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BRITISH COLUMBIA

victoria
& vancouver island

EPICUREAN

Shelora Sheldon's

AT LARGE

Food Finds

Shelora Sheldon eats Spanish ham, Mexican tortilla and organic soups — it's all in a day's work for our inquiring culinary explorer.



HE SOUPS, HE SCORES

Chefs are increasingly stepping out of the hot confines of the kitchen and moving into product development. Gourmet products abound. Chef **Robert Clark** from C restaurant is dedicating more time to sourcing ingredients and developing products for his Contemporary Ocean line. **Lesley Stowe**, long time Vancouver caterer, morphed her store into a full time production commissary for a line of packaged gourmet products and frozen entrees. Victoria caterer **David Feys** has expanded his business enterprises to encompass the Victoria Estate Winery allowing more visibility to his line of chocolates, preserves, sauces and gourmet crisps.

The newest addition to this niche market was spied recently on the shelves of Planet Organic. **Wolfgang Puck** - who once turned the American restaurant scene on its ass with spa cuisine - continues to expand his horizons. With numerous cookbooks, a cooking show, six fine dining establishments, James Beard awards, catering firms and express dining franchises sweeping the U.S., he has now released a line of canned organic soups.

I chose three from the 10 offered. The ingredient list is impressive. Besides a little calcium chloride and citric acid, everything - even down to the flour, tapioca starch, vegetables, cream and spices - is organic.

First up in my test kitchen was the Organic Chicken & Wild Rice. These are not concentrated soups, so no added liquid is required. However - at \$4.69 for 398 ml - I couldn't resist adding a bit of water to rinse out any soup goodness left in the can.

The soup had a good even distribution of chicken, rice and vegetables. The eye candy is the addition of coin-shaped carrots. (I love carrot coins, so for me, they're the soup's best feature.) Overall nothing stellar, but nothing bad.

Next up was the Tomato Basil. Balanced flavours with a fearless amount of basil and easy-to-handle tomato pieces in every spoonful. Smooth with no over-acidity from the tomatoes. Excellent!

Not being a fan of creamed soups or squash, I was highly sceptical of the Creamy Butternut Squash. Expecting a baby food consistency, I was surprised with a sophisticated squash puree as a backdrop for chunky roasted potato and carrots. I detected hints of garlic and a delicate sweetness reminiscent of sherry. This selection should be the standard that all canned soups live up to. None of these soups needed salt or pepper. They could just be a little cheaper. Top marks, Wolfie.

Planet Organic, 3995 Quadra, 250-727-9888.

HAM I AM

I was first introduced to jamón serrano (serrano ham) in - of all places - Oaxaca, Mexico. Spanish transplant, **Javier Olivo Cantero**, owner of Los Olivos restaurant, cures his own. He treated me to transparent rosy-red slices served on toasted bread with ripe tomatoes and olive oil. The ham's apricot-like perfume was so intoxicating, I kept returning for additional hits.

Being sorely deprived of this culinary treat in Canada, you can imagine my joy when **Andrew Moyer** of Ottavio announced the arrival of the first true Spanish serrano ham in 50 years.

The company Campofrio, in Burgos, Spain, produces 15-month aged serrano ham in their state-of-the-art production plant. Mimicking the traditional method of open-air aging in the mountainous regions of Spain, Campofrio's technology has satisfied the CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency).

This auspicious relationship is the result of tireless



At the Ottavio inaugural slicing: a traditional *Jamonero* is used for slicing a leg of jamon serrano.

efforts by Toronto chef/food importer **Michael Tkaczuk**.

"It has taken three years, but it has been worth it," says a satisfied Tkaczuk.

The legs of white-race pigs are first salt-cured for the equivalent of one day per kilo of meat. Next, the meat is dry-cured for seven months beginning with high humidity and low temperatures. Curing temperatures are up to 33 degrees with the ham losing up to 35% of its mass. (This is the diet for me!) Finally, the hams go to the cellars to mature. This is where complex flavours develop. The fat changes into 62% monounsaturated - closer to an extra-virgin olive oil or avocado than what we normally consider for pork fat. In short, it's good for you! For further comparison, Italian prosciutto de parma contains only 6-10% monounsaturated fats.

