

Sensual, salty, and a little bit spicy

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Yet another episode about anchovies.

It doesn't matter if you haven't hear the first two (though I hope you have) because this episode stems a part of the presentation of Marcela Garcés at the Dublin Gastronomy Symposium that there wasn't room for in our first conversation: the original Spanish anchovy on a stick, the pintxo known as a Gilda.

Marcela: It's a small bite, and it's made up of three things. It has an olive, a salt cured Cantabrian anchovy and a Basque pickled pepper, or what's called a pippara, and some places will add a fourth element by drizzling a little bit of olive oil over the anchovy before they serve it. It's called the Gilda is actually because it's named for a character from the film Gilda.

Film Clip: Gilda. Are you decent?

Film Clip: Me? Sure I'm decent.

Marcela: The important thing about the film, Gilda, is that it starred Rita Hayworth. Her original name was Margarita Carmen Cansino, and her father was actually from Spain, and her mother was of Irish and English descent, so when she went to Hollywood, she changed her last name to Hayworth and shortened her name to Rita.

Jeremy: So about the film. The plot is, how shall we say, a little complex, but all you really need to know is that Gilda is a sex bomb in a nightclub in Buenos Aires. I mean, there's a bit more to it than that, but, you know ... Anyway, it was directed by King Vidor and released in the US in 1946.

Marcela: In Spain, it wasn't released until 1947. It was a splash. A colleague named Diana Norton wrote a whole article about the reception of the film, and she actually talks about how it made an affective splash, which I really like, because she talks about how what

happened was, the film affected all these different parts of society. The licentiousness of it was scandalous in Spain, and of course, you have to think about, you know, 1947 Spain, you're talking about the Franco dictatorship. So many films were censored. Her dance numbers were shortened by the censors. But it was enough, you know, just seeing her dance, seeing her act, it was enough for them to be inspired to name this pintxo after her. They said that, you know, these three elements, right? Taking these pickled elements and this, you know, nice salty anchovy. And they said that it was like her because in Spanish it had *verde, salada y un poco picante*.

Film Clip: Sure. I'm decent.

Marcela: Now you could translate that. So *verde* means green, but it can also mean sensual, right? *Salada* in Spain means ... it's kind of like *simpatica*. So it means salty. But in Spain that's a good thing. So it's a nice thing and then a little spicy. Right? *Un poco picante*.

Jeremy: Now the story goes that the Gilda was the first pintxo and it was invented by one of the regulars at a place called Bar Casa Vallés in San Sebastián. Joaquin Aramburu, known to his pals as Txepetxa, was the first person to skewer a pickled pepper, an anchovy, and a green olive on a toothpick. Alas, the story doesn't tell us who first called it a Gilda. Of course, some killjoys say that this is all nonsense, that something like the Gilda had been gracing bar counters in San Sebastian since the 1920s. And that's as maybe; everyone does agree, however, that it was Rita Hayworth who gave the sensual, salty, spicy pintxo its name.

Marcela: Of course, you know, these histories are written and sometimes they're not written. Some people say, you know, that this isn't the first pintxo. A woman named Marti Buckley, who has a wonderful cookbook that just came out this year, it's called *The Book of Pintxos*. So she talks about how there actually are earlier pintxos potentially in the 1920s, but this really is a famous pintxo. And you can see why, right? because of this connection to film, still today called La Gilda. And it has this kind of interesting history that I think, you know, other pintxos maybe don't have as good of a story.

Jeremy: Yeah. But do you think, I mean, when you're in the Basque Country having having a pintxo or two, do you think the young people are aware of Gilda, of the movie? Are they aware of Rita Hayworth? I mean, she's not a name these days.

Marcela: I think it depends on where you are. So, you know, even though supposedly this was invented in San Sebastián, in Bilbao, so about an hour away, there are a whole chain of places that are called GildaToki and *toki* means place in Basque. And these are pintxo bars specifically that serve only Gildas, and they serve the traditional one, but they also serve all these other variations. And actually, when you walk in on the door, there's an image of Rita Hayworth with her gloved hand. Now, does everybody know that's Rita Hayworth? Maybe not, but they actually see her image right when they walk in. You know, this Hollywood star, right? every time you walk in to this particular place in Bilbao.

Jeremy: We'll come back to the GildaToki. But first, I think it's worth looking beyond the pintxo and asking how else Gilda might have affected life in Spain.

Marcela: The film was actually very highly criticised by the Catholic Church when it came out. You know, it often happens when you prohibit something, people are even more interested in it. Tickets would sell out with this film. Diana Norton talks about how, you know, there were people who boycotted the film or even threw ink at the screens. It wasn't just about food, right? So she talks about how a cocktail was created in Madrid. Interestingly, today there are a bunch of bars that have Gilda cocktails as well.

Jeremy: Those are pretty spicy, too, involving tequila and cinnamon syrup.

Marcela: And also, she talks about how women started wearing T-strap shoes because in the film, Hayworth wears these T-strap shoes, and they weren't called T-strap shoes, they were just called *Zapatos Gilda*. So, like Gilda shoes. I think a really fascinating example of how, you know, one film can have all these different cultural manifestations.

