



SPANISH · BASQUE (BILBAO COAST) · MAIN · SMALL-PLATE CENTERPIECE  
· TECHNIQUE SHOWCASE

# Bacalao al Pil-Pil · The Basque Emulsion in a Cazuela

Four loins of desalinated salt cod confited at 70°C in olive oil with garlic and guindilla, then the cazuela swirled off heat in slow circles until the fish's own gelatin binds into the oil and transforms loose liquid into a silky pale-yellow sauce. The technique is pure physics — no eggs, no starch, no roux. Just protein collagen, temperature, and wrist motion. The most pedagogical stovetop emulsion in Spanish cooking, and a test of patience that rewards understanding over speed every time.

Protein Bacalao (salt cod)

Serves 4 as main, 6 - 8 as tapa

Difficulty Intermediate-Advanced

Active 3 5 min active · 3 6 - 4 8 h desalination · zero idle stovetop risk

Total 3 6 - 4 8 h desalination + 4 5 min cook

## THE STORY

### The Sound a Cazuela Makes When It's About to Work

Pil-pil is an onomatopoeia. It's the gentle *pil... pil... pil...* sound the confit oil makes when it laps against the lip of a hot clay cazuela as you swirl it. When a Basque grandmother says the sauce is ready, she means her ears told her — not her eyes. The

sauce is ready when the swirling slows, the oil thickens, and the rhythm of the lapping changes pitch.

The physics: cod skin is unusually rich in **gelatin**, a protein that dissolves into hot liquid below 80°C and, once dissolved, acts as an emulsifier — binding oil and water into a stable mayonnaise-like cream. The 70°C olive-oil confit dissolves the gelatin gently out of the skin; the fish releases a few milliliters of milky gelatin-rich liquor into the oil during the 8-minute cook. That liquor is your emulsifier. The swirling motion — slow clockwise circles with the cazuela off the heat — mechanically agitates the oil-liquor interface at the correct temperature window (55-65°C) and forces the emulsion to form. The sauce goes from separated (oil on top, thin liquor on bottom) to unified (silky pale-yellow cream coating every fiber of the fish) in about four minutes of patient wrist work.

No eggs. No starch. No cornflour. No butter. Just fish gelatin + olive oil + physics. This is the recipe that makes Spanish cooks shake their heads at anyone who thickens pil-pil with flour — that would be the easy way, and the easy way isn't pil-pil.

It is also the single highest-pedagogy stovetop dish in the Spanish canon. Own this and you understand emulsion science at a level that transfers to hollandaise, aioli, beurre blanc, mayonnaise, and every other oil-water thickening system you'll ever meet. Get it once, the rest of stovetop cooking opens up.

# Specs

<p><b>YIELD</b></p> <p><b>4 loin portions · serves 4 main / 6-8 tapa</b></p>	<p><b>BACALAO</b></p> <p><b>4 × 150 g loin portions, thick cut with skin on (the skin is where the gelatin lives — do not remove)</b></p>	<p><b>DESALINATION</b></p> <p><b>36-48 h cold-water soak, changing water every 8-12 h</b></p>	<p><b>CONFIT TEMP</b></p> <p><b>70 °C / 158 °F — oil temp, measured with thermometer</b></p>
<p><b>EMULSION WINDOW</b></p> <p><b>55 - 65 °C / 130 - 150 °F — off-heat swirl temperature</b></p>	<p><b>CAZUELA</b></p> <p><b>20-22 cm glazed terracotta (cazuela de barro) — non-negotiable for traditional technique; heavy nonstick acceptable substitute</b></p>	<p><b>DIFFICULTY</b></p> <p><b>Intermediate-Advanced</b></p> <p>●●●●○</p>	<p><b>ACTIVE TIME</b></p> <p><b>35 min (once fish is desalinated)</b></p>
<p><b>KEY SKILL</b></p> <p><b>Off-heat wrist-circle swirl — 3-4 minutes of unbroken slow circular motion</b></p>			

## What Changed & Why

Two variables: bacalao quality and olive oil quality. Technique is identical across tiers.

