



SPANISH · BASQUE · PLANCHA TRADITION · MAIN · CENTERPIECE ·
WEEKNIGHT-TO-DINNER-PARTY

Merluza a la Plancha con Refrito de Piquillos · Direct-Sear Fish, Basque Finish

Thick loins of hake (or gulf grouper as a Miami substitute) pressed onto a blazing plancha at 260-280°C for 90 seconds per side, then rested briefly and dressed with a hot refrito — garlic slivers browned in olive oil, blistered piquillo peppers, sherry vinegar off the heat, parsley. The fish has a caramelized mahogany crust on both sides and a pearly translucent center; the sauce is liquid gold with red-pepper shards and a sharp vinegar finish that cuts through the fat. A Basque direct-heat classic that teaches plancha thermodynamics, rest-and-dress timing, and the refrito — Spanish cooking's universal 'sauce made in the last 60 seconds.'

Protein Merluza (hake) · Grouper (Miami substitute)

Serves 4 main · 6 smaller plates

Difficulty Intermediate

Active 25 min

Total 30 min

THE STORY

The Plancha Changes Everything

Most home cooks sear fish in a skillet and are disappointed. The skin sticks, the fillet curls into a banana shape, the flesh on the hot side overcooks before the cold side even starts browning. They blame the fish. The fish is not the problem. The pan is.

A **plancha** is not a skillet with a different name. It's a thermodynamic instrument. A cast-iron or carbon-steel plancha is 10-15 mm of solid metal with massive thermal mass — when you heat it to 260-280°C and drop a cold fish on it, the fish loses almost no heat because the plancha has infinite heat to give. A skillet, by contrast, has roughly a third of that thermal mass; the fish's moisture drops the pan temperature 40-60°C instantly, which is exactly why it sticks and curls. On a plancha, the fish hits 260°C metal, the moisture on the skin flashes into steam, a thin vapor layer forms (the Leidenfrost effect), and the fish slides freely while building a perfect crust in 90 seconds. This is the single biggest upgrade a home cook can make for whole-muscle fish cooking. If you cook fish more than twice a month, buy a cast-iron plancha.

The second lesson of this dish is the **refrito** — Spanish cooking's ubiquitous last-60-seconds sauce. Garlic slivers browned in hot olive oil until just golden, something acidic added off-heat (sherry vinegar, lemon, or the liquor from pickled peppers), a vegetable inclusion for body (here, piquillos), and a handful of parsley. It takes less than two minutes to build, coats the fish in a flavor layer that cost-per-minute outperforms every other sauce in cooking, and is the thing that turns 'seared fish' into 'Basque seared fish.'

The last detail is the rest. A thick hake loin right off the plancha is still cooking — the heat captured in the crust continues into the center. Thirty seconds of rest on a warm plate lets the muscle fibers relax and the cooking finish; the center settles into pearly translucency instead of chalky-white. Apply the refrito AFTER the rest, not before. Hot sauce on hot fish, served immediately.

Specs

<p>YIELD</p> <p>4 × 150-180 g loin portions</p>	<p>PLANCHA TEMP</p> <p>260 - 280 °C / 500 - 535 °F -</p> <p>surface temp before fish touches it</p>	<p>SEAR TIME</p> <p>90 seconds</p> <p>skin-side, 60 - 75 seconds flesh- side</p>	<p>REST</p> <p>30 seconds on a warm plate before dressing</p>
<p>FISH</p> <p>4 × 150-180 g thick skin-on loin (merluza / hake, or Gulf grouper in Miami)</p>	<p>PIQUILLOS</p> <p>6-8 jarred or blister-on- plancha fresh Navarra DO</p>	<p>DIFFICULTY</p> <p>Intermediate</p> <p>●●●○○</p>	<p>ACTIVE TIME</p> <p>25 min (plus 10 min to preheat plancha)</p>
<p>KEY RULE</p> <p>Plancha must read 260°C before fish touches it — use an infrared thermometer</p>			

