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THE STEAK THAT GOT AWAY

Lifestyle and Entertaining Editor Mike DeSimone waxes poetic on the quest to rediscover the perfect Spanish chuletón.

Six years ago, my partner Jeff and I visited Rioja. It was the first time we had visited purely in pursuit of fun.

While dining at Restaurante Alameda, a high-end but simple restaurant in the tiny village of Fuenmayor, we feasted on a perfectly grilled *chuletón de buey*, an oversized rib steak seasoned with only salt and pepper. We caught the attention of a local winemaker, mainly because Americans don't usually vacation in Rioja during the dead of winter.

It was the best steak I had ever eaten—and I eat a lot of steak. As we began to tuck in, the winemaker came to our table and asked if we wanted to visit his winery. We tried to politely decline so we could continue to savor the delectable steak alongside a bottle of *crianza*, but soon he was back at our table and told us his car was outside.

We did the polite thing and piled into his German SUV, not finishing our chuletón.

We drove through the snow-covered countryside to Samaniego, a village that hides its secrets behind thick stone walls, even more so when winter sets in. What looked like an ancient fortress actually housed the modern Remírez de Ganuza winery.

We returned to Restaurante Alameda this past spring, hoping its chuletón was as good on the plate as it was in memory.

There, we enjoyed a private tour and tasting led by Fernando Remírez de Ganuza. The wines were outstanding, and the experience of drinking them directly from the barrel and enjoying a lineup of vintages is one that will never grow old as far as we're concerned.

However, since that day, I have bitterly lamented the one that got away—the steak I never finished. Every steak I have eaten since, in New York City, Buenos Aires or anywhere else, has been compared to that flame-kissed piece of meat. Not a single one has tasted as good.

We returned to Restaurante Alameda this past spring, hoping its chuletón was as good on the plate as it was in memory.

When we asked our waiter to recommend a white wine to start, he suggested Remírez de Ganuza Blanco. If this weren't a big enough coincidence, as soon as we poured the first glass, Fernando himself walked in with a group of friends. He spotted us at our table and we struck up a conversation as if six years hadn't passed.

When we told him we were having chuletón, he insisted on opening a bottle of his 2007 Reserva to go along with it. It was the perfect pairing for the perfect steak. 🍷