● Tier A (Everyday) uses **Giraldo or La Tienda imported Spanish salt cod** (both available online and at Whole Foods specialty seafood counters in major cities; in Miami, Marky's Gourmet Market in Aventura carries both) plus **California Olive Ranch Arbequina** or a similar grocery-tier Spanish EVOO. Produces a genuinely restaurant-grade pil-pil. ● Tier B (No Limits) uses **Giraldo Lomo de Bacalao Especial** (the thickest-cut premium loin) or air-shipped **bacalao Gadus morhua from a Galician importer**, paired with **Rincón de la Subbética summit Arbequina** or **Castillo de Canena Family Reserve**. The oil difference is meaningful here — pil-pil is essentially fish + oil, so the oil is 40% of the finished flavor. Tier B is the version you serve at a Saturday dinner party when the sauce is the point.

CHANGE	ORIGINAL	UMAMI VERSION	WHY
TECH	Confit the cod at a low simmer in olive oil until flaky	Confit at exactly 70°C / 158°F measured with a probe thermometer for 8-10 minutes; the oil should never simmer	A simmer is 95-100°C — that's too hot. At simmer temperature the gelatin denatures and collapses rather than dissolving cleanly; the cod flesh also over-cooks and goes from silky to flaky-dry. 70°C is the sweet spot where gelatin dissolves gently, the cod reaches a just-cooked protein temperature, and the oil is warm enough to extract garlic aromatics without browning them. A thermometer is non-negotiable. Eyeballing 'a gentle bubble' puts you too hot 80% of the time.

CHANGE	ORIGINAL	UMAMI VERSION	WHY
<b>TECH</b>	Remove the fish, add flour or cornstarch to thicken the oil into a sauce	Remove the fish, remove the garlic and guindilla, let the oil cool to 55-65°C, then return the fish skin-up and swirl the cazuela in slow circles off the heat for 3-4 minutes until the sauce emulsifies	Flour thickening is not pil-pil — it's a different dish wearing pil-pil's name. The whole pedagogy here is that fish gelatin can emulsify oil on its own if you respect the temperature window and add mechanical agitation. Flour masks the technique. Swirling works because at 55-65°C the gelatin is still dissolved and still functional as an emulsifier, but the oil is cool enough that small oil droplets don't immediately coalesce back out of suspension. The physical swirling forces the gelatin-liquor layer to repeatedly re-encounter the oil surface, and each encounter incorporates a tiny bit more oil into the emulsion. After ~3 minutes the sauce visibly thickens into silky cream.

CHANGE	ORIGINAL	UMAMI VERSION	WHY
ADD	—	Save 2 tablespoons of the cloudy desalination water from the final soak; use it to kickstart the emulsion if the cazuela doesn't have enough natural gelatin	Modern desalinated bacalao varies in gelatin yield — some loins release enough liquor during the confit, some don't. The final cold-water soak contains dissolved cod-skin gelatin; 2 tbsp of that, added drop-by-drop during the swirl phase, is your safety net. This is a Basque grandmother trick, not in most modern recipes, but it rescues a sauce that otherwise won't come together.
ELEV	Large skillet or frying pan	20-22 cm cazuela de barro — traditional glazed Spanish terracotta	The cazuela is genuinely part of the technique, not just tradition for its own sake. Terracotta has low thermal conductivity (slow to heat, slow to cool), which means once you remove it from the burner the oil holds in the 55-65°C emulsion window for the full 3-4 minute swirl. A thin nonstick skillet cools too fast — you'll drop below 50°C mid-swirl and the emulsion stalls. The cazuela also has sloped sides that facilitate the swirl motion. If no cazuela is available, use a heavy-bottomed stainless pan with sloped sides (a saucier or chef's pan). Do NOT use a flat-sided sauté pan.

