

Crossing Spain on an ancient pilgrimage route

By GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO
Associated Press

EL ACEBO, Spain — About three hours into the day's hike, having just cleared the highest mountain point of the Camino de Santiago, I looked down into the valleys pockmarked with yellow and purple spring blossoms, and froze.

Surely that faraway black office tower, seemingly no bigger than the trail stones making my scarred feet scream, could not be where I was planning to arrive that same night. Guidebook check: It was.

Dejected, I struggled downhill into the next hamlet, El Acebo. I was barely past the first of its slate-roofed stone houses when my name — "Giovanna!" — rang out in the lilting Rio de Janeiro accent of a fellow pilgrim.

And that was my camino experience: 31 days of physical endurance through awe-inspiring landscapes, of contemplation punctuated by deep connections. It was a combination that reset my Type-A internal clock so that stopping to pick a poppy or a bunch of grapes, or to compare blisters with hikers from Seoul or Hawaii or Naples, became not only permissible but also imperative.

The "camino frances," or French way, is a 500-mile medieval pilgrimage route that crosses Spain from the Pyrenees at the French border to the purported burial site of the Apostle James in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Of several historical routes to Santiago, this is the most popular.

It's no wilderness hike: The longest stretch without crossing a village is 10 miles through farmland. How much solitude you get depends on when and where you start.

In 2015, 172,243 people walked or rode bikes or horses along the camino



This May 2014 photo shows pilgrims crossing the medieval bridge at Puente la Reina, on Spain's Camino de Santiago. The 500-mile ancient pilgrimage route takes a growing number of pilgrims through many art-filled towns.



This May 2014 photo shows pilgrims from Brazil, New Zealand and the U.S. taking pictures of a shell-shaped Camino de Santiago route marker about a day's walk from the medieval town of Estella.

frances, according to the Pilgrims' Office in Santiago. More than 67,000 started in Sarria, about four days from Santiago, the end of the trail. The busiest months are May-September, with more than 20,000 pilgrims each,

dropping to fewer than 900 in January. Over the last decade, yearly numbers have mostly risen, but 2010 saw the most pilgrims, likely because it was a Catholic "holy year."

I walked the entire camino twice, in May-June 2014 and

September-October 2015, averaging 16 miles daily, often for hours without seeing another pilgrim — though I got stuck for a day among hundreds of yellow-hatted German confirmation students.

With the universal greeting of "buen camino," I met bikers from Taiwan, retirees from New Zealand, school groups from Minnesota and southern Spain, couples who started at 4 a.m. to ensure solitude and singles who got a lively party scene going most nights. The only kind of person I did not meet was one not deeply affected by the experience.

Not everyone can devote four to five weeks to go the full way, however. Here are my favorite four-day stretches:

RONCESVALLES TO ESTELLA

After the first pilgrims' blessing in half-a-dozen languages at the ancient stone church in Roncesvalles,

If You Go...

GETTING THERE: From Madrid, take trains to any larger city along the camino; buses and taxis connect smaller ones.

LODGING: Buy a "credencial," which gets you in most public hostels. The credencial, stamped and dated along the way, earns you the compostella when you turn it in at Santiago's Pilgrims' Office. Hostels charge about 5 euros for a bed, first come, first served. Most towns also have hotels; private rooms with bathrooms average 30 euros. Services transport backpacks for 3-5 euros daily. Most restaurants have three-course pilgrims' menus with wine, 8-10 euros.

TIPS: Train before you go; it's strenuous. The camino frances is so well-marked with yellow arrows and its shell symbol that you never need maps. Take precautions, especially for female solo travelers. An American woman walking the trail was murdered in 2015.

a two-day downhill trek through mountain woods where Charlemagne fought and Hemingway fished takes you to Pamplona, one of four major cities the camino crosses. Refueled with Basque txistorra sausage, you're off through rolling hills carpeted in wheat and vines, topped by castles and crisscrossed by Roman roads and medieval bridges until Estella, whose fortress-like medieval churches and palaces huddle in a gorge.

