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You Are How You Eat: Reflections on Food and Culture

By Malia Politzer

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GRANADA, Spain — "You can learn all you need to know about Spanish culture by studying three things," olive-oil aficionado, chef, and amateur food historian Francisco Lillo said to me while leaning over a small mountain of broad beans, which he was in the process of trimming with a paring knife, one at a time. "*Paella*, *salmorejo*, and Mercadona."

It was past noon one Sunday in Granada, a sunny 102 degrees outside, and Francisco was giving me a lesson in Spanish cooking and Spanish history, which, according to him, essentially amounted to the same thing. "Let us examine the *Paella,"* he continued, reaching across the table for another bean. "We have saffron — and rice brought by the Moors, mixed with local seafood, pork *chorizo* made by Spanish Christians, and, of course, *pimiento*, imported from the American colonies. It is a dish that could only happen in Spain."

We were sitting around a glass *bracero* in my living room, preparing the traditional *comida* — a meal eaten between the hours of 3-5p.m., during the midday siesta. For the *primero* we would have s*almorejo*, a cold tomato soup, and the broad-bean salad. *Segundo* was broiled *bacalao* (Atlantic cod) in a fried tomato-and-garlic sauce, and for *postre* (dessert) there were fresh figs with goats cheese and honey. As we finished trimming the broad beans and started peeling tomatoes for the *salmorejo*, Lillo continued his history lesson. "*Salmorejo* has roots in our Roman heritage. They brought with them the tradition of raw, vegetable-and-bread-based soups which they ground with mortar and pestle, though the tomato came from the Americas."

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Based out of the south of Spain, Malia is looking at the primary migration routes via Morrocco and the Spanish enclaves in North Africa. She previously worked for Mint, an Indian business and economics news daily paper, where she wrote on a variety of social issues including disability issues, internal migration, gender, social entrepreneurship and development trends. As a fellow at the Village Voice, she wrote primarily about immigration. Malia has won multiple awards for her reporting and published articles in the Wall Street Journal Asia, Far Eastern Economic Review, Foreign Policy Magazine, Reason Magazine, and Migration Policy Institute's monthly magazine The Source. She has reported from China, the US-Mexico border and South Korea, and speaks fluent Spanish, conversational Mandarin, and intermediate Hindi. Malia holds an M.S. in multimedia and investigative journalism from Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where she was a Stabile Fellow, and a B.A. in Liberal Arts from Hampshire College.

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Francisco Lillo teaches me how to make a broad-bean salad. Photos by Tomas Conde Kemme.

Food always comes with a story, and Spain's is linked to its history. Europe's gateway to Africa, positioned between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, Spain has seen many migrations and invasions throughout its history, with each conquest leaving an indelible stamp on Spanish culinary traditions. As early as 8th century BC, the Greeks settled the coast of Spain — bringing with them a tradition of wine and olive oil, while the Celts inhabited the center of the country, leaving a legacy that of Spanish *empanadas* — meat and fish pies, as well as veal. In the 2nd century, Spain was occupied by the Romans. Then came eight centuries of Moorish rule, which brought the sweeping arches and impressive Sufi architecture that adorn Granada's Alhambra and the Cordoban Mosque along with almonds and citrus fruits, rice, honey and aromatic spices such as saffron and cumin. Then came the chocolate, chilies, tomatoes and potatoes from the

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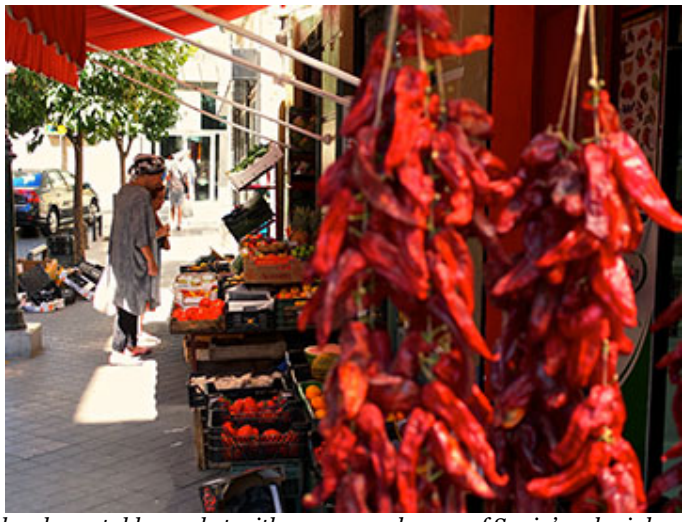
Americas during Spain's colonial era — an inspiration for Spanish breakfast traditions such as *churros con chocolate*, and *tostada con tomate*.



