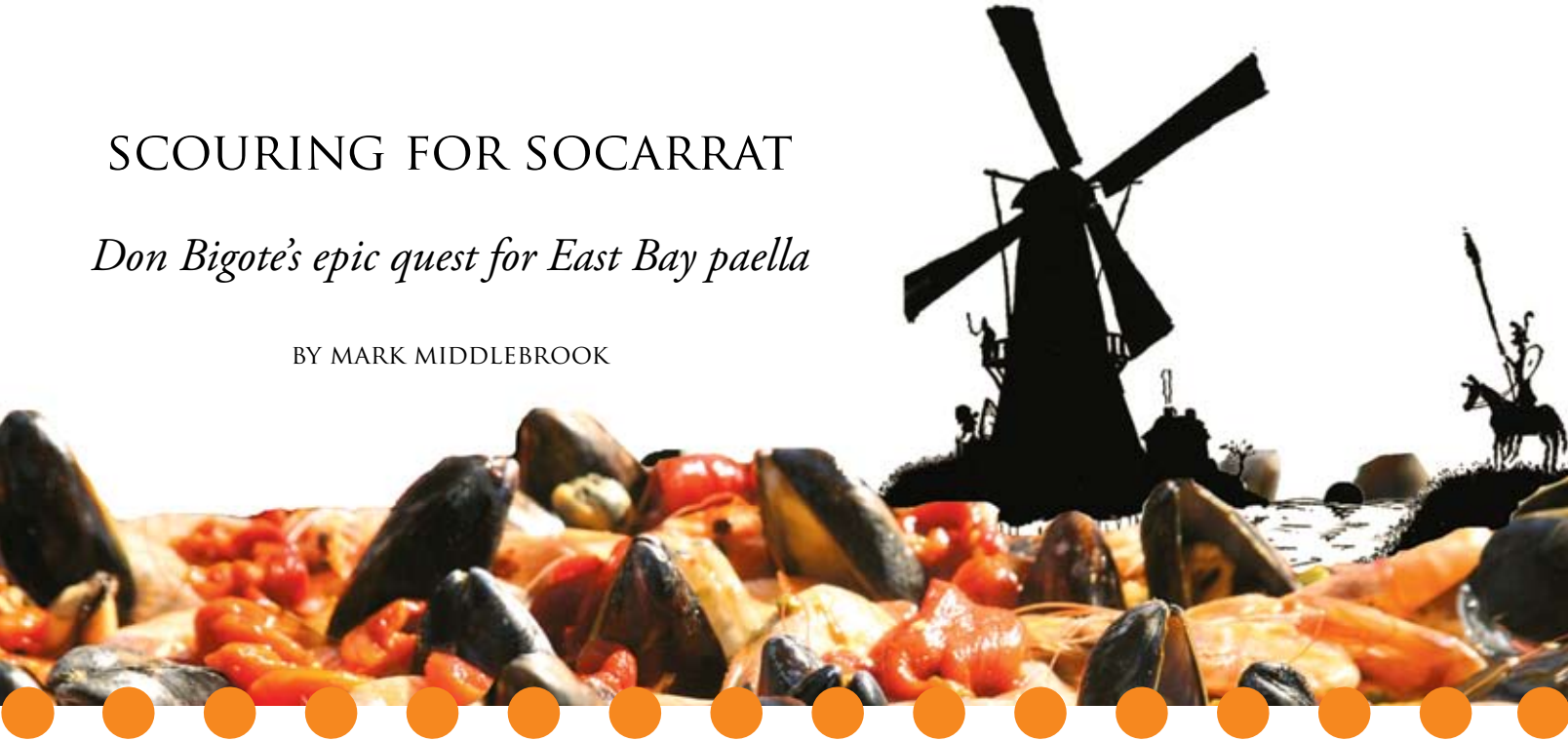


SCOURING FOR SOCARRAT

Don Bigote's epic quest for East Bay paella

BY MARK MIDDLEBROOK



As we recounted in the *Edible East Bay* Fall 2006 issue, Don Bigote returned from his tapas and taco truck sallies both wiser and fuller. Alas, it cannot be said that his painstaking exploration into the possibilities of a true *tapeo* in the East Bay and his discovery—nay, invention!—of the heretofore unknown Oakland variation known as “*taqueo*” has inspired others to engage in late-night, bicycle-powered taco truck crawls. Whether it was the bitterness of seeing his fellow citizens fail to follow the trail that he had blazed or an excess of horchata and tongue tacos, Bigote soon re-descended into his bilious, half-mad state.