CHANGE	ORIGINAL	UMAMI VERSION	WHY
<p><b>ADD</b></p>	<p>—</p>	<p>Thermometer in the oil at all times during the confit phase — pull the cazuela off the heat briefly if it creeps above 72°C</p>	<p>The margin between 70°C (correct) and 80°C (gelatin starts denaturing) is narrow on a gas burner. The lowest gas-burner setting on most home ranges still outputs more heat than needed to hold 70°C. Plan to cycle the cazuela on and off the heat every 60-90 seconds during the confit phase, watching the thermometer. A diffuser plate between burner and cazuela helps moderate the heat. Induction holds temperature far better than gas — if you have induction, set it to 80-90W and leave it.</p>
<p><b>SKIP</b></p>	<p>Chop the garlic and scatter it into the sauce</p>	<p>Slice garlic into thin golden coins, confit them in the oil first (3-4 min at 70°C until faint gold), remove before adding fish, reserve as garnish</p>	<p>Chopped garlic left in during the fish confit browns unevenly and can tip the oil into bitter territory. Whole thin slices confited briefly and then removed give you (a) clean garlic-infused oil for the fish, (b) a beautiful golden-coin garnish to scatter on top at service, and (c) a guindilla chile to remove at the same moment. Separating aromatic infusion from protein cook is a universal confit-technique principle that applies to every oil-based Spanish preparation.</p>

# What You Need

## ● Everyday

### The Bacalao

- 4 × 150 g (~5 oz each) **skin-on thick-cut bacalao loin portions** — **Giraldo Lomo de Bacalao** or **La Tienda Imported Salt Cod** (both online; see [sourcing/03-seafood](#) and [sourcing/06-spanish-pantry](#)). The skin is essential — it holds the gelatin. Avoid skinless "bacalao fillets" — they will not emulsify.

### The Confit Base

- 400 ml **good Spanish EVOO** — **California Olive Ranch Arbequina** (grocery) or equivalent. This is your cooking oil AND your sauce base, so it matters. Skip the basic Italian supermarket oil; go Spanish here.
- 6 **cloves garlic**, peeled, sliced into thin coins (~2 mm)
- 1-2 **dried guindilla peppers** (Spanish dried red chile, mild heat) — or 1 dried arbol chile + pinch red pepper flakes as substitute
- Sea salt, if needed (the fish will already be salty even after desalination; taste before adding)

### The Emulsion Safety Net

- 2 tablespoons of the **final desalination-water soak**, reserved cold — contains dissolved cod-skin gelatin, used as insurance during the swirl phase

### Service

- Flat-leaf parsley, finely chopped, for garnish
- Crusty bread for sopping up the sauce (pan de payés from Batch 7 is ideal)

## No Limits

### The Bacalao (Tier B)

- 4 × 150 g **Giraldo Lomo de Bacalao Especial** — the thickest-cut, premium-grade loin portion, skin-on, traditionally Nordic-Atlantic caught + Spanish-cured. OR **air-shipped skrei (Norwegian winter cod) dry-cured by a Galician importer** if you can source it fresh. Both yield dramatically more gelatin than Tier A.

### The Oil (Tier B)

- 400 ml **Rincón de la Subbética summit Arbequina** OR **Castillo de Canena Family Reserve Picual** — [sourcing/11-oils-vinegars](#). The oil IS the sauce — this is one of the few Spanish dishes where you genuinely should use your best oil.

### Aromatics (Tier B)

- 6 cloves **Las Pedroñeras DOP purple garlic** (Morado de Las Pedroñeras) — genuinely more pungent and cleaner-finishing than generic garlic
- 2 **fresh guindillas de Ibarra** (Basque pickled-in-vinegar chile) if Saturday market, OR 2 dried guindillas de Ibarra from a Spanish importer
- Fleur de sel or Maldon for final finish

## EQUIPMENT

### Your Kit

---

- 20-22 cm cazuela de barro (glazed terracotta) — the traditional vessel. If unavailable, a heavy-bottomed stainless saucier with sloped sides. Do NOT use a flat-sided sauté pan.
- Probe thermometer (instant-read) — non-negotiable for the 70°C confit temperature
- Small bowl for reserved desalination water
- Flat wooden spoon or offset spatula for lifting fish
- Small plate to rest garlic + chile during the swirl phase
- Paper towels for patting fish dry after desalination

MISE EN PLACE

## Before You Start

---

- Bacalao desalinated 36-48 h in advance (see Phase 1)

