

From Trash to Treasure

Trailblazing chef Ángel León's new restaurant is putting a quiet corner of southern Spain on the culinary map—and transforming the way people think about seafood.

Jay Cheshes goes in for a taste. PHOTOGRAPHS BY GUNNAR KNECHTEL



"THIS IS GOING TO BE the most beautiful restaurant you've ever seen," said Ángel León, as he stood in a 200-year-old stone salt mill overlooking a protected wetland outside the Andalusian seaport town of El Puerto de Santa María. I had come to meet the burly, soft-spoken Spanish chef because he'd been described to me as the Ferran Adrià of seafood, a true piscatory modernist. When we met, he was deep in preparations to transform the space into Spain's next great culinary destination—a supersize replacement for Aponiente, the Michelin two-starred spot he opened eight years ago in the center of town. At more than 19,000 square feet, the new location, which opened in September, is nine times as big as its predecessor, with a glass-enclosed kitchen and a high-tech

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food lab outfitted with centrifuges and a special grill-oven hybrid. Outside, he showed me an area he planned to remake as a "garden of the sea," a system of salt ponds for sustainably raising fish and growing plankton, which appears on his menu.

León has made it his professional mission to champion "trash fish," challenging conventional wisdom about the marine life we eat by turning things that are often discarded—stingray-wing collagen, tuna blood—into haute cuisine. A native of Andalusia, he grew up fishing with his dad on weekends, watching the long-haul boats unload their prize catches from trawling nets that scooped up everything in their wake. "I'll never forget seeing seventy percent of the fish getting thrown away," he said. >>



FROM LEFT: Chef Ángel León outside his restaurant, housed in a former salt-works; the Aponiente kitchen team at work.

Using what others considered waste became an obsession, and when he finally opened his own restaurant, his all-seafood menu featured less-vaunted species like scorpion fish and moray eels. The general absence of the popular tuna, mackerel, sea bream, and hake didn't earn him many fans. "Nobody understood what we were doing," he said.

El Puerto is a mostly working-class community, whose population swells for a few weeks in the summer, when affluent families from Jerez and Seville move into magnificent beachside villas. It's also a stopover for visitors on their way to explore the sherry houses of Jerez and the fortifications of Moorish Cádiz, where Christopher Columbus started several of his voyages.

But these worldly sun-seekers are generally not interested in avant-garde cooking, and locals prefer the area's old-fashioned *freidurías*, where fried fish is served in paper cones. Business was so bad that, for a while, he thought about closing and trying his luck elsewhere. But his persistence paid off. León parlayed a guest-judge stint on Spain's *Top Chef* into his own weekly series, in which he travels around the country fishing and cooking with like-minded colleagues. Chef Dan Barber, of New York's Blue Hill—another pioneer of the "trash cooking" movement—called him a madman and a genius. And critics took note, too. A few Michelin stars later, the culinary pilgrims finally descended.

After giving me a tour of Aponiente's future, León introduced me to its past. My lunch at the original location was a meal of epic proportions: all 21 courses of it explored the rich biodiversity of the Bay of Cádiz, one delicious, novel dish at a time. There were sardines smoked over charcoal made from olive pits, cured mullet in a spiced saffron

soup, razor-clam *gyoza*, and cuttlefish carbonara. Midway through, León swung by the table clutching a vial of dark green slime: pure concentrated plankton. He put a spot of it on the back of my hand, indicating I should lick it up. "It's the ultimate superfood," he said, as I tasted the intense ocean flavor, "the building block of life."

Introducing plankton into high-end cooking has been one of León's most significant innovations. A quarter teaspoon, he says, can have as many omega-3s as 60 pounds of fish, depending on the species. Among the other big-name chefs who have since embraced the ingredient are Juan Mari Arzak in San Sebastián, Spain, and Pascal Barbot in Paris. León has also figured out how to make meatless facsimiles of Spanish pork sausages using a fatty swamp fish nobody eats.

The new location of Aponiente offers the chef a far better platform from which to advance this kind of culinary stagecraft. The dining room has wall-to-wall installations of silver- and bronze-painted seashells, soaring ceilings, and sculptural chairs meant to resemble fish fins. "Everything I do is about the sea," he said, "but at the old restaurant, you couldn't see any water."

Always in search of new innovations, León has been working with researchers at the University of Cádiz to study the mechanics of bioluminescence, a phenomenon that allows some marine organisms to glow in the dark. "My dream is for diners to be able to swallow the light," he said after lunch. "The waiters will come out with this light from the sea. It will be a spectacular moment." He paused, imagining the possibilities. "It will be magic." ➤

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