The Spanish Table

During this time, Don Bigote became possessed by paella. He sallied forth again, this time to The Spanish Table on San Pablo Avenue, his trusted source for all things Iberian. Experience assured him that he would be able to obtain the weaponry for paella-making there, as well as knowledgeable instruction in its use. The glint of sunlight off of the shiny array of paella pans in the shop window only inflamed his madness, and he burst into the store demanding to purchase one... but which one?! There were three types—carbon steel, stainless steel, and enameled—and dozens of sizes, designed to serve from two to 200 people. Being an aficionado of cast iron cookware and carbon steel knives, and fearless of the small amount of additional care that they require, he settled on carbon steel.

And tallying up the small number of friends who had not tired of his post-prandial rants and fled his dinner table, he estimated that the 38 cm / eight *raciones* (servings) size would generously accommodate any group of people that he might hope to entertain. Bigote worried that his conventional four-burner gas stove wouldn't be capable of heating a pan of such large diameter evenly, and he briefly considered buying a stand-alone propane burner

designed specifically for paellas. But he found that straddling the pan over two burners and rotating it 90 degrees every minute or two did the trick without the need for additional gear.

He snatched a copy of The Spanish Table's helpful handout on paella, which includes a basic recipe and instructions for seasoning a carbon steel pan. Bigote then cornered wine guy Kevin Hogan, whom he knew to be a fount of insight into the arts of Spanish cooking, be it with a *cazuela* or a *paella*. (In fact, Señor Kevin periodically sallies forth himself to teach classes at Kitchen on Fire in Berkeley.)

Señor Kevin related to Bigote his main piece of paella-making advice: Start with a flavorful stock, whether you make it from scratch or spike a commercial one by boiling it for awhile with some onion and any meat or seafood scraps that are at hand. Señor Kevin also counseled that a home cook be *tranquillo* about whether the paella develops a good *socarrat*—the darkened-but-not-quite-burned crust that forms in the layer of rice next to the pan. The flavor is good with or without *socarrat*, he advised Bigote, but the latter remained so transfixed by the exotic pungency of the word that he continues to this day to obsess about the minutest imperfections that he might observe in the *socarrat* each time he makes paella.

Señor Kevin recommended to Bigote that he look at Mark “The Minimalist” Bittman's *New York Times* articles about paella (search for “bittman paella” on www.nytimes.com). These include a recipe for a minimalist tomato paella, with suggestions for simple variations, and a nine-minute video with El Minimilísimo commenting as chef Pep Crespo cooks a traditional *paella valenciana* over orange wood: <http://travel.nytimes.com/2007/04/08/travel/08Bite.html>. Bigote was intrigued to see that Chef Pep uses plain water instead of stock, saying that the water effectively *becomes* a stock as the rabbit, chicken, snails, beans, tomatoes, and seasonings simmer in it. Although this claim seemed incompat-

ible with Señor Kevin’s advice to start with a good stock, it demonstrated to Don Bigote that all orthodoxy about how to make a good paella is suspect. (El Minimilísimo observes that those who proclaim that theirs is The One True Paella call all of the other, “fraudulent” versions “*arroz con cosas*” — “rice with stuff.”)

The Book

After several months of modestly successful paellas using The Spanish Table’s paella sheet as inspiration, Don Bigote one day stumbled upon a slim yet useful book entitled *La Paella: Deliciously Authentic Rice Dishes from Spain’s Mediterranean Coast*, by Jeff Koehler. From this book, Bigote learned more about the place of paella in Spanish culture, as the center of a leisurely Sunday afternoon lunch with family and friends or a rural, outdoor cooking ritual practiced by men. He also read that paella is one of a family of Spanish rice-based dishes prepared in a single pot. The other family members include *cazuela*, cooked in a shallow, terra-cotta casserole, and *caldoso*, a soupier version prepared in a deeper terra-cotta or cast iron pot.

It pleased Bigote’s naturally pedantic sensibilities to know that the dish is named after the pan, which is simply a *paella*; not a *pa-ellera*: “*Paellera* is the outdoor place where the paella is prepared over wood, as well as the woman who makes the paella (a man would be a *paellero*),” wrote the author. But Don Bigote’s pedantry

did not prevent him from scowling at the inflexible orthodoxy of those who claim that the traditional *paella valenciana*, using just the ingredients noted in a preceding paragraph, is the only incarnation worthy of the name “paella.” “At this point in my investigations,” Bigote proclaimed, “I would say that ‘paella’ is a *technique* rather than a *dish*, whereas ‘*paella valenciana*’ is a specific, historical dish that deserves recognition as such.” Fortunately the author of the book appears to have agreed with Don Bigote, thereby having spared himself a lengthy screed from Bigote’s angry pen.