---

- Final desalination water (2 tbsp) reserved cold in a small bowl

---

- Fish patted dry with paper towels; set on a plate skin-side-down

---

- Garlic sliced into 2 mm coins; guindilla de-stemmed (keep seeds if you want heat; discard for mild)

---

- Thermometer ready, oil measured into cazuela

---

- Parsley finely chopped; bread sliced and ready

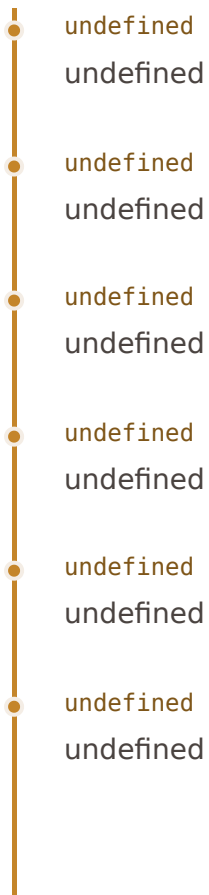
---

- Serving plates warmed (oven at 50°C, or over the pilot light)

MAKE-AHEAD

## Timeline

---



- undefined  
undefined
- undefined  
undefined
- undefined  
undefined
- undefined  
undefined

## METHOD

# The Cook

### 1 Phase 1 · Desalination — 36 to 48 hours ahead

1. Place bacalao loins skin-side-up in a glass or ceramic dish, fully submerged in cold filtered water (1.5 L minimum).
2. Refrigerate. Change the water every 8-12 hours — typically 3-4 water changes total across 36-48 hours.
3. At the final water change, taste a tiny corner of one loin. It should taste lightly salty but no longer aggressive — similar to well-seasoned fresh fish. If still very salty, continue soaking with fresh water; if already approaching bland, stop.
4. Reserve 2 tablespoons of the final soak water in a small bowl; refrigerate. This is your emulsion safety net.
5. Drain the bacalao; pat gently with paper towels to remove surface moisture. Do not squeeze — handle like fresh fish. The loins should be plump, white, and rehydrated.



#### WHY THIS WORKS

Salt cod is cured to ~18-20% salt by weight. Desalination works by osmotic diffusion: salt moves from the high-concentration cod flesh into the low-concentration water, equilibrating over hours. The 8-12 hour water-change cadence is critical — if the water gets too salty, diffusion slows. Cold water (refrigerated) is important because warm water encourages bacterial growth during the long soak. The final target salinity is approximately seasoning-level: still perceptible, not overwhelming.

## 2 Phase 2 · Aromatic Infusion — 4 minutes

1. Place the cazuela on the lowest gas burner setting (or induction at 80-90W). Add 400 ml olive oil + sliced garlic coins + whole guindilla.
2. Warm the oil slowly. Insert thermometer. Target 70°C / 158°F.
3. Watch the garlic: it should sizzle very gently and turn from white to faint gold over 3-4 minutes. It must NOT brown — brown garlic is bitter garlic.
4. As soon as the garlic shows faint gold color (not brown), use a slotted spoon to remove garlic + guindilla to a small plate. Reserve.
5. Verify oil temperature is still at 70°C. If higher, pull cazuela off heat for 30 seconds; if lower, let it climb back.



### WHY THIS WORKS

Garlic contains sulfur compounds that are aromatic at moderate temperatures (60-100°C) but turn acrid and bitter when browned. Confit-infusing aromatics into oil at 70°C extracts the fat-soluble flavor compounds cleanly — garlic oil this way tastes of garlic without any sharp or bitter edge. The guindilla contributes a mild heat that infuses into the oil over the same 3-4 minute window.

**3**

### **Phase 3 · The 70°C Confit — 8-10 minutes**

1. With the oil steady at 70°C and the aromatics removed, gently lay the bacalao loins into the cazuela SKIN-SIDE-UP. The oil should come roughly halfway up the sides of the fish.
2. Maintain the oil at 70°C. Pull cazuela on and off the heat every 60-90 seconds to hold temperature — watch the thermometer, do not let it climb above 72°C.
3. Do not stir or move the fish. Do not flip. The fish confits gently from the bottom upward.
4. After 8 minutes, check one loin: the flesh should flake gently when pressed with a spatula but still be silky, not dry. A faint milky liquor should have pooled under the skin — this is the gelatin-rich liquid that will become your sauce.
5. If underdone, continue 2 more minutes. Most 150 g loins are perfect at 8-9 minutes.