A local vegetable market with peppers, a legacy of Spain's colonial past.

I had met Francisco Lillo by happenstance while having a morning coffee with Tomás, my boyfriend, at a local bar called *Los Cuatro Gatos* a few months back. Lillo was sitting at the table next to us; a small man with short-cropped white hair who slurped his coffee, and was squinting over his spectacles at the small typed print of the morning's newspapers. On his head was a tweed newsboy hat, and he wore floral pink cargo shorts, a blue button-up shirt, socks and sandals, none of which remotely matched. The socks-with-sandals combination was normally a dead giveaway for a German or an American tourist. In fact, he was a local "character," originally from Cordoba, with one singular obsession: Food.

Food, more specifically, cooking, also happens to be an obsession of mine. One of my greatest pleasures since coming to Spain has been learning new recipes and developing my Mediterranean palate. So when Lillo overheard Tomás and me discussing our planned visit to an ecological winemaker, a friend of ours, who lived in a nearby pueblo, he looked up from his newspaper, interrupted our conversation to introduce himself, and — completely unembarrassed by his eavesdropping — began giving us unsolicited advice on various not-to-be-missed culinary destinations in Andalucía.

I've had many such experiences in Spain — a country where every convenience-store cashier will vehemently defend the best way to make a *tortilla*, and have actually been known to pluck sub-par foods from my shopping cart that they find particularly repugnant, replacing them with something of a more respectable quality. In fact, it is difficult to overemphasize the role that food plays Spanish culture. Though Spanish cuisine is perhaps less world-renowned than those of neighboring France or Italy, food plays a pivotal role in Spanish society — the heartbeat that sets the rhythm for daily life. From the early morning *desayuno* to the traditional post-dinner stroll around

town to the local ice cream parlor, food timings determine the Spanish business *horario,* and form the foundation for nearly every social function. “In *Andalucia* food is not just something to consume,” Lillo said. “It is what do. It’s what you share. It is who you are.”

* * *

I’ve always had a somewhat Proustian relationship to food. I learned to cook from my grandmother and my father, and to this day many of my fondest childhood memories are linked to the savory scent of onion sautéing in butter, or the pungent aroma of red cabbage drizzled with apple-cider vinegar simmering on the stove. When I first moved to India, I lived for many months in an apartment that was completely barren, with the exception of a mattress on the floor of one of the bedrooms, and a fully stocked kitchen, which I amply supplied with pots, pans, and all the cooking devices necessary to make a proper meal. To this day, it is impossible for me to feel at home in a new domicile until I have cooked something and served it to friends and loved ones for dinner.

Alhambra, a monument from eight centuries of Moorish rule. Photo by Tomas Conde Kemme

My paternal grandparents were professors and only recently American: My grandfather was an Austrian-Jewish refugee, with a dual PhD in linguistics and sociology, and my grandmother a linguist who grew up in an ethnic enclave in New Jersey, where she spoke German before learning English. Perhaps that is why I grew up with the somewhat European concept that family dinners were sacrosanct — and every month all of my uncles and cousins would gather at my grandmother’s for a family dinner that often lasted for hours, lingering late into the night. Apart from being a brilliant intellectual, my grandmother was also a very accomplished chef, and before I left for my first solo international trip at the age of 21, she gave me a piece of sage advice that has stuck with me to this day: “If you really want to understand a culture, you really only need to learn two things. The language, and how to cook.” At the time, it seemed like odd advice, yet

language, and how to cook. At the time, it seemed like odd advice, yet more than a decade of travel later, after living in four foreign countries and on three different continents, I have come to see the wisdom that underlies her words. You can't learn everything from language and food — but you can learn a lot.

Paying attention to local food rituals — not just *what* people eat but *how* they eat it — and keeping my ears tuned for local expressions and use of slang has become a sort of game for me, and it is a constant source of surprise and wonderment how revealing food customs can actually be. For example, when I went to China to freelance and study Mandarin for a year, I lived for several months with a family consisting of a single mother and her daughter in the industrial, smog-clogged city of Shijiazhuang — the capital of Hebei, a few hours train ride south of Beijing. When she realized how much I enjoyed cooking, she made it her personal mission to teach me how to make some of the staples of Northern Chinese cuisine including *jiao zi (*dumplings), *bao zi* (steamed buns) and a variety of pork-and-vegetable stir-fries. When it came time to eat, we'd sit on plastic stools around a small round table in the living room, and eat communally out of the serving dish with chopsticks. Although each person had a small personal dish to catch errant bits of food, no one ever served food onto their individual plate — to do so was considered quite rude. Nor, if serving was necessary due to the size of the table such as at banquets, was it acceptable to serve oneself first; only after serving the person next to you (and everyone else) could one consider putting food on one's own plate.