What Changed & Why

Two variables: the fish and the piquillos. Technique is identical. ● Tier A (Everyday) uses **Gulf grouper from a quality Miami fishmonger** (Casablanca Seafood, Perricone's, or Marky's Aventura) or **any thick skin-on white-fish loin** (cod, haddock, black sea bass) as hake substitutes — true merluza is rarely fresh in Miami, and a well-sourced local fish beats air-shipped frozen hake. Pair with **jarred Matiz or Pacetti Navarra-DO piquillos**. ● Tier B (No Limits) uses **Basque-coast fresh merluza air-shipped via a Spanish importer** (rare, \$50+/kg, call-ahead at Marky's) or **wild Alaska halibut cheeks from Honolulu Fish Co**, paired with **fresh piquillos blistered on the plancha 5 minutes before the fish** (farmer's market November-December in Miami, or specialty Spanish produce import). The fresh piquillos are a genuinely different dish — sweeter, smokier, with real char.

CHANGE	ORIGINAL	UMAMI VERSION	WHY
TECH	Heat a non-stick skillet over medium-high; add oil; cook fish 3-4 min per side	Preheat a cast-iron or carbon-steel plancha to 260-280°C surface temp (measured with infrared thermometer); sear 90 sec skin-side, 60-75 sec flesh-side	A non-stick skillet maxes out around 200-220°C before the coating degrades, and even at that temp its thermal mass is too low to avoid the temperature-drop problem when fish hits it. A plancha at 260-280°C has the thermal mass to hold temperature through the sear AND the surface temperature to produce the Leidenfrost effect that keeps the fish from sticking. This is not a minor upgrade — it's the entire game. The difference shows in the crust (mahogany vs pale-tan), the release (clean vs stuck), and the interior (silky vs steamed).

CHANGE	ORIGINAL	UMAMI VERSION	WHY
TECH	Salt the fish just before cooking	Salt the fish 10-15 minutes before cooking; pat bone-dry with paper towels immediately before the sear	Salt applied 10-15 min ahead does three things simultaneously: (1) draws a small amount of moisture to the surface, which then re-absorbs along with the salt (seasoning throughout rather than just on top), (2) starts gentle protein denaturation that produces a slightly firmer exterior, which crusts better, (3) the final surface is tacky rather than wet, which sears mahogany in 90 seconds instead of pale-tan in 180. Salting at the moment of the cook leaves the surface wet — wet fish steams before it sears. 10-15 min is the sweet spot; longer than 30 min and the fish starts to cure and change texture.

CHANGE	ORIGINAL	UMAMI VERSION	WHY
ADD	—	Rest the fish on a warm plate for 30 seconds after searing, BEFORE applying the refrito	Thick fish loins (150-180 g, 30 mm tall) continue cooking from the captured heat in the crust for 30-45 seconds after leaving the plancha. Applied refrito immediately and the sauce lands on fish that's still undergoing its final protein set — the flavor doesn't bind as cleanly, and the fish's final texture becomes harder to judge. 30 seconds of rest lets the cook finish; the fish relaxes; the crust crisps; THEN the hot refrito lands on a rested surface and binds beautifully. This is a restaurant-kitchen detail most home recipes miss entirely.
ADD	—	Build the refrito in the same plancha (cleaned with a quick steel-wool pass + oil film) AFTER the fish is off	Fish plus garlic-oil sauce in the same hot plancha = refrito picks up trace fish-oil flavor from the surface (desirable — umami deepening). The plancha is already at ~240°C after the fish comes off, which is the correct heat for the refrito's 60-second garlic-browning phase. Using a separate pan loses this flavor connection AND requires bringing a second pan to temperature, which takes 5 minutes you don't have. One plancha, one dish.

