

THE MAINS IN SPAIN

The tapas guru behind Barrafina has a philosophy beyond light bites to make a world of flavour, says **Claire Coleman**

YOU may not recognise the name Nieves Barragán Mohacho, but if you've been to Barrafina, arguably one of the Spanish restaurants that has spearheaded London's love affair with tapas, then you've probably tasted her food.

While she grew up in a family where food was central to life – 'when we sat down for lunch we'd start talking about what we were going to eat for dinner; when we sat down to dinner, we'd talk about tomorrow's lunch' – her first step into a professional kitchen was as a porter in a French restaurant called Simply Nico, and it wasn't until some years later that she found herself planning the menu for the first Barrafina (there are now three) – Basque-influenced small plates.

But her new cookbook, *Sabor*, covers far more than just tapas. 'It's a very easy family book,' Mohacho tells me. 'It's about ingredients, about not messing around too much with the food.' The name, which means 'flavour' in Spanish, was the hardest part of creating the book. 'We didn't know what to call it but whenever I am in a kitchen cooking, every day, I'll taste something and say "Sabor! What it needs is more flavour!"'

The book has chapters for specific ingredients – eggs, meat, fish and shellfish, as well as for separate courses – and it's accessible.

'I don't use any machines, only a mixer or a blender. I cook rice in a large pan with foil, not a rice cooker. My cooking is not about techniques that require three or four complicated machines; I don't use water baths – if I confit something, I'll do it in a large pan. That's how I like cooking – the way we used to cook – and I think it's cooking like that, that makes good ingredients really tasty.'

Among her favourites from the

book are the Galician crab empanadas, the stuffed squid in its own ink, and the stuffed mussels – 'every time I cook that dish, it reminds me of my childhood', she says. 'I really like dishes where you need to use a knife, a fork and a spoon – for me, it's about getting a lot of flavour from your ingredients and that doesn't have to be complicated. My recipes may take time but they're not difficult.' As for ingredients, Mohacho cites garlic and parsley as her favourites – 'with garlic, parsley and olive oil you can cook anything!'

As someone who's had to be scrupulously tidy – the open kitchen at Barrafina mean chefs are cooking under their customers' noses – she has some tips. 'Finish one job and then start another – it's the only way, otherwise you end up with food everywhere. Doing one job, clearing away and starting another is the only way to stay tidy, and the only way to work faster.'

Mohacho admits that she's not precious about tradition and that living in London has led to her food evolving. 'I discovered ingredients such as celeriac, which I'd never come across before, and artichokes. I remember thinking "what is this? what can I do with it?" and then realising that actually, they go very well with serrano ham.'

'I try to incorporate English flavours into Spanish dishes. I remember the first time



Queen of tapas:
Nieves Barragán
Mohacho

I tried horseradish – I tasted a big lump and I thought my head was going to explode! But then I made a horseradish aioli, which goes brilliantly with anchovies. There's always something new to taste, a new ingredient to try, a new way to cook.'

But she still has rules – one recipe clearly states you must make a minimum of one litre of béchamel

sauce. 'Sometimes it doesn't work when you multiply or divide. It makes the béchamel watery, because you need a certain volume to be able to whisk it, so you get the right texture and consistency.'

It really is all about the sabor.

■ *Sabor* by Nieves Barragán Mohacho (£25, Penguin)

SQUID, PUNTARELLE, TOMATOES, ANCHOVIES & CAPERS

If you can't find puntarelle, you can use something peppery and bitter, like rocket. This is easy, quick to make, tasty and healthy. All you need to buy is squid, tomatoes and puntarelle – the rest of the ingredients should be in your cupboard.

SERVES 4

- 100ml extra virgin olive oil
- 800g good-quality squid, including tentacles, or cuttlefish
- sea salt
- 20ml Moscatel vinegar
- 12 tinned anchovies, roughly chopped
- 2 tablespoons capers
- 300g Datterini or other fresh baby plum tomatoes, cut in half

- 150g puntarelle
- Ajillo and chilli oil to finish

1 Put 50ml of olive oil into a pan on a medium heat. Season the squid with salt and fry for around 1½ minutes on each side – you don't want it to colour too much or to get a crust, as this will make it tough and chewy.