#### **WHY THIS WORKS**

At 70°C, cod muscle protein coagulates slowly and evenly. The skin's collagen — essentially a sheet of gelatin precursor — slowly dissolves at this temperature, releasing a milky liquor rich in gelatin into the oil. This is the single most important scientific event in the recipe: the gelatin extraction. Too hot (over 80°C) and the gelatin denatures and loses emulsifying power; too cold (under 60°C) and it doesn't dissolve at all. 70°C is the narrow sweet spot.

4

## Phase 4 · The Cool-Down — 60 to 90 seconds

1. Using a slotted spatula, carefully lift each loin and transfer to a warm plate. Keep them skin-side-up. Cover loosely with foil to hold warmth.
2. Remove cazuela entirely from the heat source. Do not turn off the burner if gas — just move the pan.
3. Watch the thermometer. The oil will cool from 70°C toward your target window of 55-65°C. In a cazuela de barro this takes 60-90 seconds; in a stainless pan it cools faster (45-60 sec).
4. Do not skip this cooling step. If you start swirling at 70°C+, the emulsion is fragile and will break. If you swirl below 50°C the gelatin re-solidifies and the sauce won't form.



### WHY THIS WORKS

This cooling step is the single most frequently botched part of the recipe. The emulsion window is 55-65°C because: (a) the gelatin is still dissolved and functional as an emulsifier (below 80°C), (b) the oil viscosity has increased enough that small droplets don't immediately coalesce back out of suspension, (c) the kinetic energy in the system is low enough that the mechanical agitation of the swirl can force oil-water contact without immediately undoing it.

## Phase 5 · The Swirl — 3 to 4 minutes (The Moment)

1. Return the bacalao loins to the cazuela, skin-side-UP (not skin-side-down — the skin rides on top of the oil). The fish is already cooked; this is about the sauce now.
2. Hold the cazuela by its two handles (or with an oven mitt if no handles). Begin slow, steady circular motions — clockwise, about one full circle every 2 seconds.
3. Do NOT stir with a spoon. The motion is the vessel moving, not a utensil moving in the oil.
4. Listen. You should hear a gentle *pil... pil... pil...* sound as oil laps against the cazuela's lip. That rhythm tells you the temperature is correct.
5. Within 30-60 seconds the oil will begin to change appearance — small milky droplets (the gelatin liquor the fish released) start to distribute through the oil. Keep swirling.
6. At 90-120 seconds: the oil visibly thickens. It goes from clear pale-gold to cloudy-pale-yellow. This is the emulsion forming.
7. If after 2 minutes the sauce hasn't started to thicken: add ½ teaspoon of the reserved cold desalination water. Continue swirling. Add another ½ tsp at 30-second intervals if needed, up to 2 tbsp total.
8. At 3-4 minutes: the sauce is silky, pale yellow-cream, coating the skin of the fish. The swirl sound changes — it becomes slower, thicker. Stop swirling.
9. Visual checkpoint — how to know it's right: tilt the cazuela gently 30° to one side. A correctly-emulsified sauce flows like heavy cream — thick but mobile, with visible body — and coats the cazuela in a pale-yellow opaque film that slowly slides back. A broken or not-yet-formed sauce runs clear and thin like loose oil, or sits in two visible layers (clear gold oil on top, milky liquor below). The right sauce has one single tone; a wrong sauce has two. If you see two, keep swirling or add ½ tsp reserved water. If you see one uniform pale-cream color, stop — you've made it.



