

The Mouth

By Nanci Tangeman

The hills have eyes

Restaurant Pulpo
 Willemsparkweg 87, 676 0700
 Mon-Sat 17.30-00.00
 Cash, PIN, credit cards

I used to be a cocky linguist. Years ago, on my first visit to Portugal, I confidently translated museum placards and menus using my eight years of beginner's Spanish. I figured, how different could the two languages be? It wasn't until Partner-in-all-things-untranslatable and I stepped into a cafe in the hills near Sintra that I learned my linguistic lesson.

That's when I met my first *polvo*. Not a *pollo*, or chicken, as I expected when I ordered, but an eight-legged, bulging-headed, glaring octopus sprawled on a plate, waiting for my tentative knife and fork. It wouldn't have been so bad—my little friend was extremely tasty—except that the entire population of the village seemed to be in the cafe to witness my mistaken translation.

Pollo. Polvo. What a difference one letter (not to mention centuries of cultural evolution) can make. Change two more letters and your linguistic detour takes you right inside the door of tonight's restaurant.

Pulpo is the Spanish word for octopus and at Restaurant Pulpo it is always on offer. This evening my little friend is nestled in a starter of linguini, mussels and stewed fennel (€9). He is sliced, peppered and, ironically, tastes like chicken—the gentlest, most delicate chicken on earth.



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mash of green peas and mint. But Pulpo's decor is more 'lighting showroom circa 1972'. Chrome fixtures line the walls; decoration is minimal. No curious villagers stare at us as we decipher the tastes: a touch of cinnamon in the couscous, orange blossom essence in the coconut panacotta and a flavour mystery that takes some time to solve in the pineapple and mango dice with pistachio ice cream (no spoilers here!).

The flats of Amsterdam may be far from the hills of Portugal, but every time we visit Restaurant Pulpo, I think about that first scowling cephalopod and the eyes of the village upon us. As for Partner-in-all-things-memorable, he just comes along to remind me of the linguistic arrogance that first landed it on my plate.

Pulpo's menu offers three courses—starter, main and dessert—for a set price (€29), but you can also order a la carte. My linguistic skills may be poor, but my math skills are strong. As we devour the soft, sesame-pocked bread and hummus, I notice that if we order the set menu, we end up with a free dessert.

I choose the red snapper with lemon potato mash, green asparagus and sauce antiboise with capers, onions and tomato (€20 a la carte). Partner starts with paper-thin slices of Carpaccio, covered with herbed oil and shavings of Grana Padano (€9). He then screws up my math epiphany by ordering fillet steak with roasted potatoes, mushrooms and truffle gravy, the lone dish with a supplemental charge (€3). We round out with Amsterdam's only rucola-free salad (€4).

Pulpo's menu has a definite North African bent: grilled tuna with chickpeas; chicken skewers with pumpkin; lamb curry with cardamom yogurt and herbed polenta served with a colourful