

The Hungry Traveler: Castilla  
By Lydia Itoi  
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The arid plains of Castilla in north-central Spain yield three things in abundance: great monuments in stone, roasted milk-fed lamb (*cordero lechal*) and roast suckling pig (*cochinillo*) so tender it can be cut with the edge of a plate. Heading north from Madrid into the tawny countryside surrounding Segovia, Alberto and I went in search of rocks and roasts.

“Castilla” means “castle,” and this granite-strewn region is full of them. Ever since Ferdinand of Aragon caught the eye of Queen Isabel I, Castilla has been the fortress from which the Spanish kings extended their power first over the Iberian peninsula, then to the New World. (There are four official languages in Spain, but the one known as “Spanish” is actually Castilian.) We stopped at the massive Escorial, the granite palace of Philip II that seems more like a monastery, if not a penitentiary. Eight miles farther north, General Franco’s creepy yet impressive monument, El Valle de los Caídos, lured us off of the highway again for an hour or so while we hiked to the top of the hill, right up to the base of the 490-ft. stone cross. The cavernous, gloomy basilica and Franco’s tomb, guarded by a squadron of grim stone angels and built by Republican prisoners of the Spanish Civil War, does not invite visitors to linger, so we hurried on to Segovia.

When we entered the rosy medieval walls of Segovia, we made a beeline to the most famous stone monument of all: the great Roman aqueduct, 95 ft. high, 2,400 ft. long, its graceful cadence of double arches still astonishing onlookers after nearly 2,000 years. But for the moment we were too hungry to give it more than glance. Just a few yards away stands another famous landmark, El Mesón de Cándido. This prime spot on the Plaza Azoguejo has housed eateries since the time of Enrique IV, who used to grant royal permission to perform the plate-cutting ceremony.

Cándido, a third-generation *asador* (roasting specialist), was not only a great chef but a master of public relations. There are plenty of talented *asadores* in town, including his late rival, Dionisio Duque of Casa Duque. But although Duque boasted the title “Master Asador of Segovia,” Cándido was anointed “Greatest Innkeeper in Castilla” by King Juan Carlos I, and the city of Segovia erected a statue of him in one of its traffic circles. Ambassadors, politicians and movie stars like to visit, and Emperor Hirohito of Japan made a point of coming after Cándido sent him a copy of his massive, 600-page book on regional Spanish cuisine and a personal invitation. Their sons carry on the rivalry, while their grandsons train in the kitchens and the great-grandchildren play in the back rooms of the restaurants. Roasting *cochinillo*, and feuding about whose is best, is a family affair.

As we attacked the juicy, tender meat under the crackling skin, we enjoyed our view of the aqueduct and the plaza below. Alberto noticed that cars were no longer allowed to drive through the aqueduct into the plaza. Cándido’s son explained that the traffic was diverted away from the restaurant as a tribute when his father passed away.

But while the meat was superb, Cándido fell short on Segovia’s other specialty, a rich, custardy almond cake called *ponche segoviano*. The best we found was at the bakery El Alcázar, in the shadow of the cathedral. The other Segovian Alcázar, a fairytale of a

castle, is famous for its role in the Reconquest and the coronation of Isabel I, but this one is also a monument in its own way. Pilar, the shy woman behind the counter, told us that *ponche segoviano* was created at the bakery by Frutos Garcia in 1925 and presented at the 1929 Barcelona Expo. The recipe is a secret, but it does not have sponge cake or marzipan like its pretenders, she said disdainfully. We bought one for the road and headed northeast to the beautifully preserved medieval town of Sepúlveda.

If suckling pig is king in Segovia, lamb rules the surrounding countryside. The road to Sepúlveda is lined with shop after shop sporting “*asador*,” “*figón*” and “*horno*” signs. They all offer tender, milk-fed meat roasted slowly in a wood-fired oven, usually seasoned with nothing but a swipe of salt and lard. Hunting for the best *cordero lechal* is a weekend sport for city dwellers, and these pastel-colored plains are the Napa Valley of lamb tasting. Aficionados vie for the left forequarter, deemed the tenderest part since the lamb lies on its other side. One could eat nothing but roast baby lamb morning, noon, and night for a week and still not make it to all the restaurants along a single mile of road.

There are many similar old towns in the area, with flocks and shepherds roaming the valley in view of gently crumbling churches and castles, but Sepúlveda stands out. It has several porticoed 11<sup>th</sup>-century churches, a lovely view of the river Duratón, a timeless town square, and a reputation for some of the best baby lamb around. The most renowned *figón*, Figón Zute El Mayor “Tinín,” was closed for vacation, as was his cousin’s place, Figón Zute El Menor. However, Figón Ismael, under the arcade in the main square, was doing very brisk business indeed.

We walked past the smoldering oven, surrounded by clay dishes filled with roast lamb, into a rustic dining room with the windows thrown open to the view of the fields. Whole families were clustered around long tables, and the mood was jolly and relaxed. On one wall was a tiled portrait of Ismael himself, sporting a belt embroidered with “VIVA MI NOVIA” (“Long live my girlfriend!”). He explained that according to local custom, women make these belts for their intended when they get engaged. A very useful sort of announcement, I think.

Figón Ismael is Castilla’s answer to the Big Mac: few fast food joints are more efficient. We sat down, a waitress appeared and said, “Lamb, right?” then disappeared. Within seconds, one of those well-laden earthenware platters appeared, along with salad and a basket of country bread. The waitress simply pulled the steaming lamb quarters apart with her hands, and it seemed to fall into serving pieces at a touch. It turns out that Figón Ismael does have quite an extensive menu, but it is assumed that no one is interested in anything but *cordero lechal*. When I asked to see the menu, it took Ismael half an hour to print one out. I can’t imagine how long it would take to order anything from it.

Because of the simplicity of the preparation, all that is truly necessary for outstanding roasts is exceptional meat and knowing what to do with it. Milk-fed lambs have no muttony taste at all, and the meat is almost white. The ovens lack thermostats, so the *asador* must know from experience how long to roast and how to regulate the temperature. Ismael says he can tell if the oven is hot enough by the color of the interior walls.

But the best roasted meat of all might have been back in Madrid, at the Asador Real. The *cochinillo* was a paragon of the genre, but what I remember most are the grilled lamb kidneys (*riñones*). I don’t know why I ordered it, because I am not overly fond of

organ meats. They were sold out, but the waiter brought out the few that remained for us to sample. They were little morsels from heaven—just slightly crisped from the charcoal on the outside, melting richness on the inside. I still dream of them sometimes.

El Alcázar, Plaza Mayor 13, Segovia, Spain. Birthplace of *ponche segoviano*.

Asador Real, 1 Plaza de Isabel II, Madrid 28013, Spain. Tel: 91-547-1111, fax: 91-522-4805. Traditional Castilian asador with lovely grilled meats. Don't forget the organs.

El Figón de Ismael, Calle Lope Tablada 2, Sepúlveda, Spain. Relaxed, rustic atmosphere with simple food, simply prepared. Ismael Ortiz López claims that his forebears taught Cándido's how to roast. Spectacular roast lamb meal for two, including house wine, coffee and dessert, was less than \$35.

El Mesón de Cándido, Azoguejo 5, Segovia 40001, Spain. Tel: 921-42-5911, fax: 921-42-9633. We can argue about whose *cochinillo* is best in Segovia, but the view of the aqueduct and the traditional Castilian atmosphere of this 15<sup>th</sup> century hostelry can't be beat.