I believe that such food rituals often serve to illuminate core values both at the level of the individual, but also aspects of the larger society they belong to. What and how we eat cuts to the heart of who we are, what we value, how we interact with one another. Viewing food through that lens, it's not so strange that in China, where the communist value of social good and community still often trumps individual rights, food would be eaten communally, with the symbolic emphasis on sharing whatever is there, whereas in the United States, where the individual is paramount, fewer and fewer families are eating together each year, family meals supplanted longer work hours, and an increasing emphasis on after-school activities — activities that embody the prioritization of individual development and productivity over community.

As I began taking note of these sorts of small details, other questions began to arise. Where and how do people buy their food, and what do these choices reveal? What about whether people eat alone, or together? How food is prepared? Whether they eat home-cooked food, or buy industrial food, or how long they take to eat their meal? Although these questions may seem simple — they often have answers that are quite revealing.

When I was in India, I had a friend who came from a family of devout Hindu Brahmins in Goa. He considered himself a worldly

"Westernized" Indian: He was educated as an architect in Australia, had worked in Singapore, dressed in Ralph Lauren polo shirts and tailored Armani suits, and made an excellent risotto using a recipe taught to him personally by an Italian chef. He did not consider himself to be particularly observant of religion or caste, but the one thing he was fastidious about was the food he ate inside his own home. While he had no qualms about ordering medium-rare steaks or Italian cold-cut plates at restaurants, no beef or pork products were permitted to pass through the front door into his house. When I asked him about this peculiarity, he said it was out of in deference to his family. "Goan Brahmin are forbidden to eat beef or pork," he explained. "It would be disrespectful to my mother."

I had many such experiences in India — a country where food restrictions often directly indicate ones *jati* (caste), spiritual beliefs and position in society. Food customs play out in many telling ways, from what jobs people are permitted to do, to what social status they occupy, and in some cases has even provoked riots (several Hindu-Muslim riots have been started because of an errant bit of cow or pig served to the wrong person at the wrong time, or thrown into a temple or mosque). Thus, butchers are almost always Muslims and Christians, because Hindu vegetarians and Jains are prohibited by their religion to consume or handle animal flesh.

Food rituals become exclusive the higher caste people occupy: Iyengari Brahmin — a Southern sub-caste — are traditionally prohibited from either eating garlic or onions, and have many specific rituals around preparing food: The cook should be of an equivalent caste as the consumer, and needs to bathe and wear new clothes before entering the kitchen, and all food should be locally sourced. *Dalits* (the lowest caste formerly known as "untouchables"), the most socially excluded class, on the other hand, eat nearly anything available — including both pork and beef, the most inexpensive source of protein in India. Food can even be used as a form of social exclusion: In Bombay, for example, it isn't uncommon for wealthy Hindu landlords to refuse potential Muslim and low-caste tenants on the basis that they are not vegetarian.

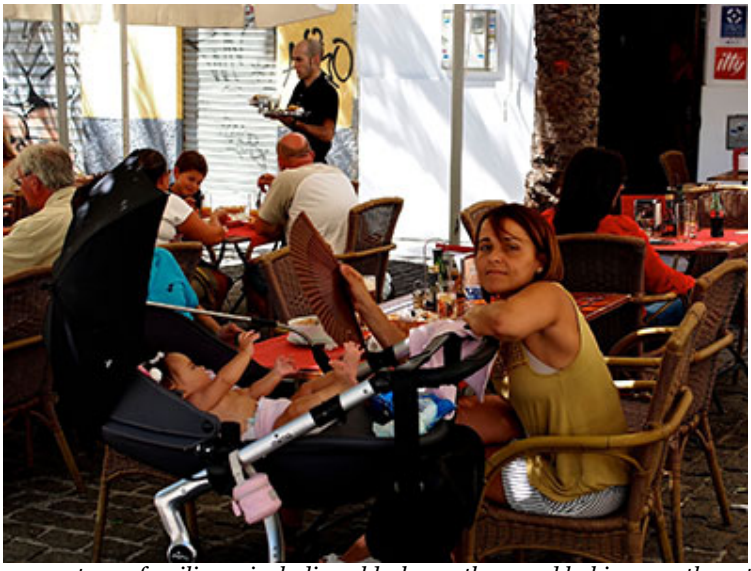
But if in India food practices are often indicative of religion, social or caste status, in Spain — particularly in Andalucía — food seems to function almost exclusively as social currency.

