

The Rice Tree Chronicles

A Lingering Trace of Grilled Sardines

El Rastro is Madrid's 400 year old flea market which on Sunday mornings is the place to be. Even during the pandemic, the calles (streets) are crowded with local shoppers as well as a sprinkling of tourists looking for anything and everything under the sun.

Even though it is expected to reach 104 F today, shoppers have flocked to the narrow cobblestone calles starting from the Tirsu de Molina Metro stop which will take you to the heart of el Rastro. Once there, you pass the commercial stalls of cheap jewelry and fake sunglasses, you will find yourself along the streets that radiate from Calle Ribera de Curtidores. For the true affectionados of flea markets, the hunt is the deal because there are real treasures and most at decent prices.

Take hand made pastilleros (silver pill boxes) which if found in antique shops would generally run about 70€. They are often one of a kind and not machine stamped, but hand made by craftsmen. They are small and an easy to carry regalito (small gift) for someone at home. El Rastro was generous today and I found that prices could be made even more attractive with a little haggling.

A vendor selling assorted odds and ends both used, old and discarded attracted my attention.

“Buenos Dias Señor , these are hand crafted pastilleros. I could tell you are interested. You look at it a long time...I think you like it, no?”

“Yes, you are right...I like this one.”

“They are made of silver...look at this. How can you not buy one? It's only 30€. That's a very good price.”

We each know the routine. The original asking price is high and is never taken. If the seller doesn't offer a lower price, you can make an offer. Stopping short after his first offer would be premature. I make an offer.

“I do not want to offend you, but would you take 20€ for this one?”

“This is real silver, Señor. Look, feel the weight.”

“Yes, but it looks like it wasn't made in Spain.”

“Yes, you are right. This one was made in Italy.”

“I only want it if it was made in Spain.”

“Va-le, Va-le (Okay, okay)...here, this is a good one.”

Toying it a bit, I said, “Yes, I like it, but the cover doesn’t snap tightly.”

“Va-le, Va-le. Señor, maybe a little plier will do the trick.”

“Yes, I think so. But 30€ is too much.”

“Would you take 20?”

This time, he didn’t hesitate and said, “If you buy 2, I’ll sell it for 20 each and I’ll even throw in a free plastic bag.”

“Now that is an offer I can not refuse.”

That little joke, brought a smile to both of us. The price was at least a third of those found in shops.

I am sorry Sr. Antonio of the Salamanca Antique shop that I did not buy from your fine collection of pastilleros, but 70€ is well, 70€. Besides, while I enjoy antique shops, it is the lure of the hunt that drives me to look around the open market of el Rastro. It holds many surprises for the intrepid hunter.

But the hunter can only stalk his prey for so many hours before needing to refuel and what best way than to head to Bar Santurce, home of salty grilled sardinas (sardines) and some bread. Nothing sugary here and it is a legitimate delicacy. Nothing goes to waste...heads, fins and tails; You eat everything.

“You know, we in Spain love our sardinas,” said my waiter.

“Portugal thinks their Sardinas are better, but who can resist Spanish sardinas. We have style. First you eat the head, then you take a slice of bread, then you eat the tail and another slice of bread. Then as they are sardinas, you start all over again. Eat the head, then take the bread, oh, a cold beer to wash it all down, then eat the tail and then take another slice of bread.”

“You will not want for anything else, Señor.”

Yes, he was right. I ate it all, from head to tail and the only thing left was a rather lingering trace of grilled sardines on my breath the rest of the day.

El Rastro

Madrid, Spain

Ricetreechronicles.com