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Spanish invasion

By ALICE CHING

Cochinillo, anyone? The newest fad among pork lovers seems to be the roasted suckling pig, served Spanish style.

DISCERNING diners are prepared to go the whole hog for a taste of Spanish roast suckling pig.

Just as Wagyu and Angus beef have emerged as prime choices for beef lovers, many pork fans have been making pigs of themselves on Spanish-style specialities like jamón ibérico (cured Spanish ham from the Iberian black-haired pig), chorizo (cured smoked sausages) and cochinillo Segoviano (roast suckling pig from the central Spanish province of Segovia).

Piggy-backing on the success of independent eateries like The Rib Shop and El Cerdo in Kuala Lumpur, new restaurants in the Klang Valley are hogging the limelight with their hearty European-style pork offerings.



Franky Chin's roast pork made from Segovia-bred pig. Since the meat is cured with just salt, roasting allows natural flavour to come through. – Photos by RAJA FAISAL HISHAN / The Star

This favourable response prompted fine food purveyors, Latin Fine Foods Sdn Bhd and Agnus Verus, to bring in cochinitillo expert, chef Javier Sancha from Spain's famous El Pastor restaurant, for a promotional stint recently.

“We want to get local Chinese chefs and restaurateurs better acquainted with fine traditional Spanish products such as cochinitillo asado (roast suckling pork) and lechazo asado (roast suckling lamb),” said Victor E. Dejesus, managing director of Latin Fine Foods.

According to Sancha, cochinitillo Segoviano (pronounced as ko-chee-ni-yo) is a classic speciality of Aranda de Duero, the capital of Ribera del Duero, Spain's wine-making region.



Chef Javier Sancha says whitehaired pigs are bred in Segovia and there are strict conditions on the way the animals are raised, fed and slaughtered.

“We use white-haired pigs which are bred in Segovia, which is about 34km away from Madrid. Just like in France, there is a regulatory council that imposes strict conditions on the way these animals are raised, fed and slaughtered,” said Sancha through an interpreter.

“The mother sows are fed with quality grains to ensure adequate milk production so that they can suckle their piglets until they are 20 days old. Hence, the suckling pigs are free from antibiotics and growth hormone injections.”

At 20 days old, the piglets would have attained the desired weight of 4.5-6

kgs and are ready for the market.

“Every endeavour is made, right from the slaughter house to vacuum-packing, to keep the cold chain intact. This helps to maintain the exceptional quality and taste,” said Enrique Minguez of Agnus Verus. “Every pig also comes with a certification tag that denotes its geographic origin and authenticity.”

Traditionally, the suckling pig is roasted in a wood-fire oven for about two to two-and-a-half hours. Except for a sprinkling of salt and water, it is cooked without any marinade.

Chef Franky Chin of Bruno’s Restaurant & Bar at Jaya 33 shopping mall in Petaling Jaya says, “They season the pig with just salt so the natural meat flavour comes across stronger once it is roasted.”

The local version, in comparison, is more flavourful as a variety of dry spices are used to marinate the piglet prior to roasting.

He also says the Spanish suckling pigs are definitely meatier than the Chinese version. “The cochinillo has thin, crispy skin with a lot of meat while our local suckling pig tends to have thicker skin with very little meat. Taste-wise, the Spanish one has a discernible milky aroma and aftertaste to it. Its meat is extremely tender with an incomparable ‘melt-in-the-mouth’ texture.”



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Diners who attended the special Spanish food and wine dinner at Bruno's recently generally had good things to say about the Spanish suckling pig. A few even expressed their disbelief at the generous amount of meat obtained from such young piglets.

Former chef-turned-wine consultant, Christopher Low, was able to rationalise this.

He said: "Livestock from the European continent tends to be bigger in size. Although both types of suckling pigs are around three weeks old at the time of slaughter, one must remember that the Spanish piglets are far more sizeable than those bred locally."

His dining companion was renowned food and wine enthusiast Lionel Lau, who had nothing but praise for the roast cochinillo.

"I didn't expect it to be so meaty. It is surprisingly quite lean yet tender and juicy on the palate. I also like the nutty nuance in the meat which makes it quite distinctive," he said.

Travel agency boss, Terence Chong, together with his two best buddies, Dr Eng Seng Chai and Woon Fong Piew, admitted the most delectable part was the crispy skin.

“This is the first time we are having this speciality so it is quite an experience. I think some Chinese may find it hard to accept the meat’s ‘sou’ flavour,” said Dr Eng, referring to the milky-gamey scent one usually detects in dairy products.

To counter this, Chin suggest roasting the pig slightly longer.

“Once more of its natural fat melts away, it will be less cloying on the tastebuds,” he said.

Alternatively, one can always wash down the pork’s rich, sublime taste in true Spanish fashion – by complementing it with a glass or two of Luberri 2007 Carbonic Maceration Tempranillo or Rioja red wine.

Diners who wish to savour the Spanish suckling pig and other typical Spanish delicacies can check out Bruno’s Restaurant & Bar, PG-01 A, Ground Floor, Jaya 33, Jalan Semangat, Section 13, Petaling Jaya.