



# Spiced up with science

*Daniel Negreira Bercero of El Toro uses molecular gastronomy techniques to add a twist to contemporary Spanish cuisine*

BY CATHERINE SHU  
STAFF REPORTER

**D**aniel Negreira Bercero, the owner of El Toro in the Xinyi District, never intended to become a professional chef. The Spaniard helped his grandmother in the kitchen as a young boy, but had his heart set on a degree in ocean science.

When it came time to take his university entrance exams, however, he missed the cutoff by one-tenth of a point. One of his friends comforted him by suggesting a six-month cooking program. Bercero decided he had nothing to lose — and ended up studying the culinary arts for five years.

"Cooking is not a job for me," says Bercero. "It's a passion. I just cook for the sake of cooking. When I arrive every day in the morning, I'm happy about coming to work."

Bercero may not have gone on an ocean voyage, but his culinary journey has taken him from Spain to Taiwan — and he still gets to play with science on a daily basis. Since opening in April 2008, El Toro has been one of the first — if not the first — restaurants in Taipei to offer food made using molecular gastronomy techniques.

Molecular gastronomy involves breaking food down into its individual components and then recombining them to make different flavors and textures. El Toro's take on Irish coffee captures the concept: it features paper-thin ravioli made from coffee and flavored with liquor, stuffed with fresh whipped cream and topped with "caviar" made out of whiskey. Chefs also use equipment more often found in laboratories, including machines that can heat to very precise temperatures or centrifugal separators, which are used to remove solids from liquids.

"A chef in Europe is now considered a science master. What we are doing is chemistry, so the equipment we use is very advanced. The machines, the products, the technique is so concrete," says Bercero.

Bercero decided to leave Spain for Taiwan after his Taiwanese wife became pregnant. While looking for job opportunities, Bercero, who had just left a job as executive chef at a five-star luxury hotel in Spain, scouted out the dining scene in Taipei and decided he had something new to offer.

"We checked the market and I saw that for the things I used to do, the hole in the market here is so big, so I thought, 'why not?'" says Bercero.

To introduce Taiwanese diners to his twist on Spanish food, Bercero started with basic dishes before gradually introducing more complicated items to the menu. El Toro's printed menu still lists modern Spanish dishes instead of food that utilizes molecular gastronomy; Bercero prefers that diners who want to sample the cooking method talk to him so he can customize courses based on what ingredients (many of which El Toro imports from Spain or France) are available. He focuses on tapas, or small dishes, to acquaint diners with Spanish cuisine and his cooking techniques.

"They are curious, so instead of serving them a huge portion of meat, I think the best way to satisfy that is to serve them a little bit of different things from different regions in order to introduce more variety," says Bercero.

Bercero got his first taste of molecular gastronomy when he studied with Spanish chef Alvaro Sola. His technique was refined by stints at restaurants renowned for their innovations in the genre, including the three Michelin-starred El Bulli, currently *Restaurant* magazine's best restaurant in the world.

One of the hallmarks of molecular gastronomy is presenting dishes in a way that allows diners to complete the final preparations themselves, such as drizzling sauce over a main course or dropping ingredients into a bowl of soup. Bercero says this helps diners appreciate new cooking twists that might at first seem a bit weird. He cites as an example one of his favorites among his own creations, crab with white chocolate sauce, which doesn't use molecular gastronomy techniques but still has diners scratching their heads.

"It sounds so strange, so I serve them separately and let people first try the crab meat, and then add the white chocolate sauce so they will be able to understand the change. You can see how you can shift the taste of a traditional recipe with only one ingredient," says Bercero.

Bercero is also willing to make compromises for diners unfamiliar with the results of molecular gastronomy techniques. He once made a dish with mussels that used water from the inside of the shell to create foam with large bubbles around the mussel meat.

"I served it to a good friend of mine who is a customer and he told me that the look was like spit. After thinking about it, I thought, 'yeah, it is,'" says Bercero good-humoredly. "Even though the taste was so good and the texture was so nice, we stopped selling it because we were like, 'yeah, you are right.'"

Despite making a few adjustments to his menu to suit the market, Bercero says he appreciates the adventurousness nature of his Taiwanese customers, who rarely refuse to try anything he offers them.

"No one says 'no, I'd prefer not to try this.' They all say, 'I'll try that,'" says Bercero.

Living and working in Taiwan has also inspired Bercero to lend an Eastern twist to his new creations, including fresh takes on tea eggs, beef noodles and other Taiwanese favorites. Some of these recipes will be included in an upcoming book that **Bercero is working on**.

Despite his obvious enthusiasm for the innovations made possible by molecular gastronomy, Bercero stresses that the taste of a dish ultimately trumps its novelty.

"For me molecular gastronomy is just the garnish. It's used to join the main ingredients. It's not just about the foam or the bubbles.

Its purpose is to bring a twist to a classical recipe and to introduce a new shape, a new texture or a new way to eat," says Bercero.



Above: Daniel Negreira Bercero prepares a dish at a cooking demonstration. PHOTOS COURTESY OF EL TORO

## For your information:

### El Toro

Dishes made using molecular gastronomy techniques are left off of El Toro's printed menu because they vary according to the availability of ingredients. Dishes offered at the restaurant change on a weekly basis; Bercero asks that diners call ahead if they want a specific item.

**Address:** 508-2, Zhongxiao E Rd Sec 5, Taipei City (台北市忠孝東路五段508-2號)

**Telephone:** (02) 2726-4902

**Open:** Noon to 2pm and 6pm to 9pm (closed on Monday nights)

**Details:** Credit cards accepted

**On the Net:** [www.wretch.cc/blog/eltorotw](http://www.wretch.cc/blog/eltorotw) for updates on El Toro's menu and Bercero's latest projects



El Toro's chefs use molecular gastronomy techniques to introduce new textures and flavors to familiar dishes.

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