CHANGE	ORIGINAL	UMAMI VERSION	WHY
ELEV	Cast-iron skillet	Cast-iron OR carbon-steel plancha, 10-15 mm thick, 30×40 cm or larger	<p>A plancha is the vessel this dish was designed for. Cast-iron has more thermal mass + retains heat longer (better for cooking multiple batches); carbon-steel heats faster + responds faster to heat changes (better for timing-sensitive single batches). Either works. Thickness is the key metric: under 10 mm and you don't have enough thermal mass; over 15 mm and it takes 20+ minutes to heat through. Brands: Lodge carbon-steel griddle (grocery-tier, excellent); Made In carbon-steel plancha (mid-tier); Spanish-import cast-iron plancha from Rincón de la Solana or La Chamba (summit-tier). For kamado owners: a pre-heated plancha directly on the kamado grate at 260°C beats the indoor version — adds subtle smoke note.</p>

CHANGE	ORIGINAL	UMAMI VERSION	WHY
SKIP	Finish the fish with butter and baste continuously	No butter; no basting; no aromatics in the fat during the sear	Butter-basted seared fish is a French technique, not a Spanish one — and it obscures the fish's own flavor. The Spanish way is cleaner: olive oil wiped on the plancha (not pooled), no fat additions during the sear, all the flavor comes from the crust and the post-sear refrito. Butter also smokes at plancha temperature (milk solids burn at 170°C), so adding butter to the pan at 260°C produces acrid smoke rather than golden baste. If you want butter in the dish, add it to the refrito at the end — one tablespoon swirled off-heat into the finished refrito gives a lactic richness without any scorched-milk flavor.

What You Need

● Everyday

The Fish

- 4 × 150-180 g **thick skin-on loin portions of Gulf grouper** (the best Miami-local substitute for merluza) — **Casablanca Seafood (Hialeah), Perricone's Marketplace, or Marky's Gourmet Market (Aventura)**. See [sourcing/03-seafood](#). Alternatives that work identically: black sea bass, pollock, cod, haddock. Always thick-cut (30+ mm), always skin-on, always pin-bones pulled.

The Plancha Prep

- 20 ml **good EVOO** — **California Olive Ranch Arbequina** (for wiping the plancha + flesh-side of fish)
- 5 g fine sea salt (divided between 4 loins)
- Fresh ground black pepper (finishing only, not pre-sear)

The Refrito

- 60 ml **good EVOO**
- 6 cloves garlic, thinly sliced (~1 mm coins)
- 1 **dried guindilla** OR ½ **tsp red pepper flakes**
- 6-8 **jarred piquillo peppers** — **Matiz Navarra DO** or **Pacetti**, drained + sliced into ribbons
- 2 tbsp **sherry vinegar** — **Forvm Chardonnay** (a white variant) or a standard Jerez vinegar
- Small handful flat-leaf parsley, roughly chopped
- Pinch sea salt

Service

- Warm plates (50°C oven)
- Good country bread (pan de payés from Batch 7) for sopping the refrito

No Limits

The Fish (Tier B)

- 4 × 150-180 g **fresh Basque-coast merluza** (rare; call-ahead at Marky's Aventura for Spanish-import days) OR **wild Alaska halibut cheeks** from **Honolulu Fish Co** (Pablo ✓), which plancha-sear more beautifully than almost any fish thanks to their high collagen density and uniform shape.

The Olive Oil (Tier B)

- **Rincón de la Subbética summit Arbequina** (for both plancha + refrito — 80 ml total) OR **Castillo de Canena Family Reserve Picual** for a more peppery refrito profile

The Piquillos (Tier B — the big upgrade)

- 8-10 **fresh piquillos from Navarra** (Spanish specialty import, available Nov-Dec; farmer's markets occasionally have Italian-grown relatives) — blistered directly on the plancha 5 minutes before the fish, then peeled + sliced. Dramatically sweeter + smokier than jarred. If unavailable, go to **Nortindal fresh-jarred piquillos** (La Tienda) — premium-tier, closest to fresh.

