



# SEA LEGS FOR DAYS

**OCTOPUS NETS TONS OF FANS  
IN OUR LANDLOCKED TOWN**

*by* AMANDA RAE





**T**he lawn above the village in Snowmass was on fire during the Food & Wine Classic a few weeks ago. Dozens of charcoal-smudged chefs poked and prodded at blazing fires pits, over which whole animals — lambs, goats, rabbits, birds — roasted on spits as a searing June sun sank low in the sky. Hosted by the crew behind the feverishly popular Cochon555 US Tour, Heritage Fire was one of the coolest culinary spectacles of the weekend.

I remember when it got weird. Standing amid plumes of black smoke that Friday afternoon, I spotted a freakish, bobbing figure across the field. I set down my rum punch and squinted. *Could it be...an alien?*

Closer inspection revealed that the eerie creature dangling from a makeshift vertical rig was another kind of sentient being with a bulbous beak: A giant red octopus.

The chef and puppeteer, Stephen Fried of New York-based Gullo Specialty Foods, had been tending his post nearly eight hours, regaling passersby with bits of marine trivia and posing for madcap photos while holding tentacles askew. In all, he roasted 11 octopus — 90 pounds total — which he sliced up and drizzled with anchovy-caper-parsley-lemon vinaigrette and chile-infused olive oil. The crowd went wild. Whole roasted pig heads? *Whatever.*

“It was the first time I grilled octopus on beautiful local wood,” says Fried, known in

chef circles nationwide as “Octoman.” (Gullo Specialty Foods is the largest importer of Spanish octopus in America; Octoman, as his name suggests, is the main dealer to Denver distributor Seattle Fish Co., which supplies numerous local restaurants.) “Amazing.”

I adore octopus — and I’ll order it whenever I find it on a menu, no doubt. So when Octoman tells me that the protein is swelling in popularity — “You see them on 70 to 80 percent of menus in cities across the country, and in bigger restaurants it’s our biggest seller,” he says — I decided to embark on a quest to find the best dishes in Aspen. I’ve already sampled what is widely considered the OG octo dish in town, at Ellina — mouth-meltingly tender, charred octopus tentacles atop a crispy risotto cake with lightly dressed arugula and sherry sauce. However, I am happily surprised to find octopus dishes on more than a dozen restaurant menus and featured sporadically as specials at a few others.

So what if our fair city is landlocked far from any seashore? After my Great Aspen Octo Crawl of 2015, I declare octopus Aspen’s summer spirit animal. For many reasons: It’s righteously healthy (high in protein, low in fat and cholesterol, iron-rich). It’s a quirkier choice than the usual seafood suspects, so chefs enjoy preparing it and adventurous diners are thrilled to try it. At the same time, it’s sincerely approachable, as octopus meat adapts to virtually any flavor. When cooked properly, the texture is divine. Move over, squid:

Octopus tastes of the faraway ocean and reeks of expensive taste. Calamari? So suburban strip-mall circa-1996.

“I moved here from California, so I really like using octopus,” says Matthew Padilla, chef de cuisine at The Little Nell. “It’s one of my favorite animals. I actually have it tattooed on myself—it goes around my shoulder.”

For his dish, currently on the dinner menu at element 47, Padilla poaches Spanish octopus in olive oil, thyme, and bay leaf for up to six hours. “We found that the larger octopus are more tender than the smaller ones, which you’d think would be opposite,” he says. After a quick char, tentacles are sliced and plated alongside quenelles of warm German potato salad with pickled mustard seeds and local watercress. Though the chef cooked octopus frequently with Michael Mina at Quince in San Francisco, “this is the best way, personally.”

After more than a year in the kitchen at Plato’s at the Aspen Meadows and with three seasonal menus under his apron, chef Aaron Schmude (above) unveiled his own cephalopod masterpiece earlier this summer. He tosses fresh squid-ink tagliatelle with guanciale (fatty Italian pork jowl), burst tomato, piquillo pepper, and micro-herb pesto, which nestles charred, marinated octopus in a brilliant flavor explosion. A beer-batter-fried squash blossom stuffed with risa, a Spanish sheep’s milk cheese, tops it off. (A glass of Campo Viejo





Tempranillo or sparkling Rioja is a must.)

