



Taste

MALLORCA

KARL NEWEDEL/MAXX IMAGES

Hot on the Inside

Ensaïmada is simple cake, the author thinks, and then he enters a Mallorcan kitchen

BY JAMES LITSTON

> I DO NOT BELONG HERE. NOT IN THIS APRON. NOT IN THIS KITCHEN. PROBABLY NOT even in this town. But here I am, a guy who has barely mastered toast, kneading dough in one of Mallorca's most renowned bakeries. "Stretch it out thin." It's the voice of the godfather of ensaïmada, Miquel Pujol. My hands, buried in this Spanish gold, can feel his gaze. "Don't break it," he warns as I pull the dough until ... it splits. Miquel sighs. I feel like the teenager who wrecked Dad's car.

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Pastry chefs say Mallorca's climate is perfect for the two-day ensaïmada recipe. Find a quicker way to make it at islands.com/recipes.

It's pure luck that I've found Miquel (the island's most respected baker), and a miracle he's letting me try his ensaïmada secrets in this bakery, Ca'n Miquel (the oven dates back to 1565). Miquel himself has been making these Mallorcan delicacies for 47 years. If anyone can teach me about these curious cakes, it's he.

Ensaïmadas are as emblematic of Mallorca as Key lime pie is of Key West. I'd first tried them at a bakery in Palma, the island capital. An attractive display of the sugar-dusted spirals — some plain, others stuffed with pumpkin or custard — had caught my attention. "Try one," said the shopkeeper. "They've been made here for hundreds of years."

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Hundreds of years got me thinking: Can I find the most esteemed ensaïmadas? Or better yet, make one myself?

I set up a pastry date with Pilar Carbonell of Palma's restaurant association. We meet at a cafe, where we each tear into an ensaïmada. It's crispy on top, moist on the bottom. Pilar alludes to the rivalry among Mallorca's bakeries.

"Which one is the best?" I ask.

"It's impossible to say," she says, "but Alaró has more bakeries than anywhere else. Perhaps you'll find answers there."

I take the train to Alaró. This pretty village has more than a dozen small, family-owned bakeries, most long past their centenaries. I step into one and find owner Pedro making tomorrow's batch of ensaïmadas. I ask him what makes Alaró so ideal for the pastry.

"Our climate," Pedro says. "But passion too. Ensaïmadas must be made with love."

He also says that, like French champagne, ensaïmadas are made under

appellation. Only by meeting strict criteria are they considered true ensaïmada de Mallorca. I ask if he might be deemed "the guy" when it comes to this Spanish

version of a high-end funnel cake.

"No, no," he says. "You go back to Palma. See Miquel Pujol. He knows everything about the pastry."

And so, back in Palma, I find Ca'n Miquel. The undisputed expert himself invites me into his bakery. He hands me an apron and begins to instruct, ignoring that I'm making a mockery of his art. He's patient as I roll the dough into a long "snake," coil it, fix it a few times and slide it into the ancient oven (it doesn't even have temperature controls).

Fifteen minutes later, I open the oven. The top of the pastry is golden, the bottom shiny and moist. It's flawless, even if the rookie who made it wasn't. Miquel wraps it in a colorful box and leads me to the door. Everyone knows, as I walk down the street, what's inside the tell-tale box. If they only knew the story of how it got there. ■ ISLANDS.COM/taste



BEST ISLAND CAKES

Mochi in Japan

Glutinous (sticky) rice is pounded into a paste to provide the main ingredient for these sweet treats. They're everywhere at New Year.

Vinarterta in Iceland

Dark prune jam is banded into light-colored shortbread to ensure that this traditional Icelandic layer cake has equal amounts of color and kick.


Bibingka in the Philippines

Ground rice, coconut milk and sugar are baked together in a special clay pot to make this Filipino favorite. It's often served with sliced, salted egg.

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