



MICHELIN STAR CHEF MIGUEL ÁNGEL DE LA CRUZ

Chef Miguel Ángel thought he could hide in the kitchen. But his talent made him the star attraction...

Chef Miguel Ángel literally grew up in the kitchen. His family ran a small-town family restaurant in Matapozuelos, Castilla y León, Spain.

As a teen, he was instructed in classic cuisine at the Segovia Hospitality School while working in a small family inn. He went through different Segovian restaurants; he went to the Balearic Islands taking care of some Majorcan restaurants, to end up returning to Matapozuelos and opening his own business in 2002, La Botica de Matapozuelos. The rest, his own style, his Michelin star and his two Repsol Suns, is history.

True to his beliefs, Chef Miguel Ángel tirelessly pursues the desire to reflect the landscapes around him on his dishes. *"I have no other stimulus that nature provides. Now, I am thinking of the uses I can give to pimpernel, chickweed, yarrow, maiden's tears, marjoram..."* he adds with a twinkle in his eye.

His legendary taste for collecting nearby ingredients, named him 'The Collector Chef'. He may well take a green pine, fallen early from the pine tree or collected by himself, and grate it on a plate of roasted deer loin. It can well be done with a ripe one, at his optimum timing, extracting its exquisite pine nuts, make a honeyed juice with pine oil and add it to a lamb gizzard. Go to a river, collect herbs that you find on its banks, and include them in a soup made precisely with trout and white pine nut. *"It's not the Soup of the Day, it's the Soup of the Moment,"* he says with a grin.

Miguel Ángel feels admiration for the nearby product, managing a network of small local producers that fill his kitchen with "not easy to find" natural products.

He recently wrote the bestseller book *"The Collector Chef and the Wild Herbs"*. As a passionate reader he states that nothing strengthens creativity so much as silence. It's this spirit which he says makes Spanish Gastronomy one of the most creative in the world.

Far removed from any stereotypical concepts of food and with a focus on simplicity, Miguel Ángel bases his dishes on his origins, beliefs and imagination. *"In order to combine certain ingredients, you have to let yourself be carried away by what the heart makes you feel and leave reasoning aside. Great works in any arts, music, poetry, painting have come from the heart of its creators, blurred by brushstrokes of silence"* he says proudly.

This approach won him respect of diners and fellow professionals setting him on the road to becoming one of the best chefs in Spain.

"Spanish Extravaganza is the perfect way for me to pass my knowledge and to provide the opportunity for people all over the world to taste Castilla y León's most emblematic dishes. That makes me feel very proud" states Miguel Ángel.



TAPAS MASTER AGER URIGÜEN

Chef Ager Urigüen should have been a lawyer. But a job at a Mongolian barbecue restaurant in Dublin changed all that...

An eternal dreamer, Ager was born in Bilbao in the Basque Country to a family of lawyers. Expected to follow in his father and three brothers' footsteps, he travelled instead to Dublin to improve his English. This decision changed his life forever.

"My uncle was a captain in the Merchant Navy," he explains. "I grew up listening goggle-eyed to his incredible Mark Twain-style tales and I was determined to travel the world."

Aged just 23, Ager found a job by chance as a kitchen porter in a Mongolian barbecue restaurant. "I'd do my job really fast so I could prepare food in the kitchen," he remembers. "A door to an exciting new world opened up for me."

Ager's passion for cooking had in fact always been there, lying dormant.

"My mother and grandmother were dedicated cooks," he says. "They made amazing traditional Basque dishes like *bacalao in a pil pil sauce* and *baby squid in its own ink*. My grandmother made a delicious dish with snails."

Ager had spent his childhood helping them cook. "Life revolves around the kitchen table in the Basque Country," he says. "It's where all the interesting things happen."

Determined to be a chef, Ager returned from Ireland to Bilbao and began a 'strenuous' 16-month training period. He worked at some of the best restaurants in the city, like *La Pérgola*, *The Guggenheim* restaurant and *La Cuchara de Euskalduna* whilst spending his evenings at a private school earning his cooking diploma.

The long hours took their toll on his love life. "One girlfriend broke up with me for falling asleep three times on three consecutive dates!" he says.

Ager openly admits that he had no obvious culinary heroes and was inspired by the copious amount of cooking books he devoured in his spare time. "I felt like I knew the chef writers personally as they kept me company for hours!" he laughs.

So maybe it makes sense that his biggest influence is not a person but a place - London. "I lived on and off in London," he reveals. "It's such a vibrant and multicultural place and has the most exciting food fusions."

But it's in Berlin where Ager now wows diners.

In 1996, friend, former chef and now President of Athletic Bilbao football club, Aitor Elizegi, persuaded Ager to set up *The Goya Society*; an old theatre with 3,000 members.

Serving a mix of modern and traditional Basque cuisine, with a dash of German style it soon made headlines. Ager's laminated bacalao confit with spider crab and pumpkin pil pil sauce became one of his signature dishes.

After *The Goya Society*, Ager ran masterclasses and workshops in Switzerland, Austria, Germany and Lithuania and then further afield in China and Thailand. "I ate the best food of my life from a Tavern in Seville," he reveals. "That's what makes cooking so fascinating, that dynamic balance between technique and the human touch."

In 2013, Chef Ager became owner and head chef of *Txokoa* which he translates as a 'house to gather in' from his native Basque language, considered one of the best tapas restaurants in Berlin.

"We make tapas classics with a twist," he says. His 36-hour slow-cooked Iberian pork cheek with celeriac and wild garlic is a firm favourite. As is his chocolate fondant with mandarin sorbet and wasabi sauce. "I'm a bit over the fondant but it's so popular I can't take it off the menu!" he laughs.

He has also appeared on television, most recently on, Spanish TV programme *Basques Around the World* (Vascos por el Mundo) and German TV show, *50 Kitchens, One City* (50 Küchen, Eine Heimat) where he represented Spain with his *bacalao al pil pil*.

But perhaps Ager's most fulfilling moment came from receiving recognition from his father shortly before he died. "He was a very driven man and wanted me to be a lawyer," he says. "So it wasn't easy for him to accept me being a chef. It meant a lot to discover he was actually very proud of me."