2 Combine the remaining olive oil with the vinegar, chopped anchovies, capers, tomatoes and just a little bit of salt (as the anchovies and capers are already salty) and mix with the puntarelle.

3 Put the salad on a plate, top with the squid, and finish with a drizzle of ajillo and chilli oil.



POTATO AND CHORIZO STEW

This stew from Rioja is simple, but you need to cut the potatoes just right. Everyone loves this - it's a very wintry, weekend-y, comforting dish. You can't get it wrong. Every Spanish mum makes this.

SERVES 4

- 4 potatoes
- 240g mild or spicy cooking chorizo
- 25ml extra virgin olive oil, plus more to serve
- 1 large Spanish onion, julienned
- 2 bay leaves
- 100ml white wine
- 1 litre chicken stock or water, or a 50/50 mixture of both
- sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 2 tablespoons chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley leaves

1 Peel the potatoes. Partially cut into them, then pull them apart into chunky, uneven-edged pieces around 3cm in size. Cut the chorizo to half the size of the potatoes.

2 Put the olive oil into a big pan on a medium heat, then add the onion and cook gently for about 15 minutes, without colouring. Add the chorizo and when it starts to caramelize, add the potatoes, bay leaves and wine. Cook until the wine has evaporated, then add the chicken stock and/or water and season.

3 Half cover the pan with a lid, and continue cooking on a low-medium heat. The more slowly you cook it, the more starch will come out of the potatoes - it should take about 25 minutes. When the potatoes are cooked through, add the chopped parsley.

4 Serve with a drizzle of olive oil to finish, and bread to dip.

PHOTOS: CHRIS TERRY

ARROZ CON LECHE

This is a classic dessert. Every mother in Spain knows how to make arroz con leche: it's a taste of childhood. Kids love it - but normally eat only about four spoons! Cooking the rice takes longer than normal because you don't want it to be al dente - it should be soft, with no bite, for a light and creamy pudding. It can be served warm or cold.

SERVES 6

- 1 litre whole milk
- 1 cinnamon stick
- the peel of 1 orange, in a strip
- the peel of 1 lemon, in a strip
- 140g Calasparra or Bomba rice
- 40g unsalted butter
- 50ml double cream
- 160g caster sugar
- ground cinnamon, to finish

1 Put the milk into a pan on a low heat and infuse with the cinnamon and citrus peel until steaming - around 15-18 minutes. The more slowly you steam it, the more flavour. Turn off the heat and leave to cool, then pass through a sieve.

2 Wash the rice in cold water to get rid of as much of the starch as

possible - the water should run clear.

3 Add the butter and cream to the infused milk, put back on a low heat and let the butter melt, then add the sugar and cook until dissolved. Add the rice and continue stirring on a low heat for a minimum of 30 minutes, until the rice is cooked and looks creamy. Cooking it on a low heat should keep it liquid - if it starts to dry out a bit, add an extra splash of milk.

4 Serve warm, dusted with ground cinnamon. If serving cold, leave to come to room temperature, then spoon into glasses or cups, dust generously with ground cinnamon and refrigerate.



CAULIFLOWER WITH SALTED ALMONDS, SHALLOT AND CHILLI

This is great served with pig's cheeks. Adding milk to the cooking water is meant to stop your house smelling of boiling cauliflower.

SERVES 4

- 1 large cauliflower
- 100ml whole milk
- sea salt and freshly ground black pepper
- 100g Marcona salted almonds
- 50ml extra virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling
- 3 shallots, finely chopped
- 1 dried red chilli, finely chopped
- 3 tablespoons finely chopped fresh flat-leaf parsley leaves

1 Trim the stalk from the cauliflower and separate the florets. Peel the stalk and cut into short, thin strips similar in size to the florets. Put 100ml of water into a pan with the milk and a pinch of salt and bring to a gentle boil,

then blanch the cauliflower stalks and florets until al dente. Drain and, if you are cooking the cauliflower in advance, place in a bowl of cold water.

2 Roughly crack the almonds with the back of a knife on a chopping board.

3 Put the oil into a pan on a medium heat, then add the drained cauliflower and allow to caramelize slightly. Add the shallots and cook gently until soft, then add the chilli and the almonds and cook for a minute or so. Season (remember that the almonds are already salted), then add the parsley. Take off the heat, drizzle with a little olive oil and mix everything together.



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