Jeremy: In your essay, you say that the Gilda pintxo is a small act of rebellion. Was it always a small act of rebellion? I mean, we're talking about Franco, hunger, all those things that in fact popularised the anchovy in many respects. So was it an act of rebellion back then?

Marcela: In its initial stages it was because, you know, if you think about this film being prohibited, you know, people saying, don't see this, this is going to corrupt your minds, right? Then you have to think about the context of, again, 1940s Spain. So those years are actually

known as *años del hambre*, so the hunger years. So I think that, you know, at a time when people are experiencing hunger, this is a tiny little rebellion, but it's also a way to enjoy oneself. Because if you eat one of these pintxos, they're delicious. And it's it kind of when you eat it, I always say it wakes you up, right? because it has this umami thing going on because of the anchovy. But it's also something fun to eat. And I think especially when you think about that time period, you know, you think about, if you're experiencing hunger or lack, but having a small way to celebrate or enjoy it really is a pick me up.

Jeremy: I said we'd come back to those GildaToki places in Bilbao, because Marcella mentioned that they have all these variations on the original Gilda. I've read about other weird modifications too, like a molecular Gilda, where each component is presented as some kind of spheroid. Maybe I'm too much of a purist — or a pedant — but I want a Gilda to be a Gilda.

Marcela: GildaToki, for example, their most popular pintxo continues to be the original Gilda, even though they have all these different types, you know. They even have they have a vegan pinto. They have, you know, Gildas with cheese or with a piece of shrimp or, you know, all kinds of different variations.

Jeremy: But then what makes it a Gilda. Is it just the anchovy and the pepper?

Marcela: Well, some of these actually don't even have anchovies. Right. So this is where ... Yeah ... This is where it gets like, oh, well, is that a Gilda, right? And so I think that particularly with this place because it's called GildaToki, you know, they're obviously using the name, using the tradition. But I think it's also a way to have variety. You can try a bunch of different types. But the thing that's kind of fascinating is many pintxo bars will have, they could have 30 or 40 different types of pinto. And so even if a bar has one pinto, let's say, they'll have a Gilda. So that's something like everybody kind of has this as: okay, we're going to make sure that that pintxo is present. It's also part of Basque culture, right. They've even created kind of an organisation to protect the creation of different pintxos and to make sure that they preserve, you know, these traditions, but also they're really into innovation.

So Basques are always trying new things. Like you mentioned, the one that you mentioned was actually created by Martín Berasategui. So

he's a three star Michelin-starred chef. His version of the Gilda has the three ingredients, but they're in liquid spheres, right? So molecular cuisine techniques. But they maintain their flavour of the original three elements.

Jeremy: You probably don't need to go all that far. All you really need are good Cantabrian anchovies. Guindilla peppers, if you can find them — I'm looking for substitutes — and big green olives and some toothpicks.

My thanks to Marcela Garcés for introducing me to the breadth and depth of the Basque appreciation of anchovies. But we haven't quite done with anchovies.

Jeremy: Now to. You guessed it — Sweden.

A little while ago I got an email from Jannie, a listener there. She said: "In my local supermarket in Stockholm, Swedish anchovies in tins (large, pink, slightly sweet and vinegared) are kept in the fridge. Imported anchovies from Italy in jars and tins (small, salty, umami) are kept on the shelf with the pasta and passata."

Now, slightly sweet, rang a bit of a bell. Jannie continued: "The former are wholly unsuited to being used as an ingredient, and are better eaten as one would a herring or a sardine."

So what's going on with Swedish anchovies? I turned to Chris Beckman, the happy anchovy himself, and he said he'd come across this question before and had even given it a name: the Swedish Anchovy Conundrum. Chris explained that Swedish anchovies are typically processed in a pickle or brine with sugar, spices, vinegar and a little salt. But the salt is for flavour only, and because they're so low in salt, they aren't very shelf stable, and that's why they're kept in the fridge. And there, of course, they sit alongside all sorts of other Scandinavian pickled fish like sardines, rollmop herrings, even gravlax. The imported Italian and Spanish anchovies probably sell better alongside the pasta and passata.

And that certainly makes sense to me. But there's another twist. Swedish anchovies aren't even anchovies. They're sprats, a different small, oily species. Jannie in Sweden was kind enough to send some photos, and they make it perfectly clear that although the tin says

anchovies, the fish within are actually sprats. *Sprattus sprattus* is their scientific name. European anchovies are *Engraulis encrasicolus*.

So why the confusion? That's much too complicated to unravel here. Maybe a simple case of passing off one species by the name of a different, more expensive species to make a bit more profit? Or maybe just confusion, pure and simple.

Chris Beckmann also pointed me to an article that goes into far more depth, and I'll put a link to that in the show notes.

And for sure, there's a whole episode to be made about the naming of fishes. I've made a note to take a look at Alan Davidson's marvellous books on *Mediterranean Seafood* and *North Atlantic Seafood* at the first possible opportunity, and I think I know someone to talk to who would be as entertaining and knowledgeable as Alan Davidson himself.

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