Having thus resolved the question of definitions—to his own satisfaction, anyway—Don Bigote continued reading about the four key elements of a paella: The Pan, The Rice, The *Sofrito* (a mixture of sautéed vegetables that forms the basis of each paella) and The Liquid. He studied the differences among Spanish medium-grain and short-grain rices, including Bomba, the most famous and expensive short-grain variety. He poured over maps to locate the three *denominaciones de origen* (D.O.s), or appellations, in which most of the best Spanish rice grows: *Arroz de Valencia*, *Arroz del Delta del Ebro* (in the province of Tarragona, west of Barcelona), and *Arroz de Calasparra* (in the provinces of Murcia and Albacete, southwest of Valencia). The author’s claim that many non-Spanish short-grain and medium-grain rices work perfectly fine in paella gave Bigote a measure of reassurance: He could continue his investigations even in the event of exile from the East Bay, this being a particularly enlightened part of the globe

in which most residents are within walking distance of a cloth sack of Bomba *Arroz de Valencia* (at \$15 per kilo).

Bigote perused the accounts of other common paella ingredients, especially the all-important saffron and *pimentón dulce*—the sweet (i.e., not spicy) version of Spain’s distinctively smoky paprika. He reviewed the basic preparation techniques, including no stirring after the rice is distributed in the pan (paella and risotto are polar opposites in both cooking technique and texture of the resulting dish). Don Bigote then set to work on the recipes. He became especially fond of the *paella de setas*, a wild mushroom paella with tomatoes that is particularly easy to put together. It inspired Bigote to make regular pilgrimages to the mushroom and heirloom tomato vendors at his local farmers’ market. And good-quality canned whole tomatoes worked fine as the fresh tomato season waned.

The Restaurant Chef

Don Bigote’s paellas by now were getting plausibly good reviews from friends and family. He sallied forth to the wild mushroom vendor each week and to The Spanish Table for a smaller 26 cm / 2 serving paella pan—suitable for simple weeknight paellas for two people. Despite the apparent successes, Bigote wondered how his paellas would compare with those cooked by a *paellera* who knew what she was doing.

Thus it was that Bigote sought out Maggie Pond, the executive chef for Bar César in Berkeley and Oakland. Chef Maggie began making paellas in the 1970s during her internship at a Spanish restaurant in Portland, Maine. She was taught by a woman who came from Madrid, and she remembers that “the method was right, but the ingredients weren’t high quality. For example, we used Uncle Ben’s [long-grain] rice.” “Well,” mused Don Bigote, “we probably should cut them some slack; cloth sacks of Bomba *Arroz de Valencia* couldn’t be had at any price in Portland, Maine in the 1970s.”

Since those early days, Chef Maggie has come to the conclusion that the two most important things in making paella are the quality of the stock and the quality of the *sofrito*. Their signature *paella César* and *paella vegetariana* each start with a rich stock—the former using lobster shells and the latter porcini mushrooms. (For those who don’t wish to follow Don Bigote in his current obsession, both of these types are available from César’s paellas; go see the web site for details.) Some of the César stocks and *sofritos* include fennel, jalapeño, brandy, and wine. These kinds of things aren’t traditional, Chef Maggie was quick to tell Bigote, but they add something that restaurant patrons like.

Don Bigote tried César’s *paella valenciana* and *paella mar y montaña*, and he could only agree. Both had a richness that his



lacked, and not only because of the generous dollops of alioli that the César chefs add.

Of course the rice is important, too, Chef Maggie added. César uses a rice called Montcia from Tarragona. “Bomba absorbs even more moisture and opens up like an accordion,” she said, but they get excellent results with the non-

Bomba variety. After the stock, the sofrito, and the rice, it’s a matter of adding each ingredient at the right time so that it cooks the proper amount. She confided to Bigote that the paellas that sell the best are the ones with the largest variety of ingredients, even though simpler paellas featuring one or two stellar ingredients can taste equally good. Don Bigote nodded in agreement, content in knowing that he’d stocked up on wild mushrooms and tomatoes earlier that day.