### WHY THIS WORKS

The emulsion mechanism is: gelatin dissolved in the fish liquor has amphiphilic behavior (it's attracted to both water and oil). When you mechanically agitate the oil + liquor interface repeatedly, gelatin molecules coat small oil droplets and stabilize them in suspension. Each circle of the swirl forces another round of oil-water contact; each contact incorporates more oil into the emulsion. Over 3-4 minutes the cumulative effect is a transformation from two-phase (oil + liquor separate) to one-phase (oil-in-water emulsion, with gelatin as emulsifier). It's the same chemistry as mayonnaise, where lecithin in egg yolk is the emulsifier. Here, gelatin replaces lecithin.

## 6 Phase 6 · Plate + Serve — 2 minutes

1. Transfer each loin to a warm plate, skin-side-up, with a spatula. The sauce should coat the fish in a thin, silky layer.
2. Spoon extra sauce from the cazuela over each portion — there will be more sauce than can cling to the fish, and the plate pool is the reward.
3. Scatter the reserved golden garlic coins on top of each portion. Place the reserved guindilla on the side of the plate (decorative; eat-at-your-own-risk).
4. Finely chop fresh parsley; scatter a pinch on each portion.
5. Serve immediately with crusty bread for sopping. The sauce should be eaten while hot — it will slowly re-solidify if it drops below 50°C on the plate.
6. Tier B finish: a tiny flake of fleur de sel on top of each loin, right before service.



### WHY THIS WORKS

The emulsion is stable at serving temperature (55-75°C) but will break if reheated aggressively (above 80°C) or if it drops below 50°C and then is reheated. Eat within 5 minutes of plating for best texture.

### QUICK REFERENCE

## Timing Cheat Sheet

STEP	TIME	CUE
Begin desalination	T- 4 8 h to T- 3 6 h	Submerge loins in cold water, refrigerate
Water changes (x3-4)	Every 8 - 1 2 h	Fresh cold water, reserve final 2 tbsps
Mise + prep	T- 1 0 m	Pat fish dry, slice garlic, thermometer ready, plates warming
Aromatic infusion	T- 0 to T+ 4 m	Oil at 70°C with garlic + guindilla, 4 min until faint gold
Remove aromatics	T+ 4 m	Garlic + guindilla to plate, oil still 70°C

STEP	TIME	CUE
Add fish · begin confit	T+ 5 m	Skin-side-up in 70°C oil
Confit complete	T+ 1 3 - 1 4 m	Fish silky + flaking gently, gelatin liquor released
Remove fish · cool oil	T+ 1 4 - 1 5 m	Oil drops from 70°C to 55-65°C window
Return fish · begin swirl	T+ 1 5 m	Skin-up, off-heat, slow circular motion
Emulsion forms	T+ 1 8 - 1 9 m	Pale yellow silky sauce
Plate + serve	T+ 2 0 m	Warm plates, garlic coins, parsley, bread on side

#### TROUBLESHOOTING

## Emergency Protocols

 UNDEFINED

undefined

 UNDEFINED

undefined

 UNDEFINED

undefined

 UNDEFINED

undefined

 UNDEFINED

undefined

 UNDEFINED

undefined

DEEP DIVES

## Technique Notes

---

### ● **Universal: The Gelatin Emulsion — Mayonnaise Without Eggs**

EMULSION SCIENCE · CROSS-TECHNIQUE

Pil-pil is one of three famous no-egg emulsions in world cooking: pil-pil (fish gelatin), beurre blanc (dairy casein + phospholipids), and avgolemono (egg white denatured by acid). All three follow the same physical template: a dissolved amphiphilic protein + oil or fat + mechanical agitation + temperature window. Master pil-pil and you understand the whole family. The key lesson that transfers: emulsions form when the emulsifier is dissolved (not denatured), the fat is liquid (not solid), the temperature is stable (not climbing or crashing), and the agitation is laminar (swirling, not stirring). Break any one of those four conditions and the emulsion breaks. Reference: Emulsion Encyclopedia chapter 2; Sauces and Condiments §Sauce Families.