BURGOS TO CARRION DE LOS CONDES

Burgos is the kind of city where, after plodding for half a day through suburbs, you still take 1.5-hour walking tours of the 13th-century cathedral or the main monastery, then limber along the river promenade to restaurants specializing in lechazo, roasted lamb. Beyond is the emptiness of the meseta (plains). Its shades of green and gold are interrupted by jewels like Castrojeriz, Fromista and Carrion de los Condes, with intact Romanesque churches.

ASTORGA TO O CEBREIRO

The camino's longest climbs start just past the Gaudi-designed bishop's

palace and buzzing main square of Astorga. Through fragrant brush and below snow-covered peaks, you clamber up hamlets like Rabanal, with its mesmerizing chanted vesper prayers, then down into vineyards around pretty, riverside Villafraanca del Bierzo. From there it's uphill to O Cebreiro's thatched-roof stone houses and Galicia's moss-draped, cow-clogged paths.

After two more bucolic days, the last 62 miles are crowded with the "clean-shod," as we pilgrims hobbling on muddy boots called those who start here.

That takes nothing away, however, from arriving in Santiago, with its incense-filled cathedral covered with stern medieval statues and swirling Baroque cherubs standing tall among homes, monasteries and student pubs.

Before going back to email and schedules, there's a stairway to climb to embrace the statue of St. James at the cathedral's altar, and one last chance to hug fellow pilgrims.

Perhaps you exchange Facebook connections, perhaps nothing but a whispered "good luck," because you both know that the real tough "camino" starts now.

Cooking on deadline: herbed salmon over a green, herby salad

By KATIE WORKMAN
Associated Press

It's amazing how the weather dictates what we want to eat, isn't it? Even if you're not consciously trying to cook with the seasons, you want braises and stews when it's cool out, and food that is lighter and brighter when it's warm.

This decidedly warm-weather salmon is bathed in an olive-oil-and-herb mixture and cooked at a fairly low temperature to let it cook through without browning, and give it a very tender texture. Then it's perched on a pile of spring-y greens — you can use any baby lettuce mix you like, or create your own. Mix that with a pile of additional fresh herbs, toss with some fresh lemon juice and good olive oil, and the whole thing tastes like late spring has willed itself into a meal.

Would I eat this in November? Sure. But I am craving it now.

Sometimes I like salmon to be browned and crispy, but in this case I was going for a more delicate, poached texture so the herbs would retain their color, and the whole dish would be soft and gentle. Summer is peak season for wild Alaskan salmon, which has a more pronounced salmon flavor than farm-raised; I used Coho salmon here, with a deep, rich, reddish-orange color. Grab it when you see it.

You could cook the salmon ahead of time and let it cool to room temperature. Then dress and assemble the salads just before cooking, which makes this a great recipe for a relaxed summer lunch.

Katie Workman has written two cookbooks focused on easy, family-friendly cooking. "Dinner Solved!" and "The Mom 100 Cookbook." She blogs at <http://www.themom100.com/about-katie-workman/>



Salmon smothered in an herb marinade served over a tender green salad.

HERBED SALMON SALAD

Start to finish: about 35 minutes

Servings: 4

Salmon

- 4 6-ounce salmon fillets
- 5 scallions, white and light green parts only, cut into 1-inch pieces

- 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil
- 3 tablespoons fresh dill sprigs
- 1/4 cup fresh parsley leaves
- 1/2 teaspoon coarse or kosher salt, plus more to taste

Salad

- 2 tablespoons fresh lemon juice
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- Kosher salt to taste
- 6 cups baby salad mix, or a mix of purslane, butter lettuce, Boston lettuce and mache, for example
- 1/2 cup whole fresh parsley leaves
- 1/4 cup sliced chives

Preheat the oven to 300 degrees Fahrenheit. Spray a baking pan with nonstick spray, or lightly oil the pan. Place the salmon fillets in the pan.

In a small food processor, blend together the scallions, 1/3 cup olive oil, dill, 1/4 cup parsley leaves, and 1/2 teaspoon salt. Spread the mixture over the salmon, and bake for about 16 to 18 minutes, just until the salmon is barely cooked through and flakes easily. Let cool for a few minutes in the pan, until just warm.

