

Frugal and Varied Cuisine

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A range of traditional cuisines coexist in the Mediterranean that, in their diversity, have common traits and philosophy, the result of the region's trading and historical cohesion. Through historical events, such as the entry of new products from Asia (the aubergine) or America (the tomato, potato, pepper or courgette), we can trace the gradual variations and culinary changes produced over the centuries, always guided by frugality, conviviality and a range of common and very old techniques such as stuffing, the use of spices, light snacks or crushed and ground seasonings. Hence, Mediterranean cuisine, in all its diversity, is a source of culture, traditions and socialisation, a legacy full of secrets, flavours and aromas that we must care for and preserve.

If you travel around the Mediterranean, along its coasts, climbing steep mountains, up rivers and beyond the fertile lands and deserts, you can visit cities, towns and small settlements, and meet diverse people: city dwellers who go to well-stocked markets and have restaurants of all kinds within their reach; country folk who, in their weekly markets, sell their limited production; semi-nomads and nomads and, of course, foreigners and tourists more or less receptive to the environment. But, above all, you meet many women who still run the family kitchen and, sometimes, have the complicated task of procuring the food needed for their families to survive.

Thus, the unity and diversity of Mediterranean cuisine is apparent: kitchens in which the traces of the contributions of the various civilisations that have followed one another through the centuries are preserved. In this basin, at the crossroads of three continents, men have clashed, invaded their neighbours' lands, and fought to establish their hegemony or impose their ideas and beliefs. But some preferred to learn from others and, in turn, pass on their

knowledge, trade goods and share techniques from different fields. This attitude is what led to the current shape of our Mediterranean.

Fernand Braudel, the renowned historian of the Mediterranean, said that we should look to cultures of the rocky promontories, since you can still find a kind of historical memory of ancient Mediterranean civilisations that preceded the great empires and subsequent settlements. This is not only true in the mountain ranges but also in some deep valleys that are accessed by almost impassable gorges, and of islands that, for centuries, lived on the frontiers of history. What Braudel says about history in general can be applied to the kitchen, where recipes, curious utensils and archaic cooking techniques can still be seen and remind us of our ancestors.

Apart from these redoubts, the Mediterranean was, as has been repeated ad nauseam, a crossroads and a point of constant trading since ancient times. The pace at which new products were added to the Mediterranean diet varied greatly, but it was gradual and sustainable; not like the recent violent and destabilising upheavals. A long time passed before the new

products discovered by Europeans achieved real importance in the new food systems. Needless to say, there were exceptions or notable differences between regions and social classes.

It is worth highlighting the key role of the Arabs, who connected the Middle East with the Mediterranean, and of Spain, which acted as a bridge between America and Europe and led the way in introducing American products. The arrival of a long list of products after the discovery of America was a real revolution that would completely change the diet not only in the Mediterranean but also in Europe and throughout the world. It is also true that some spices had arrived earlier, thanks to Phoenician and Greek trade, and we know that Pharaonic Egyptian, Roman or medieval markets were already well supplied with exotic products.

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The origins were frugal, which indelibly marked Mediterranean cultures. Nothing could be wasted. An example of this is bread, an omnipresent food and around which the different religions have developed a whole set of rituals and superstitions that showed all the respect it deserved: blessing it before slicing; making cuts in the dough before baking; and not turning loaves upside down. If it fell to the ground, it had to be picked up immediately, cleaned and kissed or pressed against the forehead with an apology, and it was considered a bad omen if large holes were found inside when it was broken open because it was thought someone was going to die soon. Of course, bread could never be thrown away and, no matter how dry it was, it had to be used, either in simple soups, which only require stale bread soaked in water and cooked with garlic, oil, salt and herbs – thyme,

oregano, fennel, sage or rosemary, in short, whatever was grown in the area – or, depending on tastes and possibilities, with something else readily available, such as eggs.

The *pa fonteta* from Mallorca, as the name indicates, is hard bread that is soaked in water, and, once strained, green peppers, chopped tomatoes, split olives, a good splash of olive oil, vinegar and salt are added, accompanied by pickles: capers and sea fennel. It is a very colourful dish. The *sopes mallorquines* (Mallorcan soups) are made with wholemeal bread typical of the island, cut in thin slices, laid dry at the bottom of a clay pot, with cabbage, chard, cauliflower, mushrooms, onion and parsley on top; everything is seasoned with salt and paprika, covered with water and left to cook. It is accompanied by olives and pickles: capers, sea fennel and raw green pepper.

The *pain perdu*, in France, or *torrijas*, in Spain, are other ways of using dry bread. The bread slices are soaked in milk or wine, which can be flavoured with cinnamon, dipped in egg and fried in oil. Sprinkled with sugar or spread with honey, they have delighted many children unable to enjoy more expensive and elaborate pastries.