The Vinegar + Aromatics (Tier B)

- 2 tbsp **Forvm Cabernet Sauvignon Reserva vinegar** — oak-aged single-varietal, deeper than standard sherry
- 6 cloves **Las Pedroñeras DOP purple garlic**
- 1 **dried guindilla de Ibarra**
- Fleur de sel or Maldon for finishing

EQUIPMENT

Your Kit

- Cast-iron or carbon-steel plancha, 10-15 mm thick, 30×40 cm or larger — the non-negotiable centerpiece
 - Infrared thermometer (Lavatools, ThermoWorks) — for verifying 260-280°C plancha temp
 - Thin fish spatula (slotted, flexible metal) — for clean release under the skin
 - Pin-bone tweezers — check fish for bones before cook
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- Small bowl for refrito aromatics
- Warm plates (pre-heated in 50°C oven)
- Kitchen paper towels — for patting fish dry

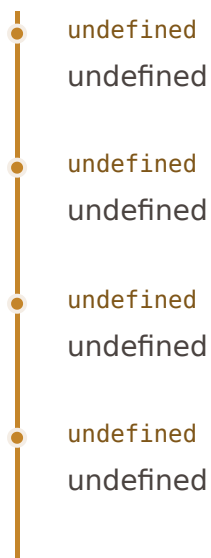
MISE EN PLACE

Before You Start

- Plancha on burner (or kamado grate) preheating — 8-10 min to reach 260-280°C
- Fish loins salted 10-15 min ahead; pin-bones pulled; patted dry at T-1m
- Garlic sliced thin coins; piquillos drained + sliced into ribbons
- Vinegar measured; parsley chopped
- Plates warming in 50°C oven; bread sliced
- Infrared thermometer ready next to the plancha
- Tier B only: fresh piquillos at room temp, ready to blister on the plancha 5 min before the fish

MAKE-AHEAD

Timeline



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METHOD

The Cook

1 Phase 1 · Preheat the Plancha + Salt the Fish — 15 minutes

1. Place the plancha on a burner (or on the kamado grate, lid closed, at 300°C). Heat for 8-10 minutes. It must reach 260-280°C before the fish touches it.
2. While the plancha heats: pat the fish loins dry with paper towels. Pull any pin-bones with tweezers. Salt evenly on both sides — about 1 g per loin.
3. Set the salted fish on a plate, skin-side-up, uncovered, on the counter for 10-15 minutes. This is the salt-penetration window.
4. Verify plancha temperature with an infrared thermometer pointed at the cooking surface — 260-280°C is the target. If the plancha has visible thin smoke rising from the surface without any oil on it, that's also a correct cue (oil applied at this temp will flash to vapor almost instantly).
5. At T-1 minute, pat the fish bone-dry again with fresh paper towels. Any residual surface moisture ruins the crust.



WHY THIS WORKS

The plancha's thermal mass is the whole point. Cast-iron at 10-15 mm thick stores enough heat energy that a 700 g batch of fish barely drops its surface temperature. The Leidenfrost effect — vapor-layer non-stick behavior — only kicks in reliably above 230°C. Under that, the fish skin contacts metal directly and sticks. Above 280°C, you start risking flash-scorching before the interior cooks enough. 260-280°C is the sweet spot for thick white fish. Salt 10-15 min ahead penetrates ~2-3 mm into the muscle via osmotic diffusion — seasoning is in the fish, not just on it. The drying step is critical: even a thin film of water on the skin takes 20-30 seconds to boil off at plancha temp, which means your 'sear' is actually '30 seconds of steaming plus 60 seconds of searing,' and the crust is pale.

2

Phase 2 (Tier B Optional) · Blister the Fresh Piquillos — 5 minutes before fish

1. If using fresh piquillos: wipe the hot plancha with an oiled paper towel to prevent sticking.
2. Lay 8-10 fresh piquillos directly on the plancha. They will hiss and immediately start to char. Leave 90 seconds, untouched.
3. Flip with tongs. Another 60-90 seconds on the second side. The skins should blacken in patches and the flesh should collapse slightly.
4. Transfer to a bowl; cover with a plate to steam-loosen the skins. Let sit 3-4 minutes.
5. Peel the blackened skins off under cool water (they come away easily after steaming). Remove stems + seeds. Slice flesh into ribbons. Reserve.
6. Re-wipe the plancha surface + verify temp back to 260-280°C before adding fish.



