

Tasting Notes

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Micky Fenix gives us the highlights of this year's Madrid Fusion on its home turf, through interviews with the chefs who were its brightest lights

Four chefs in a row celebrating the 15th anniversary of Madrid Fusion. From second from left to right: Juan Mari Arzak of Arzak, Joan Roca of El Celler de Can Roca, Quique Dacosta of Quique da Costa Restaurante, and Andoni Luis Aduriz of Mugaritz. Opposite page: Pedro Subijana at the cocktails hosted by the Philippine Department of Tourism, Andoni Luis Aduriz during his talk, and Joan Roca interviewing Maria Fernanda di Giacobbe onstage.

If an analogy can be made between Madrid Fusion and a heavy dinner, it involves how both have a huge amount of ideas that takes days to take in, and then days to digest.

All the speakers touched on a variety of subjects, some seemingly simple as "simplicity", some strange, like "a light in the abyss," some specific like "Jewish cuisine."

Be sure to stay in front, we were told, because if there are tastings, you are sure to get some. You also have a good position as well to take photographs. But you also cannot nap when jet lag hits you because the speakers can see you.

It was celebration time as Madrid Fusion marked its 15th year with a huge cake done by the Torreblanca pastry chefs—Paco, Jacob, and David. But the 2017 version added Asisa to its name, the sponsor a big health care company in Spain.

An announcement as well was made that Madrid Fusion Manila will be held on April 6 to 8 by Verna Buensuceso, director at the Department of Tourism. It will be the third edition of the event

this year. Chefs who were and will be speakers were called onstage.

All Madrid Fusion, whether in Madrid or in Manila, presents a scheduling problem. It's difficult to go through the whole scope of conferences, presentations at different venues, and the exhibits. In between the Madrid talks, tastings were done of first-class oysters, an oyster leaf, drinks from Argentina without the tango, a whirl of wines (one hardly remember how many were sipped let alone the tastes and smells). At the Philippine booth, tastings were prepared of adobo, arroz caldo, pili nuts, and kinilaw. There were long lines when ice cream (sorbetes to us, helado to them) was scooped into cones with Filipino flavors such as mango. Guests giggled as it was announced that "puto" was being served; rice cake to us meant something else in Spain.

There were standouts at the conference. Jonnie Boer of De Librije in Holland talked about ingredients he uses, such as tulip bulbs that he says were eaten during the war when there was no food to be had.

"Lights in the abyss" was by Angel Leon (also awarded "best European chef") of Aponiente in Spain who researched on the luminous light given off by some sea creatures, such as squid. This is a way to ward off predators and is caused by two kinds of bacteria, one of which is named *Luciferon*.

One could hear the chuckles from the chefs around as "nine types of cooks" were revealed through the study called *Enneagram*, and I wondered which personality type they belong to.

Very entertaining was "creative bars," by Ronny Emborg and Matthew Abbick, cook and manager of Atera in New York, who showed that a beautiful rose may be hiding prawns within its petals, nourished by a "drink."

Scheduled interviews took many journalists away from the conference. Even if the interviews sometimes involved a group, the subjects were up close.

Pedro Subijana Akelare

Pedro Subijana appeared like a benevolent grandfather with his smiling face and handlebar moustache. He is known as one of the founders of Nueva Cocina Vasca (new Basque cuisine), a group of chefs formed in 1976 who felt the need to do something for the Basque culture, and to share ideas on how to restore and update their traditional cooking. Their inspiration was French chef, Paul Bocuse, who came to Spain to talk on French nouvelle cuisine. Later Bocuse invited Subijana and Juan Mari Arzak to France. He described the group meetings as debates, which he called "food for thought."

Other regions wanted to join the Basque group, but Subijana encouraged each region to create their own because there are differences in ingredients, ways of cooking, and traditions. He emphasized that there is no such thing as Spanish cuisine, but there are Spanish regional cuisines.

He is one of the invited speakers at the Madrid Fusion Manila 2017 (April 6 to 8) on the theme "towards a sustainable gastronomic planet". He hasn't decided on what he will speak about, but it will undoubtedly be an important talk, given by a most senior chef who helped put the culinary spotlight on Basque cooking.



Andoni Luis Aduriz Mugaritz

We greeted each other like old friends, Michelin-rated chef Andoni Aduriz and I. That is after I reminded him of a T-shirt I had given him after he plunged into the waters of Anilao in Batangas during Madrid Fusion Manila 2015. He had no extra T-shirt, after all. Was that why he discarded his chef's white for a plain T-shirt for his talk about "chance" at the main auditorium? With Aduriz, whose mind seems forever open to possibilities in cuisine, you are never really sure.



He was looking for the right English synonym of chance and it came later and when he had it: serendipity. "Serendipity is the basis of cuisine," he affirmed. Chefs are presented with many creative possibilities, but whatever is formulated as a dish is always chosen by chance. This he calls "taming chance."

Eight years ago, he said, he thought of making an edible bubble and he worked with scientists to make it possible. Aduriz, after all, is a disciple of Ferran Adria (he worked in the El Bulli kitchen) and many of the ideas see fruition in the laboratory rather than the kitchen.

Reminded of how he liked Balayan bagoong (fish paste from Balayan, Batangas) in Anilao, he smiled and said he has the fermentation book from the Philippines. We are presuming he was talking about *Philippine Fermented Foods: Principles and Technology* by Priscilla Chinte Sanchez, PhD (The University of the Philippines Press, 2008), a must-have book for those who want to know about the hottest subject in food-dom today.

Maria Fernanda Di Giacobbe Winner of 2016 Basque Culinary World Prize

The contest honors a person for major contributions to the culinary world. It was for the honoree's "project Bombon," chocolate candies that have involved more than 8,000 women in Venezuela.

