

Mussels à la Chalaca

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Ports. Life is different in ports, alien places in which “belonging” lacks meaning. Take Callao, for example, north of Lima. I have eaten and drunk strange things there. Some I just don’t remember, but others have stuck in my mind and broadened my gastronomic horizons. Chalaca-style mussels, for example: a dish that not only defines the seeming simplicity of Peruvian cuisine, but that also captures the cuisine of ports, of boats—dishes made quickly between catches. Put the mussels on to cook, chop stuff over the top, add lime and there you go.

You understand, of course, that “there you go” is just an expression. As with any great recipe, being able to make Chalaca-style mussels well suggests that you’ve either experienced an epiphany or, through lots of practice, discovered the secret, uncovered some of the mystery. I can tell you, as a favor, that after years of trial and error, I have learned that the cooking time for mussels doesn’t have to be perfect—just precise. And that is all I can say.

I have also learned—once again, as with any great dish—that more than one style of wine will do. I’ve often gone for a logical choice, like a citrusy sauvignon blanc (perhaps Casas del Bosque Gran Reserva) or a perfumed and oily ttorrontés (the 2008 from Piatelli). Each reveals different details of the mussels cooked in water and then “cooked” again in lime. And why not try them with the saline flavor of a Tamaya Chardonnay from Limarí?

But more often than not, I go for a red wine. How many Chalaca-style mussels have I eaten with sips of the delicate L’Uva Arbosiana from Domaine de la Tournelle, a mild pousard that smells like blood sausage mixed with raspberries. Yes, it really tastes like that—a great red from France’s Jura. I’ve eaten these mussels with La Gautrie from the great Christian Venier in Touraine—more raspberries with tinges of charcuterie. Both wines speak the same language: reds that feel like whites, but whites made by the village butcher.



Casas del Bosque Gran Reserva Sauvignon Blanc
(\$16, Best Valley Wines, Hingham, MA)

Piatelli Vineyards 2008 Cafayate Valley Premium Ttorrontés
(\$15, Vincopia, Minneapolis, MN)

Tamaya 2007 Limarí Valley Winemaker’s Selection Tamaya Norte Block 13 Chardonnay
(\$19, National Refrescos Import Co., Florham Park, NJ)

Domaine de la Tournelle 2007 Jura L’Uva Arbosiana
(\$22, Joli Vin Imports, Berkeley, CA)

Christian Venier 2008 Touraine La Gautrie
(\$14, Savio Soares Selections, NY)