Bigote then inquired into their method of cooking paellas in the restaurant kitchen. Chef Maggie replied that they started each paella on the stovetop and then finished it in the oven, a method recommended to Bigote by a fellow home-chef and also discussed in Jeff Koehler’s book. (Being a somewhat nervous *paellero*, Don Bigote prefers to cook his paellas entirely on the stovetop, so that he can continue to watch it, spin it, and worry over it.) Chef Maggie pointed out that the finish-in-the-oven method partly results from the practical consideration of freeing up stovetop burners for other tasks in a busy restaurant kitchen. When César caters events, however, they cook the paellas entirely on special-purpose paella gas burners, of the type sold at The Spanish Table. In any case, she reported that the results don’t seem to vary greatly with the two methods.

The Private Chef

One consideration continued to worry Don Bigote during his investigations. “I have not spoken to any Spanish natives about their national dish. Chef Maggie learned to make paella in Maine. Author Jeff Koehler hales from Washington State and had the good fortune to marry into a Catalan family. And Señor Kevin Hogan is no more Spanish than his name. All three are knowledgeable cooks from whom I have learned much, and I do not wish to perpetuate the simple-minded stereotype that only those who are born into a culture are capable of truly understanding it—never mind explaining it. But would it not be wise to hear from a real Spaniard?”

Bigote found himself at a party pondering this very question over a glass of snappy Catalan white wine when his host introduced him to Raquel Hermosilla. “She’s from Madrid but now lives in Berkeley,” said the host, “and she’s a professional *paellera*.” “We need to talk,” Bigote exclaimed urgently to Chef Raquel, while pouring a generous measure of the Catalan white into her

glass.

“Paella is the king of rice dishes,” she proclaimed. “Paella has always been an important dish in Spain; it’s something that we always talk about—who makes a good one, for example.” It’s difficult to make a good one in a restaurant, she pointed out to Bigote. Growing up in a Spanish family, Chef Raquel came to believe that paella always is better at home. “It’s very much a Sunday afternoon dish; you invite family and friends over.”

She was adamant about one thing: “When it has chorizo or sausage in it, it’s no longer paella. Paella can have chicken, pork or rabbit, but never beef or sausage. If you put sausage in it, it’s jambalaya.” Bigote pondered the raves that his chorizo-larded paellas always drew, but decided to keep quiet for once and continue listening.

“The secret is how to make a paella with just a few ingredients. People who make it well pride themselves on being able to do that.” Chef Raquel learned from her mother, who taught her just this one dish and showed her just once how to make it. “She taught me to how to cook with just one dish. The most important thing about paella is the timing for each ingredient to come into the picture—especially the timing of the rice.”

Chef Raquel explained to Bigote that when she came to the U.S. to study, she was invited to pot-luck meals, a cultural practice that doesn’t exist in Spain. She made traditional tapas to bring to the pot-lucks and discovered that everyone loved them. This observation inspired her to launch Spain at Home after she finished her studies at U.C Berkeley. The business originally involved her going to a client’s kitchen to make tapas and paella for a small group. She loved the direct contact with clients and “putting on a show” for them. As the business grew to become a catering operation for larger groups, she found that she was losing what had appealed to her—personal contact with the people who were eating what she cooked. So now she is returning to her original focus and offering personalized paella-making classes in clients’ homes. “I think it’s important that we touch the food we eat,” she noted.

“I want to keep the essence of the dish. Paella is about getting people together and spending time together. That’s what I want to bring to people.” Chef Raquel explained the normal sequence of a paella lunch in Spain: Guests show up, you eat some tapas and drink some wine, and you make the paella, which takes about two hours. Then you eat, you have coffee, and you talk some more. “Your guests are in your house for four, five, or six hours.” It’s a kind of leisurely socializing that we’ve almost forgotten how to do.

The bottle of Catalan white wine was empty and Chef Raquel’s conversation with Don Bigote drew to a close. And it seemed too

RESOURCES

The Spanish Table
1814 San Pablo Ave., Berkeley
www.spanishtable.com

La Paella: Deliciously Authentic Rice Dishes from Spain’s Mediterranean Coast

by Jeff Koehler.
Published by Chronicle Books, 2006.

Bar César
1515 Shattuck Ave., Berkeley
4039 Piedmont Ave., Oakland
www.barcesar.com

Spain at Home
(Raquel Herмосilla’s private paella lessons)
510.410.4793

that Bigote’s madness had abated, displaced, at least temporarily, by thoughts of future paellas to be cooked and consumed with friends ... and perhaps by the fantasy of a future sally to The Spanish Table to acquire the 70 cm / 25 serving size paella pan.