### ● **Universal: The Confit-Then-Emulsify Template**

TWO-PHASE STOVETOP COOKING · CROSS-PROTEIN

The pil-pil workflow — confit at low temperature first, then emulsify off-heat — is a template that extends to many Spanish and French preparations. Garlic-confit scallops become scallops al pil-pil. Cod's relative hake (merluza) can be treated the same way. Oxtail braising liquid can be converted into a pil-pil-style emulsion after the long cook, using the collagen released from the bones. The template: gentle oil-confit to release collagen, then off-heat agitation to emulsify the oil. Once you own this template, you can invent pil-pil variants from almost any gelatin-rich ingredient. Reference: Stovetop and Pan §Confit + Emulsion; Cross-Technique Workflows §Two-Phase.

## ● **Universal: Temperature Windows — Why 70°C Matters Everywhere**

SOUS-VIDE-ADJACENT STOVETOP · PROTEIN SCIENCE

70°C / 158°F is a universal inflection point in protein cooking. Above 70°C: collagen denatures quickly; myosin sets firmly; many gelatins lose function. Below 70°C: collagen dissolves slowly; myosin sets softly; gelatins retain function. Sous-vide cooks know this instinctively because they work with precise temperatures all day. Stovetop cooks should learn the same lesson: a thermometer in the oil transforms 'stovetop' into 'precision stovetop.' This applies to: pil-pil (this recipe), confit anything, gently-poached eggs, low-temperature omelets, tempered chocolate, homemade hollandaise, sabayon. Reference: Food Science Core §Protein Denaturation; Sous Vide chapter 1.

## ● **Basque Technique: The Cazuela as Instrument**

VESSEL SCIENCE · SPANISH TRADITION

The cazuela de barro (glazed terracotta) has three properties that make it correct for pil-pil: (1) low thermal conductivity — it heats and cools slowly, which holds the emulsion temperature window for 3-4 minutes off-heat, (2) high thermal mass — it stores heat to compensate for heat loss during the swirl phase, (3) sloped sides — geometry that facilitates the circular motion of the swirl. A thin aluminum skillet fails on all three: heats fast, cools fast, flat sides. If you cook Spanish food regularly, the 20-22 cm cazuela de barro is one of the three vessels worth buying (alongside paellera and cast iron). Reference: Spanish Foundations §Clay Vessels; Stovetop and Pan §Vessel Selection.

## ● Spanish Pantry: Desalination as a Weekly Rhythm

SALT COD · PANTRY STRATEGY

Bacalao is a long-keep protein: dry-cured, shelf-stable, lasts 6 months in a cool pantry. A Basque kitchen always has a package ready. The weekly rhythm: start desalinating on Thursday evening, cook Saturday night. Change water Friday morning, Friday evening, Saturday morning, Saturday afternoon. The 48-hour lead time is a feature, not a bug — it lets you plan dinner parties two days out with a protein that's ready whenever you are. Bacalao also transforms into: brandada (emulsified with oil + potato), buñuelos (fried fritters), pil-pil (this recipe), al ajoarriero (with tomato + peppers), a la vizcaína (with choriceró pepper sauce). One pantry ingredient, six recipes. Reference: Spanish Foundations §Bacalao; Preservation §Salt Curing.

## ● No Limits: The Thick-Loin Gelatin Advantage

INGREDIENT QUALITY · GELATIN YIELD

Giraldo Especial (thickest-cut premium-grade loin) and fresh skrei (Norwegian winter cod) release roughly 2x the gelatin of thin-cut supermarket bacalao. This difference compounds: the emulsion comes together faster (90 seconds vs 3 min), holds together more stably, and produces a silkier, more abundant sauce. For a dinner-party version of this dish, the Tier B bacalao investment is genuinely worthwhile. For Tuesday-night-practice, Tier A is fine. Source: Giraldo direct-ship to Miami via La Tienda; Marky's Aventura occasionally stocks fresh skrei during Norwegian winter (Jan-Mar). Reference: Protein Encyclopedia §Cod; Sourcing §Spanish Cured Fish.

## ● No Limits: The Oil Finishing Principle

FINISHING OIL · FLAVOR LAYERING

When the dish is essentially fish + oil + garlic, the oil quality becomes 40% of the finished flavor. Rincón de la Subbética summit Arbequina (Córdoba) or Castillo de Canena Family Reserve Picual (Jaén) are the two oils that reward this context. Arbequina is softer + buttery; Picual is more peppery + grassy. Try one of each across two batches and you'll viscerally understand the variable. For pil-pil, the softer Arbequina profile tends to win — it lets the fish come forward. Picual is better for heartier applications (grilled lamb, tomato sauces). Reference: Olive Oil Atlas §Spanish Varieties; Sauces and Condiments §Finishing Oils.