We are now going to trace four vegetables: the aubergine, courgette, pepper and tomato. Today they are part and parcel of the Mediterranean world, found in the most remote markets, grown in multiple varieties, even in desert oases, and are part of many recipes, with few wondering if they have always been here and, if not, when they arrived and where they came from.

Four Vegetables

Before we start, and as a point of interest, let us remember that, for botanists, they are fruits, although commercially they are spoken of as vegetables.



Mortar and pestle (Sylvia Oussedik).

Aubergine

The aubergine's journey to the Mediterranean is fairly well known. It originated in Southeast Asia, India and then reached Persia. Once there, the Arabs, via the Middle East and the Maghreb, took it to Spain at the time of al-Andalus. The aubergine – *berenjena* in Spanish, *albergínia* in Catalan, *aubergine* in French – takes us to the Arabic and Persian *al badingana*. For a long time, it had a notably bad reputation: it was considered an aphrodisiac and, since it was always associated with the Moors and Jews, it was typically rejected in Christian Europe subjected to the Inquisition. However, it was highly prized by Arab cooks in classical times, and Caliph Al-Wahiq is said to have been able

to eat forty of them in one sitting. In Turkey, in Ottoman times, it was held responsible for about five hundred fires, since people used to roast them, without taking much care, at the doors of their houses. The aubergine is found in many Andalusian cookbooks and in the Sephardic cookbooks of the Ottoman Empire and the Maghreb, and achieved a great level of popularity from the 18th century.

Sayings and comic verses turned into rhymes and songs help to recall its virtues and recipes. Among the most popular ones that talk about aubergines and how to cook them are those compiled on the island of Rhodes in *Siete modos de guisar las merendjenas* (Seven Ways to Cook Aubergines).

They are also found in many literary works ranging from Cervantes' *Don Quixote* to Gabriel García Márquez' tribute to them in *Love in the Times of Cholera*, as it also ended up in America.

Tomato

The tomato, courgette and pepper were brought from Mexico by the Spanish in the 16th century. In the case of the tomato, *tomatl* in Nahuatl, the wild species that grew in America were small in size and it seems that they were not part of the indigenous diet. The *mestizos* and the Spanish cultivated and modified it, increasing the fruit's size, as happened with the pepper.

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Upon arrival in Europe, this solanaceae or nightshade was mistrusted, perhaps because it is from the same family as belladonna, henbane and mandrake, and as the medicinal applications of these plants were more interesting, it was thought that it would also be so with tomatoes and that their culinary use had no reason to be. Therefore, at first it was only considered for use for medicinal purposes and with great precaution. Cultivation in botanical gardens, as a curious aspect, was another of its uses, since its fruits were highly decorative. In Spain, in the 16th century, Gregorio de Ríos, the priest in charge of the botanical garden of Aranjuez, under the auspices of King Felipe II, said that it was a plant that produced red apples with no smell and that a sauce could be made with them. Its name, golden apple or *amoris* apple – it was believed to have aphrodisiac virtues – would pass into Italian giving rise to its current name, *pomodoro*.

Pepper

The pepper is another solanaceae that comes from Peru and Bolivia, in the Central Andes.

We know that it was grown in pre-Columbian times in Mexico and that, after a stage in which Columbus brought the seeds to the Mediterranean, it began a long journey. In the days when Spain and Portugal controlled trade with Asia, it reached the Far East, and today it is grown on all continents. It is consumed fresh or dried, raw or cooked, or ground, as would be the case, among others, of paprika. Cultivated species were subjected to numerous hybridisations that gave rise to multiple varieties. Their different shapes, sizes, colours, flavours and uses varied greatly, although the largest and sweetest fruits were not achieved until the early 20th century.

But there is a doubt about this. In Roman literature there are references to what might be peppers, and if they are, we should consider other hypotheses that would involve northern Europe and the Viking voyages to American coasts and, therefore, it could be that this vegetable reached Europe in two ways.

Courgette

The courgette, native to southern North America and Mesoamerica, where wild species grow, was one of the oldest plants to be cultivated, possibly simultaneously by several cultures. After the voyages of Columbus, its cultivation spread to Europe, where the different varieties were very popular from the Middle Ages. As happened with the previous vegetables, from the Mediterranean it was introduced into the diet and its cultivation spread throughout the world. It was a vegetable that did not arouse great misgivings, unlike others, and its dietary and culinary properties have always been praised. The result has been a wide variety of recipes in which it appears alone or as an accompaniment.