Thinly sliced on the grain, jamón serrano is almost floral in perfume, delicately sweet and salty. Groove on the good-for-you fat by slipping a slice in your mouth, letting your tongue's heat melt the fat like sweet butter. Just smelling it is satisfying; eating it is an epiphany.

A true tapas party will be in order with thin slices of the ham accompanied by manchego cheese, quince paste or honey, toasted almonds, olives and white anchovies, called *boquerones*. Keep beverages authentic too, with a Fino dry sherry, Manzanilla or Cordoniu dry cava.

This is just the beginning. At the end of the year, Tkaczuk promises us Spanish wine chorizo and lomo, a cured pork loin dusted with smoked paprika. And in a few more years, the much-talked-about jamón Ibérico made from the acorn-munching black Ibérico pigs. Stay tuned.

Eating pork fat and feeling good about it is one of life's precious gifts.

Ottavio, 2272 Oak Bay Ave., 250-592-4080

SPUD SERVICE

The tortilla known to most of us as a flat corn-based staple of Mexico and some Latin American countries takes on a different shape and flavour in Spain. The Spanish tortilla is best described as a potato frittata. This is simplicity at its

finest - potatoes, onions, salt, and eggs.

Hearty fare and *amiga* of the tapas table, the tortilla Española serves to fill the stomach and satisfy the soul at any hour of the day.

In a nutshell, the recipe goes something like this: potatoes are peeled, sliced and par-cooked in oil - or steamed for the diet conscious - making certain that the potatoes do not take on colour. Sliced onions are sauteed and tossed together with the potatoes and liberal sprinklings of salt. An egg mixture is added and the happy ingredients finish cooking in the oven or on top of the stove.

If time or patience is not on your side, I suggest the Spanish tortilla served at Casa Nova on Johnson St. Owner **John Medeiros** makes a sky-high version, preferring chunky potato pieces over slices. With the colourful addition of parsley, red peppers and "secret spices", Medeiros cooks the tortilla solely on top of the stove. The end result, looking like a comfy toss cushion is nothing short of perfection. Hearty wedges are a mere \$3.25 or with the addition of soup or salad at \$6.00 - you won't need to eat for the rest of the day.

Casa Nova, 727 Johnson St., 250-385-8242, Monday to Friday, 7:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m.

CULINARY TREASURES

For those with an interest in cooking Mexican, but can't garner the time required for **Diana Kennedy's** thorough and often complex recipes, a new book has just been published that will inspire the novice culinary adventurer.

Mexican Culinary Treasures, Recipes from Maria Elena's Kitchen (Hippocrene Books), by Maria Elena, Cuervo-Lorens is a selection of recipes from the authors vast collection.

When Lorens moved with her husband and two children to Victoria almost 30 years ago she brought along a series of binders filled with recipes. It was a treasure - much like a photo album - documenting her family's history through food.

She began teaching some of these dishes at Camosun College and - at her husband's urging - published her first book, *Maria Elena's Mexican Cuisine* (General Store Publishing).

Some of her recipes were included in the Julia Child Award-winning cookbook, *Cocina de la Familia* (Simon & Schuster). By noted cookbook author Marilyn Tausend, it contains the best Mexican dishes from home kitchens throughout the U.S. and Canada. Tausend writes the foreword to Lorens's new book, calling it a "valuable resource".

Cooking my way through this resource, I came across a curious salsa recipe requesting chicken broth. With the addition of cascabel chilies - a small round chile rarely called for in recipes - I found the salsa earthy with smoky hints from the addition of roasted tomatoes. Lorens suggests this salsa with meats. It matched up perfectly with brined and baked thick-cut pork chops, and has since become a staple in my kitchen. Her cooked tomatillo salsa and the Pico de Gallo, made when tomatoes are fresh from the garden, are both great table salsas, which translates to "add them to anything".

Be forewarned, Lorens's use of fresh serrano chiles is *bravissima*. If you can't take the heat I suggest you remove some of the chile seeds and veins.

For the culinary historians among you, a recipe for the old-style dish, Peneques, offers a snapshot from her upbringing in Mexico City. As does an incredible tamal of a roasted poblano chile, first stuffed with fresh masa and then wrapped in corn husks and steamed.

A favourite recipe of hers, and one that she regularly presents at her cooking classes, is the Flautas with Avocado Sauce. Slow-cooked flank steak is shredded and rolled tightly inside warm corn tortillas. The companion sauce is a