WHY THIS WORKS

Fresh peppers release water when exposed to high-temp direct contact. The steam generated between the charred skin and the cooked flesh is what separates the two layers during the cool-covered rest. A 3-4 minute covered rest is essential — skins don't peel cleanly without it. The blackened-char flavor from plancha contact is genuinely different from oven-roasted peppers: higher Maillard, more smoke-adjacent, less sweet-stewed.

3

Phase 3 · The Sear — 2 minutes 30 seconds

1. Wipe the hot plancha with a paper towel dipped in olive oil — a thin film, not a pool. The oil should smoke faintly on contact.
2. Pick up each fish loin. Press a tiny dab of oil on the skin-side with your finger (coats the interface). Lay skin-side-DOWN on the plancha.
3. Do not move the fish for 90 seconds. Do not poke, peek, or flip early. The crust builds during these 90 seconds.
4. At 90 seconds, test-flip one loin with a thin fish spatula. If it releases cleanly with a mahogany crust, flip all of them flesh-side-down. If any loin resists, give it 15-20 more seconds.
5. After flip: 60-75 seconds on the flesh side for a 30 mm loin. Check interior: the fish should be pearly-translucent just short of opaque at the center when pressed.
6. Transfer immediately to the warm plates, skin-side-up. Do not crowd the plates — leave space for the refrito.



WHY THIS WORKS

The Maillard reaction accelerates exponentially above 140°C; at 260-280°C plancha temp, it completes a mahogany crust in 90 seconds where a skillet at 200°C would need 3+ minutes. The 60-75 sec flesh-side is shorter because (a) no skin to crisp, (b) the already-hot interior just needs final protein set, (c) overcooking the flesh-side is the #1 home-cook mistake. Fish muscle sets at 55-60°C internal — you're aiming for 55°C at the center when it leaves the pan (it will rise to 58-60°C during rest). Pearly-translucent just short of opaque is the visual cue for 55°C. Chalky-white means you overshot to 70°C+.

4

Phase 4 · The Refrito — 90 seconds

1. With the fish resting on plates, pour 60 ml olive oil onto the still-hot plancha (~240°C at this point) and immediately tilt to spread.
2. Add sliced garlic + whole guindilla (or red pepper flakes). Stir with a wooden spoon or spatula — the garlic will sizzle aggressively. Target: 45-60 seconds until the garlic is faint-golden. Do NOT brown beyond gold — browned garlic is bitter.
3. Add the piquillo ribbons. Stir to coat. Let warm through — 20-30 seconds. They just need to be hot, not re-cooked.
4. Pull the plancha off the heat (or slide to a cooler zone if on the kamado).
5. OFF-HEAT: add the sherry vinegar. It will hiss dramatically — step back briefly. Swirl to combine. The heat is now cooling fast; this is where flavors mellow and integrate.
6. Add chopped parsley + a pinch of salt. Stir.
7. Spoon the refrito generously over each fish loin on the plates. Get garlic coins, piquillo ribbons, and hot oil on every portion. Serve immediately.



WHY THIS WORKS

The garlic-in-hot-oil step releases fat-soluble sulfur compounds — the clean, aromatic side of garlic flavor. Held too long or too hot, those compounds oxidize into the sharp-bitter compounds characteristic of browned garlic. 45-60 seconds to faint-gold is the narrow correct window. The vinegar-off-heat step is critical: adding acid to oil at 240°C vaporizes most of the acid aromatics before they land in the sauce, and the vinegar tastes flat. Off-heat at ~150-170°C, the acid integrates smoothly and retains its brightness. This is a universal Spanish sauce principle — vinegar always off-heat.

5 Phase 5 · Service — 90 seconds

1. The fish should have rested 30-45 seconds before the refrito lands on it. No longer — the fish cools fast.
2. Spoon refrito over each loin. Garlic coins visible on top, piquillo ribbons distributed, liquid pooling on the plate for sopping.
3. Tier B finish: a tiny flake of fleur de sel on top of each loin, right before service.
4. Serve with crusty bread on a side plate. No additional sides required — the dish is complete as plated.
5. Drink: very cold Txakoli de Getaria or a crisp Albariño, poured at the moment of plating.
6. Eating convention: fork the flaky fish in big pieces through the refrito, with bread used to sop the remaining oil + vinegar from the plate.

