

by Ron James

THE SPANISH AUTHORITY

Freshman Vassar College student Penelope Casas was enamored with everything Spanish. In 1962, the native New Yorker and Spanish major discovered her passion during a language immersion program in Spain. She not only fell in love with the country, but also with the son of the family she was staying with.

"We've been married now for 42 years," she said with a laugh.

A decade later, Casas tried to become a travel writer specializing in Spain. But, she said, "I was a nobody, and no one wanted me. So friends told me it might be easier to break in the market writing about food."

Casa started writing letters to the New York Times anytime there was story on Spanish cuisine. "Amazingly, they began to publish them," she said.

One letter on baby eels prompted New York Times food critic Craig Claiborne to note he had never eaten one. When Casas' husband suggested inviting Claiborne to dinner, Casas agreed. Both were surprised when he accepted.

PENELOPE CASAS - Penelope Casas, author of 'Tapas: The little dishes of Spain,' is considered the foremost American authority on Spanish cuisine. CNS Photo courtesy of Krasner, Trebitz.

FRIED GOAT CHEESE TAPA - Fried goat cheese with an onion confit is one of Penelope Casas' favorite new tapa recipes. CNS Photo courtesy of Jim Smith.

Claiborne wrote about the dinner soon after, calling it a "fabulous meal" cooked by the foremost American authority on Spanish food. "After that everyone wanted my articles," Casas said.

Claiborne and Casas became good friends. He introduced her to Judith Jones from Knopf Publishing and in 1985 they published the landmark Spanish cookbook, "Tapas: The little dishes of Spain" (Knopf, \$30).

"There had been fitful attempts since the 1970s to popularize tapas here," Casa wrote, "but the concept was somehow foreign and authentic ingredients were hard to come by. When tapas bars were mentioned, most people heard 'topless bars' and shied away."

Now the foremost American authority on Spanish cuisine, Casas has written countless articles for major food and wine publications and authored numerous cookbooks. She also regularly hosts culinary tours to Spain.

THE DISH

The small plate movement, now so popular in American fine dining restaurants, is a direct result of a handful of chefs and authors like Casas. The first chef to make an impact in the United States was Felipe Rojas-Lombardi, who opened tapas bars in New York and Chicago.

Recently star-chef Jose Andres brought the tapas magic to Washington, D.C. when he opened Jaleo. The traditional tapas dish was simple and the ingredients inflexible for many years. Today, Spanish and U.S. chefs are fusing Asian, African and West Coast flavors into the mix.

Our featured dish reflects the new flavor profiles of tapas, fried goat cheese with an onion confit. It is one of several additions to Casas' re-release of her first cookbook, "Tapas: The little dishes of Spain." "An outstanding tapa," Casas writes. "It's one of my favorites from the new generation of tapas. The sweetness of the slowly stewed onions is the perfect foil for the goat cheese and its crunch coating."

THE WINE

This is a wine-friendly dish and would work well with most dry, white and light- to medium-bodied red wines. But we're going to split the difference and suggest that a wonderful, food-friendly SoloRosa 2005 California Rose (\$15) is just the ticket for this lovely little tapa. The light, crisp acidity will contrast nicely with the rich, crispy, fried goat cheese and the fruity flavors match perfectly with the sweet-onion confit.

SoloRosa's only mission is to make great American roses, and is the brainchild of wine industry veterans Jeff Morgan and Daniel Moore. It is the only company in the U.S. to focus only on the dry, pink wine. The 2005 California Rose is a blend of Napa Valley sangiovese and merlot from Lodi, Calif. It has a bit of citrus, with bright cherry and strawberry flavors.

FRIED GOAT CHEESE WITH ONION CONFIT

(Queso de Cabra Frito Sobre Cebolla Confitada)

1/2 recipe Onion Confit (recipe follows)

1 egg

1/4 teaspoon dried parsley flakes

1 (4-ounce) log goat cheese, cut in 1/2 inch slices

Dried bread crumbs, preferably mixed with Japanese-style panko crumbs

Mild olive oil for frying

Yields 4 to 8 servings.

Prepare Onion Confit and reserve. (Can be prepared ahead of time.)

In shallow bowl, beat egg and parsley together with fork. Dip cheese in egg mixture then coat with crumbs.

Heat oil to 360 F, preferably in deep fryer. Otherwise, pour oil into skillet to depth of at least 1 inch; heat oil until bread cube placed in it quickly turns brown. Fry cheese in hot oil until golden brown; drain on paper towels. (Can be kept warm in a 200 F oven for up to 30 minutes).

Warm confit and place 1 tablespoon or so on 4 to 8 individual plates. Place 1 or 2 fried cheese pieces on top and serve immediately.

ONION CONFIT

2 tablespoons olive oil

2 large onions, such as Vidalia or other sweet onion (about 1 1/4 to 1 1/2 pounds), sliced in slivers.

2 cloves garlic, minced

1/8 teaspoon crumbled saffron threads

1 bay leaf

Kosher or sea salt, to taste

Freshly ground pepper, to taste

1 tablespoon dry white wine

Place oil, onions, garlic, saffron, and bay leaf in shallow saute pan. Heat over lowest possible setting until mixture begins to sizzle. Cover and cook 40 minutes. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Add wine and cook until evaporated.

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Ron James welcomes comments and suggestions. E-mail him at ronjames@perfectpairings.us. Listen to his "Gourmet Club" radio show and see archives of previous columns at www.perfectpairings.us.

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Food and Wine: Goat cheese tapas and rose wine by Ron James