



BARCELONA, 600 YEARS OF GASTRONOMY CULTURE

THE FIRST SUCCESSFUL CUISINE: MEDIAEVAL COOKING

The first recipes in Latin-derived languages 14th and 15th century are in Catalan, like the so-called Sent Soví. Probably much of the uniqueness of Catalan cuisine comes from the fact that it has managed to bring together, from the basis of its classical and visigoth heritage, the fine influences of Andalusian culture, thus guaranteeing the Mediterranean culture and transmission of oriental treasures.

The Arabs introduced and reintroduced many products to the Iberian peninsular, some of these still play a part in idiosyncratic nature of Catalan food, like rice, spinach, egg plants, lemons, sugar or pasta (fideus), and there was a certain taste for greens, which the philosopher Ramon Llull identified as a source of health, especially taking into account that garden fruits had really undervalued until then by feudal masters. As well, the presence of fish and other products from the Mediterranean characterised this mediaeval Catalan cuisine. And there were also some exquisite sauces like ginestrada, a cream made with rice, saffron, with the milk of almonds, and costum —exported to a large extent— made by cooking poultry in citric fruits, as well as various dishes

delicately scented with rose water and prohibitive mixes of far off spices. Remember that ginger arrived much before sushi, or coriander before guacamole, and that galangà came before the Tom lam soup.

Catalonia shared this way of cooking with, firstly -and in a very special way- Occitània, as it did with serenading, the trobadors and an occasional heretic, and afterwards there were successful contacts with Sicily, Sardinia and the



Italian Peninsular. In the moment when Catalan cuisine was really founded, it already showed its most characteristic trait: the capacity to incorporate the best of other culinary cultures, that for one or another reason, it had come into contact with. This was not a unique thing; anthropologists have shown that cuisine reflects societies quite clearly. So it is not at all strange that cuisine in Catalonia reflected the spirit of a place that was very much a thoroughfare and place of arrival, preferring to incorporate that than resist other styles.

THE FUSION OF «NEW» AMERICAS PRODUCTS

With time ultramarine products from the Americas were incorporated into Catalan cuisine, which without them today would look very different. For example, sausages and beans (American), Egg plants with peppers (American), Soup of Cauliflower and potatoes



(American), and tomato (American)-bread and even our bread and chocolate (American) for an afternoon snack.

Modern times is not especially good —as everyone knows— for the production of Catalan culture, which was persecuted and occasionally had to hide even in convents or monasteries. Precisely it was in the monasteries where many of the recipe books of the time were written, faithful to the mediaeval tradition (there was still a fair mix of sweet and salty dishes that were so liked in the Middle Ages, for example, but also with the healthy meat restrictions as prescribed by monastery rules. And bit by bit the new

incorporations began to bring the makeup of the dishes, despite not losing their character, to current day ones.

THE FIRST INNS

The evolution did not stop there, and the first inns appeared. Sempronio explains in *Quan Barcelona portava barret* that the word «fonda» (inn) comes from the Arabic word *alfòndec*, sort of warehouse where, apart from storing merchandise, the men that transported the goods also ate and slept; a sort of urban, western caravan harem. Barcelona's most well known *alfòndec* was in the Santa Maria del Mar quarter; later to become a hostel, which was what came directly before the *fonda*.



The first inn owners were Italians and they came in the 18th century. And they would advertise themselves on wooden boards with pictures of falcons or a sabre rather than with letters for those that could not read. In the book *Vint segles de cuina a Barcelona*, Nèstor Luján explains that the most famous inn belonged to a Sardinian who had arrived in the city in 1788. In 1815 he opened *Beco del Racó*, where you could eat rabbit casserole, potato stew, *escudella*, meatball soup, beef stew; a whole series of dishes that we recognise as traditional Catalan dishes and that we included in the majority of recipes when, with the Renaissance, cooking books reappeared.

«At around the end of the 19th century, in the *sisos* inns, where you could eat for “*sis quartos*” (a small quantity of money), the food on offer was great, nice and very popular. But there was also a need for a different sort of offer dedicated to the new emerging social classes because the so called “golden age”, a name taken from Europe, was growing in



Barcelona more and more [...] luxury sweet shops, glove makers, cake shops and restaurants were setting up like under a spell», explains Narcís Oller in his famous novel *La febre d'or*.

EXQUISITE AND BOURGEOIS CUISINE

In Catalonia this exquisite and bourgeois cuisine, as only it could be, was also liked. And it left its mark on those that could afford it.



Meanwhile, as Rusiñol explains, «the workers that could and their bosses would get out of town on Sundays to eat rice and conger with muscles or grilled lamb». Another great cook of the time Ignasi Domènech, who had worked with Escoffier, said this part of traditional

cooking, that we have seen, continued to be added to with outside influences.

The Spanish Civil War was horrible and the dictatorship a disaster. But many people from other parts of the State came to Catalonia, bringing new cultural riches.

THE GASTONOMIC DIFFERENCE: ANTROPOLOGY AND CULTURE

Recently, gastronomy has become totally accepted as an essential part of culture.

That is why cuisine is a faithful reflection of the people and societies that put down its roots; this means, cooking forms an essential part of the cultural structure of every people: «we are what we eat», said wise men. And that is why the way we eat is a key indicator. In this sense the power of popular Catalan recipes has become public and



noteworthy, a valuable patrimony that is worth saving and yet is in constant evolution. As well, showing what is our own way of cooking, brings us to another function of gastronomy; the value of traditional cooking as part of a necessary integrating strategy for immigration.

And the tablecloths of Catalonia contain lots of history. A series of menus, meals, and dishes have paraded on the tables of our country, and its capital for the last centuries. These are testimonies of their time, an interesting living museum of Catalonia, Europe, and its travels. Our cuisine is an inheritance from and tribute to all the civilisations that have ruled Europe since Imperial Roman times. The result is a recipe book that clearly shows what Catalans are like, and that helps define their identity and construct the culture and intellectual background of Catalonia.