

COUNTING SHEEP AT LA OVEJA NEGRA

Feasting on barbacoa is a weekend tradition at this family-owned restaurant in one of the capital's oldest neighborhoods

BY NICHOLAS GILMAN
Special to The News

Santa María La Ribera, one of the oldest colonias in the capital, is a mixture of dreamy nostalgia and scrappy urban growth. Its streets are lined with crumbling 19th-century mansions, cantinas and small family-run businesses that evoke a genteel, long-gone era – if walls could talk.

A Moorish fantasy kiosk reigns majestically over the central plaza, here called the Alameda (it's a leftover from a forgotten world fair), and the time-warp Museo de Geología sits like a set from a Steven Spielberg movie. Old-timers and recently settled young artists hang out there like they do in any provincial Mexican town.

Three blocks west is the justly famous La Oveja Negra, family-owned since the 1950s, where you'll find the best barbacoa I've eaten in Mexico.

Feasting on barbacoa is a weekend tradition all over central Mexico. Our version is nothing like American BBQ as it is wrapped and steamed, not roasted over coals.

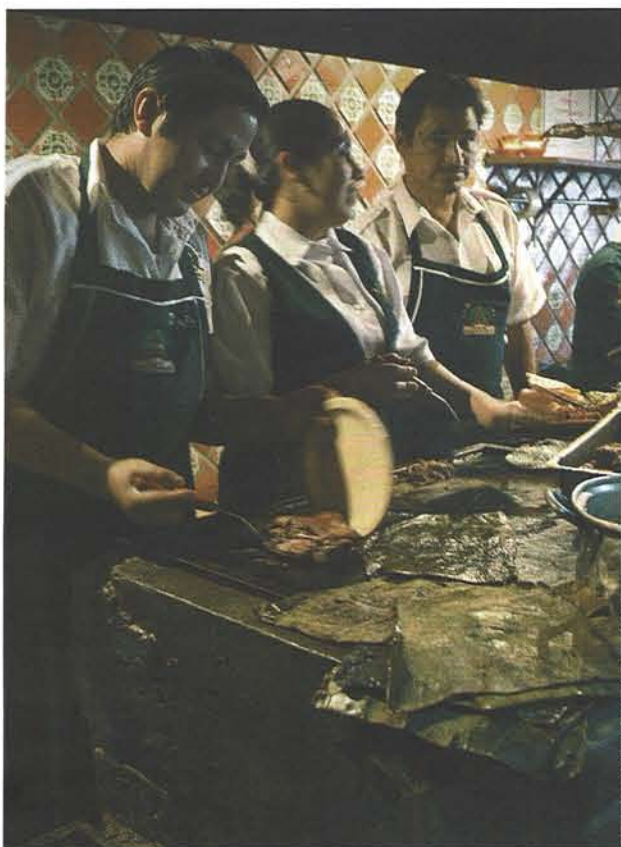
The restaurant's open facade is decorated with lovely Talavera tiles. On the left, an efficient assembly line of apron-clad women produces handmade tortillas. Behind the counter chefs serve up consomé while others grill sausages.

But the star attraction is proudly displayed in the entryway. Buried beneath enormous leaves of magüey (similar to what is used to produce tequila) in a huge tin tub, the wrapped meat has been pit-roasted above a wood fire. The juices from the tub are seasoned and served as consomé, a hearty lamb broth, garnished with cilantro and onion, and jazzed up with a squirt of lime.

Start your meal with nopales aztecas, tart cactus stewed in a complex chili

MORE INFO
Try some of the best barbacoa in town.

La Oveja Negra
Sabino 215
Santa María La Ribera
Tel.: 5541-0405
Open Saturday and Sunday only, from 7:30 a.m. until around 6 p.m. or when the meat runs out, whichever comes first.
No cards, bring cash.
Parking can be found next door.



Only the best quality organically raised meat is served.



The atmosphere at La Oveja Negra is warm and inviting. Apron-clad women make handmade tortillas.

sauce. The plato oveja combines smoked chorizo, fresh cheese, chicharrón and guacamole. Both tasty and filling, it's perfect appetizer, big enough to share.

The curtain doesn't rise, however, until the star attraction arrives: enter La Oveja herself.

Barbacoa is best ordered by weight. I suggest a half kilo for four. The meat is served wrapped in a penca de magüey (its cooking wrapper), and accompanied by tortillas. The tender, juicy meat hits all the marks. Swathed in a smoky corn tortilla, doused with their

earthy salsa, this is Mexican food nirvana.

What's their secret? Only the best quality sheep are used. The family has its own ranch in the state of Hidalgo, where they raise organic livestock, as well as produce cheeses and chorizos. How can you go wrong?

To wash this feast down, there are fresh aguas de frutas, beer, or for the more adventurous, curados (fruit flavored pulques), offering a rare chance to sample this essential Mexican beverage.

A few standard desserts, such as flan or strawberries

and cream, are laid out as an afterthought – most diners will be too sated to consider them.

As this carnivorous feast will set you back about 100 pesos per person, it shouldn't break the already teetering bank.

A Sunday comida at La Oveja Negra is an essential Mexican experience that I happily recommend to all – but hardcore vegetarians should stay home.

Nicholas Gilman is the author of "Good Food in Mexico City: A Guide to Food Stalls, Fondas and Fine Dining." His Web site is www.mexicocityfood.net.

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