The fact is that, in the 18th century, these vegetables were already fully integrated and

grown on all shores and inland. Today it is hard to imagine Mediterranean cuisine without these four vegetables, without a good base *sofrito* sauce for many stews, as an accompaniment for meat and fish, in pizzas and pastries, in soups and creams, stuffings, fillings and salads. All are eaten raw or cooked, except the aubergine, which is always used cooked

These four vegetables are found in many recipes with different regional variations, the dishes change their name, one ingredient may disappear, another is added; the condiments, spices and herbs vary, and the preparation and presentation techniques also have their nuances, but they are still closely related.

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In the Iberian Peninsula they call it *pisto*, throughout North Africa we find these ingredients combined to make *chukchuka*, in the south of France *ratatouille*, in Italy, in Turkey, in Greece, in Palestine, in Lebanon... there is nowhere without a dish using these ingredients. The variations occur, above all, in the use of the spices to season them. The proportions also vary according to the customs of each culture and depending on taste and tolerance to spiciness. Thus, we can find black pepper, cumin or chillies, and in terms of herbs, bay leaf, thyme or oregano. Of course, the cooking is always done over a low heat, as the name given to the dish in the Maghreb indicates, which refers to the sound of the stew over the flame; others say, instead, that it refers to the custom of dipping bread in it.

On the island of Mallorca, these four vegetables, the aubergine, courgette, pepper and tomato, are joined by another ingredient, the

potato. Considered a traditional local food *du terroir*, as the French say, we can say, however, that as it is used today, it cannot be prior to the 16th century, and that potatoes only began to be considered as food suitable for human consumption from the 19th century, as a solution to famine.

In the case of the Mallorcan *tumbet*, the potatoes are peeled, cut into slices and fried. Once drained, they are arranged in the bottom of a clay pot. Next, the same is done with the aubergines and courgettes and, finally, some chopped garlic and green peppers are fried, chopped tomato, salt and black pepper are added and, in this case, the aromatic herb is bay leaf. It is cooked over a low heat and poured over the vegetables in the clay pot. This is a main dish, which can be accompanied by fish or fried eggs.

Stuffing

In the Mediterranean, although the climate is generally mild, the land has never been too generous for crops and livestock. The consumption of lamb, kid goat, pork or veal has always been limited, with whole pieces only seen on feast days and in wealthy houses. Poultry, rabbit or small game were within everyone's reach in the rural world; therefore, it was essential to use the whole piece, whether in sausages or stuffings. Meanwhile, until the end of the 19th century and mainly due to conservation problems fish was restricted to the coasts near fishing areas, although it is also true that it was considered inferior to meat and associated, among Christians, with days of penitence.

Well-used leftovers can produce delicious dishes and even lend themselves to refined concoctions worthy of the finest tables; we have already said that waste did not fit into the schemes of Mediterranean cultures, which

were marked by sobriety. Thus, croquettes and meatballs, also made with fish or vegetables, are present in all kitchens.

Stuffed poultry and larger cuts of meat, as well as fish, can lead to spectacular dishes. Intestines are filled to make cold cuts and sausages, such as North African *merguez*, a very red, spicy and sometimes very pungent sausage made with minced beef or lamb, cumin seeds, fennel, coriander, paprika, cayenne pepper and other seasonings. Depending on the butcher or the house where they are made, garlic, *harissa*, cinnamon, black pepper, sumac, and so on, will be added.

All the vegetables mentioned are likely to be stuffed, as are many others such as artichokes, pumpkins, onions or potatoes. In any case, the proportion of meat is always limited, since other vegetables, legumes and cereals vie for space.

A particularly delicious non-meat filling is the delicate fiori di zucca, filled courgette flowers, battered and fried, and truly exquisite

There are vegetables that, although they cannot be stuffed, can be filled in a different way. This is the case, for example, of cabbage, chard leaves or vine leaves, whose provenance is disputed by different cultures.

In any case, although it is true that ingredients vary, the differences are seen in the meat used. Depending on religious strictures (halal, kosher) we will have fillings with pork, beef or lamb.

A particularly delicious non-meat filling is the delicate *fiori di zucca*, filled courgette flowers, battered and fried, and truly exquisite. The secret is that the flowers must be very fresh, and must therefore be collected first thing in the morning, before they open, washed carefully and dried even more carefully. Some fill them with mozzarella, others with ricotta ac-

companied by anchovies or chopped nuts and an aromatic herb. Apart from water, flour and egg white, the batter should contain a little beer, beaten well and allowed to rest. The flowers, once filled and closed, must be coated and fried immediately in abundant and very hot oil and, when removed, drained and eaten before they cool down.

Light snacks

Lunch is not only nourishment but also a time for sharing. It has always been said that the conviviality that accompanies hospitality is inseparable from Mediterranean cuisine. Being invited and inviting is a sign of friendship. Hence Amin Maalouf, the great Lebanese writer, cites in *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes* a comment by Saladin saying that he was not willing to share a table with someone with whom he disagreed.