WHY THIS WORKS

Fish loses heat rapidly after plating — a 150 g loin drops from 58°C internal to 48°C in about 3 minutes on a room-temp plate. Warm plates buy another minute; immediate service from plancha-to-table is the only way to guarantee the fish reaches the eater at peak texture. This is why Spanish fish dishes are plated and served instantly, not held in a warming oven.

QUICK REFERENCE

Timing Cheat Sheet

STEP	TIME	CUE
Salt fish + preheat plancha	T- 1 5 m	1 g salt per loin, rest uncovered; plancha on heat
Mise en place	T- 1 0 m	Garlic sliced, piquillos ribboned, vinegar measured
Blister fresh piquillos (Tier B only)	T- 5 m	90 sec per side on plancha, steam-cover, peel, slice
Verify plancha temp + dry fish	T- 1 m	Infrared reads 260-280°C; pat fish bone-dry

STEP	TIME	CUE
Sear skin-side	T+ 0 to T+ 9 0 s	No touching; mahogany crust; clean release
Flip + sear flesh-side	T+ 9 0 s to T+ 2 m 3 0 s	60-75 sec; pearly-translucent center
Fish to warm plates	T+ 2 m 3 0 s	Skin-side-up; rest 30 sec
Refrito · oil + garlic	T+ 3 m	Same plancha, 45-60 sec to faint gold
Refrito · piquillos + off-heat vinegar + parsley	T+ 3 m 4 5 s to T+ 4 m 3 0 s	Warm piquillos 20-30 sec; vinegar OFF-HEAT
Plate + serve	T+ 4 m 3 0 s to T+ 5 m	Spoon refrito over fish; bread on side; serve immediately

TROUBLESHOOTING

Emergency Protocols

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DEEP DIVES

Technique Notes

Universal: Plancha Thermodynamics — Why Thermal Mass Wins

VESSEL SCIENCE · CROSS-PROTEIN · UNIVERSAL

The plancha beats a skillet for direct-sear cooking because of thermal mass — the ability of the metal to store and deliver heat without temperature drop when a cold food hits it. A 10-15 mm cast-iron plancha has roughly 3× the thermal mass of a standard skillet of the same surface area. This matters for any direct-sear: fish, steak, scallops, vegetables. The Leidenfrost effect (vapor-layer non-stick behavior at 230°C+) also only kicks in reliably on a plancha because the surface temperature is maintained. Once you own plancha technique, it applies identically to: seared scallops (60 sec per side), thick-cut ribeye (final crust after reverse-sear), blistered shishito peppers (90 sec, no oil), smash-burgers (if the plancha is over 260°C). Reference: Stovetop and Pan §Vessel Selection; Food Science Core §Heat Transfer.

● **Universal: The Pre-Salt + Pat-Dry Two-Step**

SURFACE PREPARATION · CROSS-PROTEIN · UNIVERSAL

Salting 10-15 minutes ahead then patting dry immediately pre-cook is a universal direct-sear preparation that applies to fish, steak, pork chops, duck breast, chicken breast. The mechanism: salt penetrates the muscle via osmotic diffusion (seasoning throughout), draws moisture to the surface then re-absorbs it (leaving a tacky pellicle), and gently denatures surface proteins (firming for better crust). The pat-dry step removes any residual wetness that would steam instead of sear. Combined with a hot plancha, this two-step produces the ideal surface condition for Maillard-driven crust development. Master this and the sear-crust question is mostly solved.

Reference: Protein Encyclopedia §Dry Brining; Cross-Technique Workflows §Pre-Sear Prep.

