

It's the house that jamón built, the castle of chorizo, the mansion of manchego. The Spanish food mecca Despaña, in SoHo, is a landmark shop for food lovers, its dark wood finishes and white subway-tile walls bringing together the sights of Spain and New York. When I arrived to meet its owners, Marcos and Angélica Intriago, they welcomed me with *tortilla española*: potatoes and onions fat with olive oil and bound with egg into a neat little cake — the king of tapas. “But the problem with tortilla,” Angélica said to me, “is that Americans don’t want to pay for it because it’s just potatoes and eggs, and Spaniards don’t want to pay for it because it doesn’t taste like their mother’s.”

Still, tortilla was, in a sense, the soul of the business when it was just a tiny box of a chorizo factory in Queens. “One day, maybe 25 years ago, my old business partner was making a tortilla for lunch,” Marcos explained. “And of course we had a glass of wine. A customer came in as he was cutting the tortilla and asked for a slice. So, O.K. And of course, a glass of wine. So then we started putting out tapas for our customers.” Angélica laughed. “When I came to Despaña in 2000, it was so old-school,” she said. “They had no website, but Spanish people would come in, and we poured drinks for them — it was really a gathering place as much as it was a business. Even now, they still come in just to talk. And eat some tortilla!”

Just to be clear, the Spanish tortilla doesn’t come in corn or flour, and it isn’t something you’d want to fold into a taco. But the confusion is sort of apt. “I once read a history text about a Mexican fieldworker strike in California, in 1932,” James D. Fernández, a professor of Spanish at New York University, told me. “Well, it turns out none of the workers were Mexican — they were Spaniards! But you hear a field-labor story about people with Hispanic surnames in California, and by default they become ‘Mexican.’” He continued, “In our country, the Spanish are so often invisible that way.”

Fernández is the co-editor of “Invisible Immigrants,” a beautiful, haunting historical photo album of the Spanish in America. He noted that if the Spaniards in California were assumed to be Mexicans, in New York they were often mistaken for Puerto Ricans. (Two iconic tastes of Latino New York — Goya Foods and Café Bustelo, the ubiquitous bodega caffeinator

— were in fact started by immigrants who originally came from Spain.)

In the early 1900s, the Spanish community in New York concentrated around 14th Street and Eighth Avenue. There, “Little Spain” centered on the Spanish Benevolent Society, which took in newcomers and helped them find work, a place to stay, people to talk to and a meal: everything you need to start to feel a sense of home. (There’s still a pretty good restaurant on the ground floor. Get the *fideuà*.) But that neighborhood faded as immigration from Spain slowed to a trickle, and Spaniards living in New York City have had to find camaraderie wherever they can get it, like striking up conversation over tapas at a food shop you just stumbled into.

As I took another bite of tortilla, shamefully eyeing a third slice, Angélica said: “You should taste the one Marcos’s brother Manolo makes. Everyone cuts the potatoes a different way, cooks them a different way, and it all makes a difference. But his is just like their mother’s.”

And so I found myself beside Manolo as he simmered onions and potatoes in a truly carefree quantity of olive oil; they

emerged so soft, so rich, you might think they were made with cheese. We were at the home of the Intriagos’ friends Jorge, dressed patriotically in a white linen shirt with red pants, and Maria, who plied us all night with jamón-baked scallops and garlicky shrimp and a salt-cod empanada from her home region, Galicia. But even among all these delicacies, Manolo’s simple tortilla took pride of place at the table. His other brother, Candido, explained: “In the north of Spain, you have *fabada*; in the south, paella. But tortilla is everywhere. The tortilla is 150 percent Spain.” Then he confided: “Actually, I hate onions. But I *love* my mother’s tortilla.”

We ate and drank, and Antonio Banderas sang passionately over the speakers. Jorge and Candido talked about Broadway shows, settling on “Man of La Mancha” as their favorite. Later, more friends arrived: the chef at the Spanish Embassy and his Dominican wife — an honorary Spaniard in this crowd. Galician bagpipe music came on, and Maria danced, her arms in the air, a militant swing in her hips. It was late, and I called a car to go. They all stayed, anything but invisible to one another.

Tortilla Española

Time: 1 hour

Poaching the potatoes and onions in olive oil makes them almost creamy. (Keep the infused oil in the fridge: it's great for dipping bread into or other uses.) Serve the tortilla by itself, or as part of a spread with jamón serrano, chorizo, cheese, olives and piquillo peppers.

- 1 ¼ pounds onions, diced
- 1 large green bell pepper, seeded and chopped
- 4 cloves garlic, minced
- 2 ½ pounds russet potatoes
- Kosher salt, to taste
- 4 cups extra virgin olive oil
- 10 large eggs

1. Place the onions, pepper and garlic in a large bowl. Peel the potatoes, quarter them lengthwise and slice those crosswise into ½-inch tiles. (A mandoline is great for this.) Add them to the onion mixture, and season with 2 teaspoons kosher salt.

2. Heat the oil over high heat in a 12-inch, deep-sided skillet (preferably nonstick or well-seasoned cast iron). Drop 1 potato tile into the oil as it heats; when it floats and then begins to fry vigorously, carefully add all the potato-onion mixture, and stir gently.

3. Cook the potatoes at a vigorous simmer, stirring occasionally so they don't brown too much on the bottom, until they are very soft but not quite losing their shape, 20 to 25 minutes. Drain the potatoes in a colander, and let them cool until warm.

4. Beat the eggs in a large bowl. Taste the potatoes for salt, and season the eggs with salt accordingly. Stir the potatoes into the eggs.

5. Place the skillet over medium-high heat. When it is very hot, pour in the potato mixture, spread evenly and turn heat to medium. Using a spatula, gently pull the edges of the tortilla toward the center to release them from the pan, and let any liquid egg run out the sides.

6. After 4 minutes, cover the pan with the bottom of an oiled baking sheet. Using towels or oven mitts, carefully flip the pan onto the sheet, place the pan back over the heat, then slide the inverted tortilla back into the pan. Cook, without stirring, for 3 minutes. Both sides of the tortilla should be golden brown.

7. Insert a long skewer into the side of the tortilla to see how wet it is inside. Some prefer the inside a little moist, some fully cooked. You can continue to cook it, flipping the tortilla as described once a minute, until it's done to your liking. Serve warm or at room temperature.

Yield: 8 to 12 servings.

Adapted from Manolo Intriago. ♦