Schmude, at Plato's by way of Las Vegas, uses what he calls the "triple-dip" method in a just simmering elixir of red wine, red wine vinegar, and Noble Tonic 03 XO sherry bourbon vinegar.

"I dunk it three times from the head," he says, having learned the technique long ago. "It shocks the muscles, to get them ready for cooking."

Most chefs agree: Octopus isn't difficult to cook, per se, but it requires finesse.

Some octo, including those hawked by Octoman, are pre-tenderized in a cold brine of sea salt and ice water in stainless-steel tumblers aboard the fishing boats, which may cut cooking to a third of the normal time.

Superstitious cooks are known to throw a wine cork in the broth — an old fisherman's tale believed to tenderize the tough muscle. (Alas, there is no scientific basis for why this might work.) The namesake chef and star of the documentary film "Jiro Dreams of Sushi" commands his apprentices to massage octopus with salt for no fewer than 50 minutes. Celebrity toque and Food & Wine Classic regular Scott Conant reportedly throws octopus and plain ol' water in a washing machine.

At the new Maru, chef de cuisine Trenton Brennan tenderizes octopus by hand via 1,000 karate chops before poaching it in fragrant Malaysian oil; executive chef Peter Coyne finishes the plate with seaweed salad, shiso chimichurri, pickled daikon, and house-made shichimi (Japanese 7-spice). If that doesn't turn you on, we're obviously not friends.

"The main thing is to peel it, get rid of all that slimy, soft skin" on the underside, notes Zocalito chef-owner Mike Beary. His saucy shrimp and octopus seafood salad has been a menu staple for years. The dish is served warm, escabeche-style: sautéed onion, cactus, and jalapeño in Meyer lemon vinaigrette with red chicolle chile, avocado, and tomato with a sprinkling of cotija cheese and sorrel.

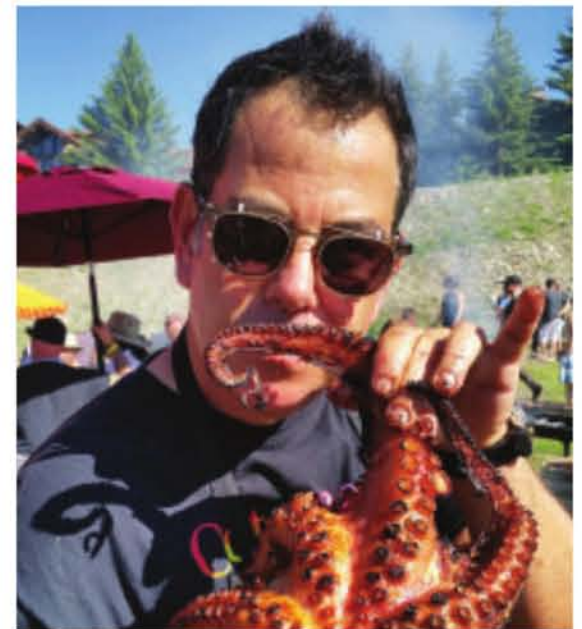
Chefs Club by Food & Wine at the St. Regis serves a seasonal octopus *a la plancha*, another one of the most talked-about dishes around. Executive chef Todd Slossberg's summer version sees a hefty charred tentacle surrounded by tomato-eggplant relish with currants, green olives, and paper-thin slices of crispy chorizo. (This winter, accouterments included almond Romesco, duck fat potato, chorizo, and arugula.)



"We will probably have it on the menu in some form, usually [with] Mediterranean flair," Slossberg says. "It has become a signature dish for us. There is no secret about octopus, you just need to get a quality European octo and cook it carefully."

Though octopus are fished the world over, those from cold Mediterranean waters are most popular in the U.S. "They say the best octopus comes from Spain, maybe Japan," Octoman says. Since the highly intelligent creatures grow fast and reproduce early — spawning up to 200,000 eggs at a time — trap-caught catch is classified yellow, or "good alternative," on the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch List.