Already successful as a chef with nine restaurants, Di Giacobbe said her "moment of reckoning" was seeing a poster of Venezuelan chocolate. She decided that her country had a product that was worth working with and letting the world know. She turned to mothers and grandmothers who traditionally made fruit preserves to be covered in chocolate. She included using other produce of her country, such as coffee and rum. Starting with 30 women, the project has spread throughout Venezuela, even to the Amazon. Each region, Di Giacobbe points out, produced different products and flavors.



For her, cacao has transformed both the women and the nation. The women now can earn, and there are about 700 women who have received diplomas from the Simon Bolivar University, learning not only how to make chocolates but do coding, photography, hygiene, marketing, transport, applying new tools. They earned their diplomate in eight months, going to the university one day a week for study, then to the laboratory to make bombons.

The Basque Culinary World Prize, she said, has restored the identity of cacao and its soul. For the women, it has made them important, being the bearers of tradition, necessary to the progress of their country.

Maria Fernanda Di Giacobbe ended our talk with a declaration that, "The heart of the movement will go to Colombia and other Latin American countries."



Lolanda Bustos and Jose Solla pose after the interview. Photos by Anton Diaz.

Iolanda Bustos La Calendula

This soft-spoken chef from the Catalan region was to talk on a subject matter that seemed too esoteric and scientific: "biodynamic cooking." In general terms the concept means that action is based on the cycle of the moon. In farming, it includes when to plant and harvest. Then she smiled when we were puzzled as to how that can be applied in the kitchen. She said matter-of-factly that if the moon can control the tides, why not the kitchen? But she explained that when the moon is crescent, bacteria is most alive, good for cheese. With the moon descending, it's good for meat maturation, preserves, and wines.

During her talk, she said that appearing there was like revenge for her. At the interview, she explained a bit of family history. Her father was an agriculturist and her mother cooked Catalan cuisine that uses a lot of fermented products stored in large jars. Then, 20 years ago, the Ministry of Health closed the restaurant, citing sanitation, because the jars were not hermetically sealed according to the World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines. But, she said, bacteria that causes fermentation dies without air.



She applies lessons learned on fermentation from her women ancestors in her La Calendula restaurant, including creating a drink from flowers. And she expects to pass these on to those who want to learn about this natural technique.

Jose Gonzalez Solla Casa Solla

The chef looked like he was on vacation at Madrid Fusion. Six years ago at his restaurant in Galicia, he was clean-shaven and wearing his whites. Maybe this more relaxed persona is his new look.

Because he was to talk on "curing fish," the conversation concentrated on seafood and how chefs have to work within certain parameters. One of them, he said, is the temperature by which fish should be cooked. He specified that it should be 47 C to 48 degrees Celsius.

But equally important is when and how a chef receives the fish. There is a difference in taste, he said, if a fish is cooked two days or seven days after it is caught. And while fish is always stressed when caught, there is such a thing as good stress and this is what fishermen will have to be taught so that the product is always at its prime.

Solla showed the lamprey during his talk, a favored fish in Galicia. It is mistakenly identified as an eel because of its snake-like shape. It's supposed to be one of the oldest fish species in the world that swims in the rivers of the region.

Just to make things interesting, we told him about the sleeping fish technique developed by a Filipino scientist where fish is put to sleep (the method is secret), wrapped, and then transported without water. It is revived when it is placed in water. We won't be surprised if he brings that information back to Nove, the group of Galician chefs who innovate on their region's cooking.



Clockwise from left: Martin Berasategui at the Auditorium; guests at the Philippine booth sampling the local tsokolate; and Philippine chef Tatung Sarthou relaxing after his talk.

Martin Berasategui Restaurant Martin Berasategui

There isn't space on top of this page to place all the restaurants of Berasategui both in Spain and other countries, plus restaurants that his group manages. He is also the only Spanish chef that has garnered eight Michelin stars. That shows he has successfully combined creativity and business savvy.

Like many of the chefs in Spain, Berasategui grew up in a family that ran a restaurant. His mother and aunt did the cooking at el Bodegon Alejandro in San Sebastian. He was the only one among his brothers who was interested, and he began work when he was told as a teenager to report next day at eight a.m. until closing time at one a.m. The first of his Michelin stars came five years after he took over from his mother and aunt.

He did study at a French pastry school in the French Basque region and then went to apprentice with many chefs, including Alain Ducasse

Like all the other chefs, Madrid Fusion is his way to link with veteran chefs, among them his Nueva Cucina Vasca co-member, Pedro Subijana, as well as connect with the younger chefs whom he says will see him as just a "normal guy."

Tatung Sarthou Agos

"Rediscovering pre-Hispanic Filipino cuisine" was his subject, a repeat of his presentation at the Madrid Fusion Manila last year. He showed the same documentary on the Tausug pamapa itum and the Maranao palapa, two spice mixes employed by two Muslim tribes in Mindanao.

Our conversation, however, happened at the Amsterdam stopover before our flight to Madrid, when he revealed that he would also talk on "salt," certainly an ingredient we have had even before the Spanish came. At the conference, he showed the video shot in a huge salt bed, hectares of it in Pangasinan, managed by the only salt engineer in the country. His concern was the proliferation of artificial salt in our markets brought in from China and made with chemicals. He said this has endangered our cuisine because the unnatural salt doesn't melt easily and will not ferment products properly. Minerals are absent in artificial salt, which is harmful to health. Another issue is iodized salt that is required by law but is not overseen properly as to its application.

How good that the Philippines has taken center stage at last at this culinary conference.