Cooking takes time; finding the ingredients, making the dishes and enjoying them at the table involves a whole series of rituals and codes: the seating of guests, the blessings, special treatment of guests and older people, complimenting the dishes and the cook and, finally, the after-meal conversation, especially on holidays and weekends: then, it can last until dinner time, when various dishes reappear, barely changing the previous table.

In Lebanon it is called *mezzé*, in Spain, *tapas* and, between one end of the Mediterranean and the other, whether in Italy, Greece, Turkey or anywhere else, bars and cafes are spaces for drinking, eating and getting together. There is no reception at home, no matter how simple, that is not accompanied by coffee or tea and, depending on the time, a pastry, nuts or some kind of snack.

The origin of the word *tapa* is said to come from the custom of covering wine glasses in taverns and inns in medieval Spain with a

piece of bread to protect the drink. Whether true or not, in Spain, *ir de tapas* essentially refers to eating tapas served with a drink and, often, *el tapeo* involves going from one place to another. There is a great variety of areas in Spain with a tapas tradition, and each with different habits and customs, whether the tapa itself, the accompanying drink or how you pay. While in Andalusia the *fino* or *manzanilla* dry wines are served with a croquette, some olives or a pickle, without ordering and free, in the Basque Country, with a wine, a cider or a *chacolí* (*txakolin*), the custom is to ask for *montaditos*: a stuffed piquillo pepper, a piece of cod, some salad, and so on, on a piece of bread skewered in place with a toothpick. When the time comes to pay, they count the toothpicks. In Galicia, Catalonia, Levant and the centre of the peninsula, the styles vary but the passion stays the same.

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The range of tapas is immense: olives stuffed in a thousand ways, pickles of all kinds, mussels, prawns in garlic or battered, calamari, omelettes, fried fish, tripe, potato and Olivier salads, croquettes, sausages, blood sausage, cured meats, cheeses, and so on, served on a piece of bread, in small earthenware pots, on a brochette; they whet the appetite and encourage conversation.

Tapas are also served at home, weddings and official receptions, and sometimes it may even outshine the food served afterwards.

At the other end of the Mediterranean, the Lebanese *mezzé* reaches unbeatable heights. It is true that both in the countries of the former Yugoslavia, Greece and Bulgaria, as well as Egypt, Turkey, Israel, Syria or Palestine, there

is also the custom of serving food as a buffet, with similar dishes, but today, Lebanon has indisputably associated its name with the *mezzé*. It is the art of the festive table, a cuisine that delights our eyes before our palate. It consists of a multitude of highly diverse small dishes: fresh colourful salads, hummus and other creams, croquettes, for example falafel, sauces, pickles, sausages, offal, and so on, not to mention fruits, desserts and drinks, which are served at the same time. Thus, the list is immense, and some say that baked, stewed, fried and raw dishes should also be on the table.

Crushed and ground with mortar and pestle

Mayonnaise, Catalan *alioli*, *skordalia* in Greece, *harissa* in the Maghreb, and many other sauces require mortar and pestles for emulsifying, which is also essential for crushing and grinding. This is an omnipresent kitchen utensil throughout the Mediterranean. The mortars can be made of wood, stone or metal, and the pestle, of the same material. There are those who prefer the inside to be smooth, others rough because that way, they say, it grinds and crushes better. The size also varies. In Morocco, the mortar is part of the bride's trousseau, and throughout the Mediterranean every home has a mortar and pestle, often inherited.

Fried fish, a soup or stew are not complete until the seasoning is added. This undoubtedly gives the dish a certain flavour and aroma but it also responds to an aesthetic shared throughout the Mediterranean, providing light and colour. What would grilled prawns be without their seasoning, or plain sardines, or many *tajines* and couscous dishes from the Maghreb without their spicy *harissa*?

How are crushed and ground seasonings made? Herein lies the secret of many cooks and the special feature of each dish. The Catalan

style of seasoning is based on almonds and hazelnuts; Italian pesto is made with basil, garlic, pine kernels and powdered cheese, and is emulsified with oil; in others such as *harissa*, roasted red pepper and hot peppers in varying proportions, garlic, cumin, coriander, lemon juice, salt and olive oil are essential; all of them give character to the dishes they season.

Herbs, spices and condiments, more than the main ingredients, are often what differentiate Mediterranean cuisines. In the Western Mediterranean, bay leaf, oregano, thyme, marjoram or winter savory predominate; in Italy

and Greece, along with oregano, basil and sage, while in southern and eastern cuisine, herbs and hot spices reign supreme.

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In the past you learnt to cook by measuring with your eyes and today things are different as there are other ways of getting information; in markets and kitchens, you spend unforgettable moments and often forge authentic friendships.