

"Pescadores" Porlamar, Margarita Venezuela



PAYING HOMAGE IN VENEZUELA
*Eight years of Caribbean cruising
inevitably brings change*

By Louise Wollman

A Marriott sprawling over once-treasured beach terrain can ruin your sunset picnic—but was merely disturbing compared to hitting Porlamar and finding a yawning, vacant porch where Jak's Restaurant once thrived. Where crowds of cruisers once hung out, tablehopping and sampling each other's meals.

For cheap, scrumptious breakfasts,

lunches and dinners, we relied on Jak, a small, smiling Thai woman who sailed into Margarita Island from Florida and began serving up giant egg breakfasts, cornmeal-crusted calamari, big, juicy burgers, even good-old American liver and onions. Imagine eating Red Thai Curry cooked by an actual Thai person—in Venezuela!

But the rumors were true: a growing Caribbean drug culture had ravaged a vibrant person, a successful business.

Homage is due to Jak, but this story is really about "Pescadores"—

our second Porlamar gathering ground. Five years later we found it somewhat changed but still a gustatory joy.

In 2002, it was La Totuma del Pescador, meaning, we guessed, The Fisherman's Shack. "Attended by Chamaco," read the short, paper English menu, a quaint translation-misfire suggesting Chamaco owned it.

Pescadores—as everyone called it—sprawled along a long beach shaded by a thick palm-tree awning. Wiry men in bathing trunks rushed to help beach our dinghies, using both hands—meaning one hand wasn't outstretched for a tip. (Yes, we tipped, but didn't feel required.) We sat at ancient tables on backless blue

Sailing On Your Stomach:
*In the wake of an
insatiable food sleuth*

BLUE WATER DISPATCHES



The six-pound grouper, cooked up for a crowd, right. A nicely sized whole snapper meal, below



stools, digging our feet into the pale, soft-as-talcum sand, feeling it pour silkily through our toes.

Outdoor drama: in one corner a man retrieved fistfuls of just-harvested oysters from stained yellow buckets, shucked them on a scarred wooden table, sending them forth amid hillocks of lime wedges. Nearby, a young man at a plywood table flanked by two blenders and chest-high piles of fresh melons, pineapples, bananas, papaya, oranges and passion fruit, puréeing them into fresh, sun-sweetened jugos—juices.

SIZE MATTERS

Farther back, the “restaurant” itself—two adjoining wooden boxcars,

each a red-and-white homage to Coca-Cola. One was the kitchen, boarded to a sliver of space, through which issued heavenly fish lunches. In the second—the bar—sat a beefy, mustachioed, multi-stomached

man, who favored horizontal red-striped knit shirts, though they didn’t favor him. Chamaco reigned impassively, in a head-down, forearms-on-the-table, paper-reading stance—clearly not your convivial, backslapping sort of proprietor. With similar unbudging passivity did he refuse all requests that he also serve chicken.

And why should he, since he delivered about the sweetest, crispiest-skinned pan-fried fish on the planet? Primarily pargo (snapper) mero (grouper) or atún—(Caribbean tuna, resembling snapper but tasting more like bluefish—except less oily and fishy and oh! so sweet.)

Often I ranked Chamaco higher than his closest peers—a now-

defunct New York Chinatown dive that served moist pan-fried flounder, eater-friendly down to crunchy tail and fin frills. And in Astoria, Queens, Elias, whose grilled, snow-shoe-sized, whole snappers and basses came wrapped in divinely spiced, edible skin.

Though Elias’s fish were bigger (of significant importance to me) still, I could pass upwards of 45 happy minutes working over a Pescadores fish—sucking on bones, teasing out forehead flesh, downing nearly everything but the eyes and backbone.

Pescadores never lacked fresh catch. Chamaco owned three of the many fishing boats bouncing just offshore and colonized by large congregations of pelicans sitting self-importantly aboard every square inch of gunwales, yet always able to make room for another relative.

On rare occasions should Pescadores run out of pargo, “catalana” provided reasonable backup. Though smaller, you’d get two, making for a totally exhausting endeavor. Of course fish fillets or calamari were always available for lazy, persnickety, fearful-of-fisheyes types.

This magnificence cost from \$4 to \$5 and came with slaw, salad, rice,

*I want the
biggest
one you've
got*

avocado and fried plantain. Plus, a plateful of corn-yellow arepas: flat, pale little pancakes tasting like glued porridge if you hate them, grits if you're Southern or if they happen to strike your fancy. Vegetarians promptly fall in love with them.

MUCHO MACHO

I had only one problem with Pescadores: its total adherence to that familiar, punitive, pro-male custom of giving the bigger fish (or thicker steak) to the guy. I'm convinced this discriminatory convention is practiced everywhere, but more pronouncedly in macho Latin American cultures.

In English-speaking countries I'll tell the waiter, "I want the biggest one you've got." With a man present, I say, "When you bring the steaks, I want the one you plan on giving him."

Such tactics failed at Pescadores, where Pedro, the sole waiter, spoke only Spanish. Male companions got the papacito pargo and I, the bambino. Despite all requests for "grande," accompanied by spread-arm demonstrations so wide they once knocked a tablemate clear off a wobbly stool—the guys always got Moby Dick, the girls, minnows.

One day, after many such experiences, I stabbed a finger at mine, the smallest of all four, and whined, "No es grande, es pequeño."

"Oh, no, señora, es grande," chanted Pedro, as if I was not only a woman, but a blind woman as well.

Through this last Pescadores lunch, I soldiered on, in the service of all future females—and my own



Pedro presenting
the daily catch

inevitable return. Finished, I gathered the fish heads, lined them up—an incontrovertible visual for Pedro. "Pequeño, pequeño, pequeño, por las mujeres," I said, stabbing at the three ladies' fish. "GRANDE, por el señor."

Dumbfounded by such blatant female insubordination, Pedro could only flash me his toothiest smile, which was like peering into a plate of yellow arepas.

Five years later, we found just one remaining "arepa" amid that smile. Pescadores, too, had changed. Chamaco's death robbed it of his implacable yet colorful presence, though his son—now padrone—pays homage in the new name: Restaurant Rancho de Chamaco. The juicing and shucking spectacle

disappeared with consolidation of all food-prep into a new, bright yellow hacienda building. But the healthy portions (and the lunch-only policy) remain. The fish is as fresh and fantastic, though prices have escalated: in 2008 after years of rampant Venezuelan inflation, a whole pargo hit \$11, but for the eyeless, headless crowd, fish fillets were cheap enough at \$6.66. One incredible specimen (alas, not slated for me)—a stocky grouper weighing in at 3 kilos (more than 6 pounds)—went for 60 bucks U.S.

And did my battle with Pedro endure? Like I'd never left, his last salvo was: "Mañana...su pescado... mas grande."

Don't bet on it. ≈