There's more: Matsuhisa prepares Peruvian octopus tiradito with rocoto chile paste, cilantro, and yuzu. Kenichi serves nigiri and sashimi *tako*, as well as torched sashimi with ponzu and spices. Grey Lady chef Kathleen Crook spices octopus and white bean tostadas with roasted jalapeño and tomatillo pipián salsa with lime juice and cashews. Casa Tua's version of octopus salad incorporates haricots verts, potato, cherry tomato, olive, and pea tendrils. Baby octopus is stir-fried in spicy garlic-black bean sauce at Asie Restaurant, too.



**OPPOSITE PAGE:** Chef Aaron Schmude plates fresh squid-ink tagliatelle for his marinated octopus dish at Plato's Restaurant at the Aspen Meadows.  
**TOP:** Seared Mediterranean octopus with risotto forma, arugula and sherry pan sauce has been a bestseller at Ellina for years.  
**INSET:** Octo prep at Plato's Restaurant.  
**BOTTOM:** Stephen "Octoman" Fried at Heritage Fire in Snowmass during the 2015 Food & Wine Classic.



True-blue octopus fanatics will want to keep an eye out for fleeting specials conceived by local chefs. When I ask chef Nate King of Cache Cache if he's playing with the protein this summer, I'm not surprised by his reply: "Funny, I was just thinking about that this morning," he quips.

Cache Cache's current special: Spanish octopus cooked French-style in *court bouillon*, to preserve its flavor. "I don't do corks or anything, just cook it 90 minutes and it comes out like butter," King says. He serves it with sliced heirloom tomatoes from Rendezvous Farm in Crawford in a pool of sweet garlic purée and with warm, pickled-chanterelle mushroom vinaigrette over top. (A knockout pairing even oak-phobes will appreciate: Patz & Hall Dutton Ranch Chardonnay.)

"Octopus really absorbs whatever flavor you put it with," marvels Rustique chef Taylor Wolters, a Basalt native who recalls spearfishing for the creatures while attending culinary school in Maui. He's already reprised his popular

octopus salad special at Rustique. It's blanched and cooked sous-vide in red wine with mirepoix and bay leaf; chilled, sliced sashimi style, and marinated in grilled citrus-cumin vinaigrette; and served over frisée hearts with Marcona almonds and orange supremes. Catch it while you can.

When Pinion's showcased octopus and scallops with Palisade peach compote and jalapeño a few weeks ago, the dish sold out almost immediately.

"It's one of those ingredients that people are uneasy about, but when they get it, they like it," concludes chef Schmude of Plato's. "It's simple, but different at the same time."

A summer classic, indeed.

*Wanna join Amanda Rae on another Aspen Octo Crawl? Send an itinerary: [amandarawashere@gmail.com](mailto:amandarawashere@gmail.com).*

## ASPEN'S GREAT EIGHT (in no particular order)

### Don't miss these killer octopus bites:

1. Octopus and guanciale tagliatelle at Plato's at Aspen Meadows (\$14)
2. Spanish octopus with seaweed salad, pickled daikon and ginger, shiso chimichurri, ponzu and brown butter foam at Maru (\$18)
3. Octopus *a la plancha* at Chefs Club by Food & Wine at the St. Regis (\$18)
4. Charred octopus with warm potato salad, pickled mustard seeds, and local watercress at element 47 at The Little Nell (\$17)
5. Seared Mediterranean octopus with risotto forma, arugula and sherry pan sauce at Ellina (\$24)
6. Shrimp and octopus seafood salad with avocado and cotija cheese at Zocalito (\$19)
7. Marinated octopus salad with frisée hearts, Marcona almonds, citrus vinaigrette at Rustique (\$16)\*
8. Spanish octopus with heirloom tomatoes, sweet garlic purée and warm chanterelles vinaigrette at Cache Cache (\$18)\*

\*Limited special



TOP: Chef Matthew Padilla's charred octopus gets a classic potato pairing at element 47 at The Little Nell.  
ABOVE: Diners enjoy Spanish octopus with seaweed salad and traditional Japanese flavors on the patio of the new Maru.