

It's calçotada time in London: get your hands dirty at a Spanish-style onion party

Strip, dip and dangle them — eating the hot new veg on London's menus is dirty work. Try the Spanish calçot, says Victoria Stewart



Finger food: Victoria Stewart slurps up a charred calçot cooked in foil, and served with a romesco dipping sauce at Boqueria in Brixton (Picture: Adrian Lourie)

Sit up, tuck your napkin in and set aside some wet wipes, for things are about to get messy. This Sunday you are all invited to take part in the last calçotada of the month in Brixton. For the uninitiated, the Spanish calçot (pronounced kal-sot) looks and tastes like a cross between a fat spring onion and a baby leek, and it grows between December and April in Catalonia, north-east Spain. A calçotada, meanwhile, is a party at which you get your hands dirty eating and celebrating the harvest of said allium, while drinking jugs of cava or red wine. In other words: good, unclean fun.

Traditionally, countryside festivals held by peasants in Catalonia during the hungry winter period when nothing else grows, calçotades translate surprisingly well to London, where they have only recently begun to really catch on. This month more than 120 people attended three parties at the Brixton and Battersea branches of Spanish restaurant Boqueria, with others having already taken place last month at Brindisa Tapas Kitchen and Morito in Exmouth Market.

Thanks to Natoora, the restaurant supplier which last year doubled its quantities of imported calçots to London, Spanish restaurants in the capital now serve them and, this month, they were also available on menus at Lyle's in Shoreditch, Kitty Fisher's in Mayfair and Rita's Dining in London Fields.

"When we first held a calçotada a few years ago it was full of Catalan and Spanish people," explains John Scott, owner of Boqueria, the restaurant that will host this weekend's onion mess

fest. Now, he says, the events draw in “anyone with an interest in food or Spanish culture — we have all types and ages. It gets packed. It’s like a carnival atmosphere.”

Earlier this month, at Boqueria in Brixton, four friends and I experienced our first London calçotada, a brilliantly chaotic experience. Lifting charred calçots from foil wrappers we duly ripped off the outer layers, dipped their white bulbs into bowls of romesco sauce, tilted our heads back and dangled the whole lot into our mouths. Served next were plates of barbecued meat — pieces of chicken, lamb, chorizo and morcilla — while a special drinking vessel, known as a porron and filled with cava, was passed around each table. Each of us was encouraged to stand up, pour the liquid into our mouths from as high above our faces as possible before passing it to the left, all the while being clapped by fellow diners. Finally, we ate bowlfuls of Crema Catalana, much like the French crème brûlée but made with orange and cinnamon, before wiping our hands and holding our stomachs.

Boqueria’s events are laid on with the help of Rachel McCormack (who tweets from @R_McCormack), a Catalan cookery teacher and panellist on Radio 4’s Kitchen Cabinet show largely credited with bringing this type of calçotada to London. Having lived in Catalonia before coming here, McCormack says “I wanted to bring something different. But also it’s fun, and not what you’d expect from Spanish food.”

So why the huge party for a bunch of barbecued onions? McCormack maintains that traditional events have “since turned into this big party. Spain is very good at doing that. If you look at anywhere that, say, grows mushrooms, they’ll have a big mushroom festival. And it’s something that we, in the UK, have never really done. In this case calçots are more fun to eat than other things.”

Scott puts it down to the fact that “it’s nice to try something new. You don’t have to do them on the barbecue — you could also put them in a charcoal oven — but you get the nice chargrilled taste that way. But the way you eat them — the ceremony of it — is part of the fun. As is the mess!”

Here’s to more where that came from.

Calçotada at Boqueria, 192 Acre Lane, SW2 5UL, £30 (includes three courses and cava), 12.30pm-3pm, March 22; boqueriatapas.com