There are about six distinct mealtimes in Spain, and each one is basically an excuse to *disfrutar* (enjoy) with family, friends or co-workers: *desayuno* (breakfast), *café* (coffee break), *comida* (a formal three-course lunch), *tapas* or *marienda* (pre-dinner snack) *cena* (dinner), and quite often a post-dinner stroll to get ice cream. Of all of these, the only meal that might plausibly be eaten solo is breakfast — an informal affair often involving coffee and a light pastry that takes place at the figurative crack of dawn — which, in Spain, is anytime before 9:00a.m. Café takes place a few hours later in the neighborhood

bar — the central facet of all Spanish social life — where one might have a *tostada*, toasted baguette with grated fresh tomato or paté, or a sandwich, while catching up on national news and local gossip.

Our local bar is called the *Cuatro Gatos*, a tiny nook of a restaurant, where the only place to sit is on one of about seven tall stools cramped together under the long wooden countertop, or at several plastic tables set up on the cobblestone walkway outside. The owner is Vicente, a curly-haired bear of a man who's job description goes far beyond serving coffee, food and wine — he's a social worker, real estate agent, social networker and walking classified ad rolled into one. When we first came to Granada, Vicente helped us look for apartments — naturally, he knew which landlords had lost tenants, and which real-estate agencies to avoid. He's also often the first person I talk to for sources for my newsletters, as he knows everyone in the *barrio*. "Everyone comes through the neighborhood bar," he told us confidently when we first arrived in Granada, and it's true.

At any neighborhood bar, regardless of whether it's noon or midnight, one is equally likely to see men drinking beer, as a mother sipping coffee or enjoying a *tinto de verano* (half red wine, half lemon soda with ice), her baby placed squarely on the bar in front of her, kicking its chubby legs. The bar is not about consuming alcohol so much as it is a meeting place — where friends gather to catch up, or where older *señoras* with greying hair, dresses and pearls come to share a *tapa* with their adult daughters and sons, their grandchildren running gleefully underfoot.



It's common to see families — including elderly, mothers and babies — gather at bars in Spain, whether it's noon or midnight.

But by far the most important meal of the day — the beating heart of Spanish food culture — is the midday *comida,* a two-hour long, three-course meal eaten with friends and family. Every day between the hours of 2-5p.m., Granada shuts down. Shops close. Government buildings and banks shut down. Schools let children out, so that everyone can come home and have a meal together as a family. While

Spain has undergone radical social changes directly affecting the notions of "family" since its transition to democracy — for example, women entering the workforce, the legalization of homosexual unions, and an increase in single-parent households — the traditional *comida* remains a staple of Spanish life, and, I believe, may be saving Spain. Recent studies by a host of organizations — the OECD, CASAColumbia, an anti-addiction research center, and the Family Dinner Project — found that children who ate with their parents on an average of five to six days per week were far more likely to regularly attend school, had lower rates of depression, addiction and teen pregnancy, higher self-esteem, and reported having close relationships to their parents than those who did not regularly dine together as a family, and a 2011 UNICEF study on child happiness rates in developed countries listed Spain one of the countries with the happiest children due to the fact that Spanish children, on average spent more time with their families than children from other countries — despite the fact that the country was enduring the worst economic crisis in recent history, with a quarter of the population unemployed[1]. Recent studies published by CASAColumbia and the OECD also link regular family dinners (numbering between 3-5 days per week) with lower rates of truancy, substance abuse, pregnancy and depression among teenagers, as well as higher grade-point average and self-esteem.[2] [3] Children who regularly join in family meals even self-report closer, more open relationships to their parents. Across the board, the reports all conclude that families that eat together are happier, healthier, and closer than families that do not."

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Lillo doesn't remember exactly what prompted his culinary obsession, but he suspects it had to do with his father, who was an olive farmer and a producer of artisan olive oil. Some of Lillo's earliest memories are of shimmying up the rough bark of an olive tree to help his father with the harvest, sorting the good olives from the bad, and bringing them in barrels to sell to local grocers, or to trade for grains and fruits. "As long as I can remember, I always loved food. How it is grown, how it is cooked, how it tastes. It was never a choice — it has always been who I am." He distinctly remembers one evening when he was a young teen, merrily frying mushrooms in garlic and olive-oil over the gas stove, when his grandmother, who was watching him sullenly from her customary seat at the kitchen table with a look of deep suspicion on her face, leaned over to ask his mother in a loud whisper whether she thought he "maybe liked boys." "Cooking was not something that men did back then," he explained, with a wry smile.