● **Universal: The Refrito — A Sauce Made in the Last 60 Seconds**

SAUCE FOUNDATION · SPANISH UNIVERSAL

The refrito is one of the most leveraged sauce techniques in Spanish cooking. Template: (1) hot olive oil, (2) thin-sliced garlic browned to faint gold, (3) optional vegetable inclusion (piquillos, roasted peppers, capers, pine nuts), (4) off-heat acid (sherry vinegar, lemon, pickled-pepper liquor), (5) fresh herb. Built in the same pan after a sear, in under 90 seconds, at zero extra effort. Applies to: seared fish (this recipe), seared steaks, grilled vegetables, roasted chicken, bean stews, even pasta. The off-heat acid rule is the key — vinegar on a 240°C pan vaporizes most of its aromatics; off-heat at 150-170°C it retains brightness. Master this one template and you never again wonder 'what sauce goes with this?' Reference: Spanish Foundations §Refrito; Sauces and Condiments §Pan Sauces.

● **Universal: Fish Rest Before Sauce**

REST PHYSICS · CROSS-PROTEIN

Thick fish loins (25+ mm) continue cooking for 30-45 seconds after leaving the plancha — captured heat in the crust radiates into the center. Internal temperature rises 3-5°C during rest. This means you should pull fish at 55°C internal (pearly-translucent just short of opaque) to land at 58-60°C after rest. The parallel technique insight: resting BEFORE applying the sauce lets the cook finish cleanly, and the sauce lands on a stabilized surface rather than a still-changing one. Sauces applied on still-cooking fish bind less cleanly. Apply refrito, vinaigrettes, beurre blanc, or any finishing sauce AFTER a 30-second rest. Reference: Protein Encyclopedia §Fish Cooking Windows; Cross-Technique Workflows §Rest Timing.

● **Basque Tradition: Vinegar Off-Heat, Always**

SAUCE CHEMISTRY · SPANISH UNIVERSAL

Every Spanish cook knows: vinegar goes in the pan OFF-HEAT. The science: acid aromatics (acetic acid, esters, alcohols) are volatile at moderate temperatures (above ~120°C, most of them flash off within seconds). Adding vinegar to a 240°C pan wastes the vinegar — you get the sour backbone without the bright aromatic top-notes. Pull the pan from heat, let it cool briefly (to ~150-170°C, which is the sweet spot for acid integration), THEN add the vinegar. The finished sauce tastes bright, balanced, layered. This principle extends to: sherry vinegar in refritos, lemon juice in salsa verde finishes, red-wine vinegar in escabeche liquids, and citrus in any warm sauce. Universal rule. Reference: Sauces and Condiments §Acid Chemistry; Spanish Foundations §Off-Heat Finishing.

● No Limits: Fresh Piquillos on the Plancha

INGREDIENT QUALITY · TECHNIQUE EXTENSION

Fresh piquillos blistered directly on the plancha 5 minutes before the fish is the largest single flavor upgrade from Tier A to Tier B of this dish. The plancha-char produces a different, deeper flavor profile than any oven roast or jarred pepper: higher Maillard development on the skin, true smoke-adjacent notes from the direct-metal contact, and a flesh that stays slightly firmer with more structural integrity. Pair fresh piquillos with Basque-coast merluza and the dish moves from restaurant-grade to genuinely regional-authentic. Source: Spanish specialty import (Nov-Dec only in Miami); alternative is Nortindal fresh-jarred piquillos from La Tienda (year-round, premium-tier, closest to fresh). Reference: Vegetable Encyclopedia §Piquillos; Sourcing §Spanish Pantry.

● No Limits: Kamado as Plancha Platform

VESSEL EXTENSION · CROSS-TECHNIQUE

For kamado owners (Pablo ✓), pre-heating the plancha directly on the kamado grate at 300°C beats the indoor burner version. Three reasons: (a) the kamado's radiant heat environment surrounds the plancha with hot air in addition to the grate contact, so the plancha reaches temperature faster and holds it more uniformly; (b) trace wood-smoke (even from lump charcoal alone, no chunks) penetrates the fish during the sear — subtle but real depth; (c) the kamado's higher ambient temperature means the plancha cools less during the fish cook, producing a more uniform crust. For a Saturday-night version of this dish, the kamado-plancha setup is the dinner-party-grade move. Indoor plancha is completely acceptable for weeknight. Reference: Kamado Technique §Plancha Setup; Cross-Technique Workflows §Kamado Extensions.

