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# Salmorejo the Way Mama Makes It

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By RHEA WESSEL

Salmorejo, a long-loved family recipe in Andalusia and a cousin to gazpacho, is slowly winning over outsiders with its creamy but creamless taste.

The cold tomato soup originated in Sumer in Mesopotamia but made its home in Andalusia, as a peasant dish from Cordoba. It combines homegrown tomatoes and day-old white bread with raw garlic, vinegar and olive oil from the region.



Enlarge image

José Pizarro; Almuzara

"People who eat it in Andalusia recognize the finesse of salmorejo, which can be present at simple restaurants and, at the same time, be part of the haute cuisine," says Almudena Villegas Becerril, an author and food consultant based in Cordoba, who wrote a history of salmorejo that was published in 2010.

Ms. Villegas Becerril's book, "El Libro del Salmorejo: Historia de un viaje milenario" traces the soup's heritage and its incarnations on the way to Andalusia from the Middle East, before the tomato arrived from the New World sometime around 1500. The author learned how to prepare salmorejo by tasting old recipes, some of which were more than 200 years old.

Spanish celebrity chef Ferran Adrià was among the first to use salmorejo as a finer food.

Now the soup, so thick it could be mistaken for a sauce, has taken a spot on menus abroad. José Andrés introduced the soup to the American palate on television and in his Jaleo restaurants in the Washington, D.C., area.

Even as late as the 1990s, salmorejo was the light way to eat on a budget.

Now, says Luis Carlos Rejón Ruiz, a restaurant owner near Cordoba, "If a prime minister comes to Andalusia, he will taste salmorejo."

Those from the Cordoba area take particular pride in the bright-orange emulsion, the closest thing the city has to a national dish. Salmorejo lovers in Cordoba can even join a salmorejo "cofradía," or a mixed-company "brotherhood" that gets together monthly to cook, taste and talk about salmorejo.

Cristine Bendala, who teaches cooking at Academia Hispánica language school in Cordoba, says salmorejo is the first dish she prepares with students who have come to Cordoba to learn Spanish and sample the culture. "People always like it. It's not too strong on the garlic," she says.

Mr. Rejón Ruiz, who serves salmorejo at his hotel restaurant, Hacienda Minerva says, "The secret of the recipe for salmorejo is that there is no recipe. Everybody learns it from their mother."

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He presents the soup at cooking demonstrations for guests at his hotel, a rebuilt private estate nestled in the olive groves about an hour outside of Cordoba.

Part of the pride surrounding salmorejo is associated with the ingredients and the fact that Andalusia produces some of the best of each individual ingredient, such as D.O. Baena extra-virgin olive oil, vinegar from D.O. Montilla-Moriles wine and jamón serrano, which is used as a garnish and made from white pigs farmed in Andalusia.

And there is something about its ice-cold temperature that just makes salmorejo a good fit with the sun-scorched region.

"Salmorejo tastes Mediterranean. It tastes like summer," says Mr. Rejón Ruiz.

Salmorejo is typically served as a soup or starting dip. It is often accompanied by fried eggplants or a potato omelet, and goes well with a glass of fine sherry. The salinity of the wine provides freshness in the mouth.

Sillero Francisca Serrano, a 78-year-old resident of Baena, the olive-oil-producing village outside Cordoba, was given her salmorejo recipe from her grandmother and in turn, has passed it down to her own grandchildren. Ms. Serrano says she peels her tomatoes before processing and serves her salmorejo as a dip. She stresses that the local extra-virgin olive oil makes the difference.

Others say that ripe red tomatoes are the key ingredient.

Spanish chef José Pizarro, who co-founded the Brindisa Tapas Kitchens group in London, made his first salmorejo as a boy using tomatoes grown in his own garden. He learned his recipe from his uncle, Angel, from Cadiz and now serves salmorejo at his restaurants José and Pizarro on Bermondsey Street in London.

Indeed, now that salmorejo has gained a following outside of Andalusia, some restaurants serve it year round, a fact that irritates purists because it means cooks may have to use hothouse tomatoes. To get around the problem of tomatoes that aren't ripened in the sun, one chef in Cadiz roasts his tomatoes to access a deeper flavor. Cordoba locals have even been known to use canned tomatoes in deep winter.

"I don't agree with serving salmorejo year round, but I still make it at cooking shows for guests from abroad," says Mr. Rejón Ruiz. "The trick," he adds, "is the ripeness of the tomatoes. They cannot be grown in a hothouse."

### *An Andalusian Tradition*

Recipes for salmorejo can vary and may include red pepper, onion or lemon. Almudena Villegas Becerril, the author of "El Libro del Salmorejo: Historia de un viaje milenario," provided this recipe.

### *Ingredients*

½ kilogram breadcrumbs

¾ kilogram ripe red tomatoes

250 milliliters extra-virgin olive oil

10 milliliters vinegar from Montilla

1 garlic clove and salt

Jamón Ibérico or jamón serrano

Eggs

### *Directions*

Put the bread in the food processor and layer with chopped tomatoes. Add the raw garlic and olive oil. Blend until the mixture turns creamy and smooth. Add the salt and vinegar, and mix again. Refrigerate at least three hours. Garnish with jamón Ibérico or jamón serrano and slices of boiled eggs.

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