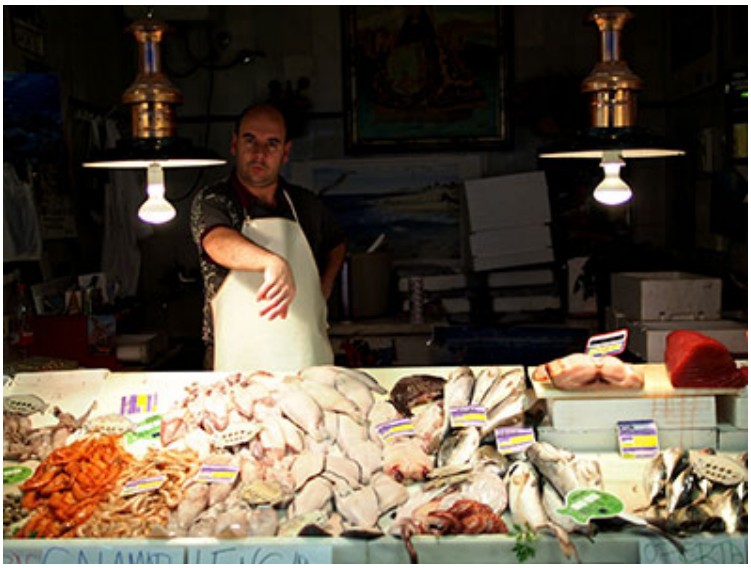
Indeed, it was a different era — a time when the dictator Francisco Franco was still calling the shots, putting particular emphasis on building a society supportive to *familias numerosos* — which in Lillo's childhood memory often translated to long, lingering three-course meals eaten together with his mother, father, and four brothers at both midday and then again during the evening. "Life was much simpler. It

was neither better nor worse — just different," he recalled. "Women rarely worked, and so my mother put all of her love and ambition into making food." His father was not a wealthy man, and when money was short, much of their food stores came in the form of barter: A liter of olive-oil for tomatoes, rice or fresh-fruit. "It was an agricultural town, so we always knew where our food was coming from," he reminisced. "The tomatoes were sweet and ripe, not the tasteless things you buy today."

For Lillo, one of the greatest tragedies of the modern era is the fact that many Spanish are losing that visceral connection to local food production, which, he believes, directly translates to a loss of understanding of flavor and quality — the staples of good Spanish cuisine. "It used to be that people bought their fruits and vegetables directly from producers," he explained. "Or, if not producers, from small shop owners who sourced locally. Either way, you could easily find out whether your tomato was shipped from Valencia or came from a nearby farm." Although today nearly every Spanish city still has at least one *Mercado* — a large public market where vegetable and fruit vendors, cheese makers, olive-producers, fisherman and butchers rent stalls to sell their respective goods — traditional markets are slowly becoming supplanted by supermarket chains, the most popular of which is undeniably *Mercadona*.

Traditional Spanish fruit stands, which Lillo believes are becoming gradually supplanted by supermarket chains such as Mercadona. Photo by Tomas Conde Kemme

There are few Spanish businesses that have experienced such massive success as *Mercadona*. First founded in the 1980s, the supermarket chain has seen enormous growth in a very short time — from just eight stores in 1981 to more than a thousand today — and is one of the few Spanish businesses to actually thrive during the crisis[4]. With a business model aimed at cutting prices to make food globally affordable to Spanish families, and a business schedule that allows a variety of grocery-shopping times to increasingly busy working parents, it's popularity comes as no surprise. However, it's also contributing to a standardization of Spanish food that Lillo finds alarming. To Lillo, *Mercadona* represents Spain's shift toward globalization, incurring with it an inevitable loss of identity. "Spain is not really one country, but several countries put together. There's *Galicia, Andalucía, Asturias, Catalonia,* each place has its own food culture, its own language. But *Mercadona* is knitting them together," he explained. "We don't buy fish from the local fish vendor anymore — we buy it at *Mercadona*, imported from China. Most of the vegetables are genetically modified, shipped from halfway around the world. Ask one of the workers where their tomatoes comes from — I guarantee that they won't know the answer."



A fish vendor at the local market. Photo by Tomas Conde Kemme.

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