

Lovely lamprey

Not the prettiest thing in the pool perhaps and certainly the fish with the most bizarre cooking method, we hunt out the top place to try this oddest of creatures



Words & photos: Adrian McManus

KING HENRY I of England is reputed to have died from eating a surfeit of them, and according to the great Spanish born Roman philosopher Seneca, Caesar August punished Vedius Pollio for attempting to feed a clumsy slave to the lampreys in his fishpond. Moved by the sheer novelty of the cruelty, Caesar ordered the slave's release, the destruction of Pollio's glassware and the filling in of his fishpond.

Lamprey was widely eaten by the upper classes in mediaeval England, especially during fasting periods, as the flavour and texture of lamprey is more akin to meat than fish. Largely forgotten about in England today, the lamprey's last gastronomic foothold in Europe is on the French Atlantic coast, in Bordeaux and on the Spanish and Portuguese sides of the River Miño in north-west Spain.

A bizarre creature, half parasite-half predator, it has remained largely unchanged for at least the last 360 million years. The lamprey has no scales, a cartilaginous backbone, a 'nostril' on its head, holes for gills and a hideously ugly mouth armed with razor sharp teeth, which are used for clamping themselves onto their prey. While clamped, they secrete an anti-coagulant that enables them to carry on feeding until they've had enough or until the unfortunate host croaks it. The lamprey is also a migratory species like salmon and eel and can be found in fresh water, lakes and the open sea, growing up to about 36 inches in length.

From January to April, the Galician villages of Arbo and As Neves on the River Miño draw gourmets from all over Spain. They come in droves to feast on *lamprea* and delicious *angulas*, or elvers, which enter the Miño from the Atlantic at the same time as the lamprey. *Angulas* are probably Spain's most expensive dish, at around €60 for just a hundred grams of them. They are pan fried with garlic and whole cayenne pepper and served in a small earthenware dish, always with a wooden fork.

Getting vicious

Lamprey is served *a la bordelesa* or *rellena*, bordelaise style or stuffed. *Casa Calviño* in As Neves, for many people, is the definitive place to try this most typical of Miño dishes. While there I was invited to watch the complete process from beginning to end. I was taken to a *vivero* or fish tank, the size of a chest freezer, in the garage of the restaurant. Here I was cheerily greeted by the owner's granddaughter, armed with a broom handle, and busy stirring the water in the tank. The lamprey were going bonkers, swimming around in circles and up and down the sides of the tank. I was told that this was vital; the lamprey had to be antagonised in order to reach the kitchen stressed out, thereby ensuring optimum results later. To add insult to injury, these *animalitos* are also deprived of sustenance for a few days, which adds to their general grumpy disposition when they leave the garage. ➤



ISN'T IT GRAND BOYS?

As well as the oddest fish recipe, As Neves also so holds one of Spain's strangest fiestas each summer

A surreal mix of Catholicism and Paganism, the pilgrimage of Santa Marta de Ribarteme is for those who have had a near-death experience during the year. These lucky survivors pay their respects to Saint Marta, patron saint of resurrection, by carrying or riding in a coffin into church to attend mass.

The congregation runs into thousands as the coffins arrive, borne by relatives carrying loved ones who have escaped death. The tiny granite church of Santa Marta crackles to the sound of the mass being broadcast to those unable to fit inside.

After mass, a procession of coffins heads uphill to the cemetery and then back down to circle the church a few times. To the chant of "Virgin Santa Marta, star of the North, we bring you those who saw death," a statue of the good saint herself is brought out of the church to join the coffins.

Everything from flesh coloured Christs that glow in the dark to illuminated scenes of the Last Supper, and garish plastic angels are on sale while Gypsy bands compete with brass bands belting out *paso dobles* in the town square. To keep spirits up, so to speak, there's plenty of delicious octopus, *pulpo a feira*, the classic Galician fiesta dish.

The Catholic church has always had a bit of a tough time in this neck of the woods where the Wicked Witch is most definitely not dead. Pagan rituals are still acted out and enjoyed alongside more saintly or sacred celebrations.





Blood curdling stuff

Preparing lamprey bordelaise style entails cooking the creature in its own blood, and mixing that blood with a good *rioja*, or a nice spicy red *mencia* from the banks of the Miño and perhaps a dash of bacardí for good measure. It's believed locally that this stress factor has something to do with a chemical reaction in the blood, which is still 'warm' when mixed with the rest of the ingredients. But the lamprey is a fish, and fish don't have warm blood, you might argue? Well the locals insist that the lamprey is not actually fish, but a *bicho raro*, or strange beast and end of story. Who would argue with them?

Meanwhile back in the garage, the granddaughter stood poised over the tank waiting for a lamprey to foolishly approach the surface;

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at this point she bravely plunged her hand into the seething mass of water, grabbed the writhing lamprey and dropped it into a white bucket. She then ran quickly up the stairs and handed the bucket to a woman, knife in hand, waiting at the sink. This half snake-half eel thing was then plunged live into boiling water for a few seconds and the first layer of its mottled greyish-brown skin was scraped away. With a couple of swift nicks, she deftly removed the still flinching head, central nerve and guts, taking great care to pour the precious blood into a warmed earthenware dish. After a thorough rinsing under cold running water, it was then passed to another woman who made eight deep incisions along the length of its body.

It was at this point that I was asked, jokingly, to turn my back. The cook was presumably mixing

Stuffed lamprey



together, in just the right proportions, the all important ingredients of blood, wine, olive oil, vinegar, bacardí, bay leaf, clove, nutmeg, black pepper, finely chopped cured ham, garlic and onion for the final stage of the cooking process. That part over and done with, I headed back downstairs to rejoin my hosts who were stood gathered round a table having an *aperitivo*.

Galloping gourmet moment

Thirty minutes later, the call came for me to head back upstairs again. I was ushered into the kitchen, glass of *mençía* in hand, to see the glorious end result - ten neatly stacked dishes of the exquisite *lamprea a la bordelesa*. After the customary team photo, we took our seats at a table upstairs for a fabulous three hour lunch where we were served both of the lamprey house specialities, the stuffed, smoked version, accompanied by a wonderful *salpicón* of finely chopped semi-hard boiled egg and strips of *pimientos de piquillo*, the famous roasted red peppers from northern Spain. *Postre* or pudding was *requesón*; a riotously rich and creamy cheese curd made from cow's milk and drizzled with the local honey.

You'd be forgiven for thinking that the lamprey was a hideous creature, it most certainly is, but it also has to be said that there's nothing quite like it, gastronomically speaking. So if you're Galicia bound early next year, reserve a table at *Casa Calviño* for a truly memorable culinary experience. ■

ESSENTIALS

■ **GETTING THERE**

Vigo airport is the best placed for visiting As Neves. Distance 40.8 kms.

■ **STAYING THERE**

Casa Pazos
 Pazos nº 11
 Barcela-Arbo (Pontevedra)
 Tel:+34 616 01 63 17
 Reservations: +34 986 66 59 86
<http://www.casapazos.com>

Gorgeous restored country house with splendid views overlooking the Miño valley and Portugal. The owner produces his own superb white wine made from the local *treixadura*, *albariño* and *loureiro* grapes.

Elvers