For the salad, in a large bowl, mix together the lemon juice and 2 tablespoons of olive oil, plus salt to taste. Add the lettuces, 1/2 cup parsley leaves and chives, and toss. Divide the salad between 4 plates and place a piece of salmon atop each pile of greens, removing the skin if you wish. Serve while the salmon is warm, or at room temperature if you prefer.

Nutrition information per serving: 483 calories; 292 calories from fat; 33 g fat (5 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 106 mg cholesterol; 384 mg sodium; 6 g carbohydrate; 3 g fiber; 1 g sugar; 39 g protein.

Kale chips, move over

Try making baked BBQ zucchini chips

By MELISSA D'ARABIAN
Associated Press

It all started with the kale chip. I fell in love the texture of the thick, green leaf made thin and so delicately crisp by baking that it felt almost flaky, with just enough thickness to impart a satisfying little crunch before nearly dissolving into salty-grassy goodness on the tongue.

And I wasn't alone: health-conscious eaters crowned the kale chip its unofficial sweetheart and suddenly they were available not just in health-food stores, but in mini-marts, airports and gas stations.

Which led me to ask: What else might we chip-up in a dehydrator or oven? And what other flavors might we add? My daughter's all-time favorite potato chip is BBQ flavored, so that became my mission — a baked veggie chip that mimicked the BBQ potato chip flavor, with all natural ingredients.

In mixing up various spice rubs, we were surprised by how much brown sugar we needed to emulate that characteristic flavor. And then we struck gold: what if we used a naturally sweet vegetable, which would allow us to reduce the added sugar down to nearly nothing?

And thus, the baked BBQ zucchini chip was born! It was a huge hit with the BBQ-potato-chip-lovers in my house. And here's the really good news: You don't need any special equipment to make this happen.

If you have a dehydrator, great — you probably already have a strong



Baked BBQ zucchini chips.

veggie-chip game going. For the rest of us: your oven on low will work great for this recipe. And, you don't even need a mandoline for slicing. I have one, but almost never use it ever since nipping off a bit of finger years ago on an episode of "Ten Dollar Dinners."

Use a knife and slice relatively thin, and that's fine. In fact, the slices are better and sturdier when they aren't too thin anyway. I do recommend using a baking rack, only because the chips will dry out faster and more evenly. But, even this is optional equipment — just use parchment paper on a tray, cook a little longer, and flip the chips halfway through cook time if you don't have a rack. Kale chip, move over.

Food Network star Melissa d'Arabian is an expert on healthy eating on a budget. She is the author of the cookbook "Supermarket Healthy."

BAKED BBQ-FLAVORED ZUCCHINI CHIPS

Start to Finish: 2 1/2 hours

Yield: serves 4

- 2 teaspoons smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon chipotle or ancho chili powder (or plain chili powder)
- 1 teaspoon brown sugar
- 1 teaspoon kosher salt
- 2 large zucchini
- 2 teaspoons olive oil

Preheat oven to 200 degrees. In a small bowl, stir together the smoked paprika, chili powder, brown sugar and salt and set aside. Slice the zucchini thinly, about 1/16th of an inch, but not paper thin.

You can use a mandolin, but slicing by hand is just fine. Don't worry if you can't quite get the slices super thin. Place the zucchini slices in a large bowl, and blot with a paper

towel to remove excess moisture.

Drizzle with olive oil and toss the slices to coat. Sprinkle with the spice mixture and toss to coat. Line two or three large baking sheets with baking racks, and spray briefly with nonstick spray. Spread out zucchini slices and bake until dry and slightly crispy, about two hours. Allow to cool on rack before removing. Best eaten the same day.

NOTE: Instead of a baking rack, you may instead line the baking trays with parchment paper, in which case flip the chips about one hour into cooking, and note that chips will require about 30 extra minutes of bake time.

Nutrition information per serving: 54 calories; 24 calories from fat; 3g fat (0 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 0 mg cholesterol; 513mg sodium; 7g carbohydrate; 2g fiber; 5g sugar; 2g protein.