# What to Drink

---

## Wine — The Atlantic Match

Tier A: Martín Códax Albariño (Rías Baixas, Galicia) · Tier B: Pazo Baión Albariño or Txomin Etxaniz Txakoli (Basque coast, natural match)

*Pil-pil is fatty, garlic-forward, and salt-cured — it needs an acidic, crisp, Atlantic-coast white to cut through. Albariño's citrus + salinity mirrors the fish's Atlantic origin; Txakoli is the hyperlocal Basque match, slightly petillant, brisk as a sea breeze. Avoid oaky Chardonnay or buttery whites — they duplicate the richness rather than balancing it.*

## Wine — The Red Contrarian

Young Rioja Tinto (Crianza level, not Gran Reserva) or a light Mencía from Bierzo

*The reflexive rule 'white wine with fish' is wrong here. Pil-pil's sauce is rich and garlic-heavy, and a medium-bodied young red with bright acidity works surprisingly well. This is a restaurant-kitchen-insider pairing — tell your guests it was on purpose.*

## Bread — The Sopping Vehicle

Pan de payés (Batch 7 · this workspace) or a crusty Basque country bread

*The pil-pil sauce is the best part of the meal, and the last stage of eating is sopping every drop with bread. Pan de payés's open crumb absorbs oil beautifully without going soggy. Slice thick, grill lightly. Non-negotiable.*

## Side — Simplicity Wins

Green salad dressed only with sherry vinegar + olive oil + salt, OR pimientos de padrón blistered in hot oil with Maldon

*The dish is intense — garlic, gelatin, oil, salt cod. Anything assertive on the side competes. A simple bitter-green salad resets the palate between bites; padrón peppers add a pop of texture without flavor overlap. Nothing tomato-based, nothing creamy, nothing starch-heavy beyond the bread.*

## 🔥 Dessert — The Cool-Down

Olive-oil ice cream (Batch 6 · this workspace) with Maldon, OR a simple poached pear in red wine

*The olive-oil ice cream is a perfect echo — same ingredient family, opposite temperature, total textural contrast. A poached pear works because its acid + sweetness resets the mouth after the savory intensity.*

### CONTEXT

## Menu Ideas

---

### **Saturday Dinner Party · 6-8 guests · Basque Night**

1. Mejillones en escabeche (Batch 5 tapa, pantry). 2. Pil-pil (this recipe, small plates). 3. Chuletón reverse-sear (centerpiece). 4. Burnt Basque cheesecake (Batch 6 dessert). Full Basque-coast arc, mostly make-ahead except the pil-pil and the steak finish.

### **Technique Dinner · 4 guests**

Structured around a single pedagogical moment. Drink: vermut on arrival. 1. Gilda skewers (quick). 2. Pil-pil at the table (demo the swirl in front of guests). 3. Green salad. 4. Olive-oil ice cream. The pil-pil IS the show — cook it in the kitchen up to end of Phase 3, finish the swirl in the dining room.

### **Intimate Tapa Night · 2-4 guests**

Pil-pil as a single centerpiece small plate + crusty bread + a salad + Albariño. A weeknight-elevated dinner that teaches a technique you can show off for years.

### **Dinner Party Reinforcement · Pil-Pil-Adjacent Pairings**

Once you've mastered pil-pil, spin it into variations: scallop pil-pil (quick sear + off-heat emulsion), mejillones al pil-pil (steam-open + emulsify their liquor), hake al pil-pil (merluza substitute for cod). One learned technique = four menu items.

YOUR NOTES

# Cook Log

---

## Session Notes

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ · Serves: \_\_\_\_\_ · Rating: \_\_ / 5

*Use this space to record what you changed, what worked, and what you'd do differently next time. Your future self will thank you.*



Stop following recipes. Start understanding food.