What to Drink

Wine — The Basque Pour

Tier A: Martín Códax Albariño (grocery, Rías Baixas) · Tier B: Txomin Etxaniz Txakoli de Getaria — the regional match, naturally petillant

Direct-seared fish with an acidic-garlic-piquillo finish wants a bright, high-acid, slightly saline white. Albariño gives the citrus-saline profile; Txakoli adds petillance that cuts the olive-oil-heavy refrito. Both are under 12% ABV, crisp, low-intervention — the correct register for this dish. Avoid oaky whites, heavy reds, or anything over 13.5% ABV.

Wine — The Contrarian

Chilled young Mencía (Bierzo) or a very cold rosé (Navarra, Cigales)

A chilled light red or serious rosé works surprisingly well with the refrito's red-pepper content + sherry vinegar. The rosé option is the insider pick — Navarra rosé with a Navarra-DO piquillo dish is a regional echo. Serve cold (10-12°C).

Bread — The Refrito Vehicle

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

The refrito's oil-vinegar-garlic pool on the plate is the best part of the meal. Good bread with an open crumb sops everything up. Slice thick, serve on a separate small plate.

Side — Optional, Spare

The dish is complete alone. If adding: very simple green salad (mixed greens + sherry vinegar + EVOO + salt), OR a small plate of blistered padrón peppers

The fish + refrito is a full plate on its own. Any side should be restrained — a palate-reset role, not a flavor competitor. Never tomato-based sides (the piquillo handles the red note), never creamy sides (nothing in the main is creamy), never starch-heavy (bread handles the starch).

Dessert — The Contrast

Olive-oil ice cream (Batch 6 · this workspace) with Maldon OR a simple flan de huevo

After the bright refrito, the palate wants something rich and cool. Olive-oil ice cream echoes the oil theme (same family, opposite temperature). Flan's egg-cream-caramel profile contrasts without overwhelming. Skip chocolate (too heavy after refrito), skip citrus sorbet (redundant acid).

Starter — The Build-Up

Cold-cured opener: mussels escabeche (Batch 5) OR bonito escabeche suave (Batch 5)

Escabeche + plancha-seared fish + refrito = all three stages of Basque coastal cooking in one meal (preserved → direct-heat → condiment-finished). A natural Basque dinner-party arc with zero redundancy.

CONTEXT

Menu Ideas

Saturday Dinner Party · 6-8 guests · Basque Coastal Arc

1. Gildas (arrival). 2. Mejillones en escabeche (Batch 5 tapa). 3. Merluza a la plancha con refrito (this recipe, centerpiece). 4. Burnt Basque cheesecake (Batch 6). Full Basque coast from preservation to direct-heat to dessert. Scale the fish portion count: 6 guests = 6 × 180 g loins (~1 kg fish), 8 guests = 8 × 150 g.

Technique Dinner · 4 guests · Batch 8 Triad

The three stovetop-pillar recipes as a single meal. 1. Bacalao al pil-pil (emulsion). 2. Chipirones en su tinta (sofrito-reduction, served as small plates). 3. Merluza a la plancha (direct-sear, as main). A full pedagogy-dinner teaching three fundamentally different stovetop techniques in sequence.

Weeknight · 2-4 guests · 30 minutes

This dish IS a weeknight capable meal — 30 minutes door-to-door. Serve with bread + a glass of Albariño. No appetizer, no dessert, just the fish and the refrito. Tuesday-night elevated cooking.

Kamado Outdoor Dinner · 6 guests

Set up plancha on the kamado at 300°C (see ● card). Do the entire dish outdoors. Serve with kamado-charred padrón peppers as a starter, and finish with crema catalana (Batch 6). The outdoor-plancha version adds subtle smoke and is the summertime-Miami version of this dish.

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.

