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## **The History of Catalan Cuisine**

### What does it all mean?

There is an area in Europe, which is called Catalonia.

This area includes areas  
of Eastern Spain and Western France.

The Language is Catalan,  
and the people are Catalan.

The Catalan name for Catalonia is "Catalunya"

Catalans consider themselves  
to be independent of Spain or France.

Barcelona is part of Catalonia,  
and the people there  
are quick to let you know they are not Spanish,  
but Catalan.

Catalan actually sounds more like  
French mixed with Spanish.

### ***The Roots of Catalan Cooking***

Few cuisines are as attached to their historical roots  
as Catalan cookery is.

Carla Passino compares today's fare  
with the medieval original. ^

'Catalans eat more graciously and better than other countries.'

This may sounds like a rave review by a food critic smitten  
with the menu

at top Catalan restaurant El Bulli,

but it was actually written in the 14th century

by Francesc Eiximenis,

a theologian who occasionally occupied his time

with the rather more mundane concerns of eating and drinking.

Catalonia - intended as the larger area  
where Catalan is spoken -  
was as much a beacon of European cuisine  
in the Middle Ages as it is today.

Or perhaps more. It influenced cooking styles  
throughout the continent and especially in Italy,  
where it arrived through Sicily, Sardinia and Naples,  
which became part of the Catalan-Aragonese kingdom  
between the 13th and early 15th centuries.

In a quirk of destiny,  
the Catalans were probably bringing back to Italy  
a much embellished version of what the Italians themselves  
had brought to Catalonia in Roman times.

The core of Catalan cuisine is of Roman origin,  
according to Rudolf Grewe,  
who was one of the foremost scholars of Catalan food history.

The Romans brought to Catalonia bread, wine and oil  
- 'the classical triad'  
which, according to medieval food historian Massimo Montanari, fed imperial  
ideology and the food model it imposed  
throughout the Roman Empire.

And Roman writers mentioned oysters from Tarragona,  
mountain hams and clams as local delicacies.

However, this basic fare was greatly enriched in medieval times,  
when Catalonia became a flourishing center of commerce  
which rivaled with Venice and Genoa for naval hegemony.

Set at the heart of the Mediterranean,  
the country introduced and adapted many foreign influences  
into its culinary tradition.

Arab cookery was especially important.  
The Moors held much of the Iberia peninsula  
throughout the Middle Ages  
and their traditional ingredients, such as rice,  
lemons or bitter oranges,  
made their way into local cuisines throughout Spain.

The Libre de Sent Sovi - which presumably dates from 1324  
and is one of the oldest cookbooks in Europe -  
lists a number of dishes made with aubergines,  
spinach or sugar which have a clear Moorish origin.

Aubergines, for example, are served with almond milk, or cooked in a casola (casserole), and the book gives two recipes for alatria, a pasta of hispano-arabic origin.

Trade with the Muslim countries and Africa also brought in spices, which played a major part in medieval Catalan cuisine.

Cloves, nutmeg, ginger and cinnamon - which was thought to have medical properties - were widely used in medieval Catalonia.

A simple mig-raust (later known as mirrauste) of almond milk in the book de Sent Sovi calls for pepper, ginger, cloves and the ubiquitous cinnamon - as well as sugar.

Some recipes use saffron, which had already been known in Roman times but found a new lease of life in Moorish-influenced Catalonia. Not only did the spice become an integral part of Catalan cuisine and the cuisines which descended from it, but - cultivated as it was in Valencia and Roussillon - it fuelled a booming trade with Germany and central Europe until the 16th century.

The Libre de Sent Sovi also carries one of the earliest recipes for two founding elements in modern Catalan cuisine: picada and sofregit.

A paste made with ground almonds, herbs and spices, picada is to Catalan sauces what roux is to French ones: the quintessential ingredient, the cornerstone of good sauce-making.

Sofregit, which may have influenced the Italian soffritto, was a stir-fry of chopped onions, garlic and herbs that was and is still used to flavour all sorts of dishes.

The contemporary version is practically identical to the medieval one, save for an ingredient: the tomato, which came to Spain and Catalonia from America in the 16th century.

Beyond the individual dishes, however, it is the creative approach to ingredients which has remained a constant

in Catalan cuisine from the Middle Ages.  
Sweet-and-sour combinations, for example,  
were common throughout Europe during the Middle Ages,  
but lost currency in later centuries.

In Catalonia, however,  
they have remained an important part of the local heritage.  
Today's rabbit with pears, for example,  
or duck with fruit have their roots  
in the marinated mutton with pears and quince  
that appears in the 16th-century *Libre del Coch*.

The other pillar book of medieval Catalan cookery,  
the *Libre* may have been written in the 16th century  
although it was published in 1520.

The author was a *Mestre Robert*,  
who in later editions is identified as Robert or Rupert de Nola,  
head chef to Alfonso V El Magnánimo,  
king of Aragon, Valencia, Mallorca, Sicily and Sardinia,  
king of Naples and earl of Barcelona between 1442 and 1458.

The book was probably a present for Alfonso's son, Ferran,  
who later became king of Naples,  
and it may have been a prime vehicle  
through which Catalan recipes penetrated Italian cuisine.

In typical medieval fashion, the *Libre*  
has plenty of sweet-and-sour dishes.  
One for all is the fritter of new cheese with sugar and honey,  
a version of which has survived practically unaltered  
in the former Catalan colony of northern Sardinia,  
where it is called a *sebada* or *seada*.

*Mestre Robert* often suggests  
sprinkling some sugar and cinnamon  
to give more oomph to his recipes, although, he says  
'there are people who believe that you shouldn't  
sprinkle sugar on pottages cooked in meat stock  
and everything depends  
on the taste of the lord of the house.'

Sweets, such as marzipans and all sorts of fritters,  
feature prominently throughout the book -  
an indication that desserts played as important a part

on the Catalan medieval table as they do today, although their serving style was different at the time. Another cookery book from the period is entirely devoted to 'totes maneres de confits' - from confit lemons to codonyat, a quince cheese which is still popular today.

Perhaps it was familiarity with these recipes that prompted 15th-century Italian food writer Bartolomeo Sacchi, known as Platina, to say that the Catalans were undisputed masters in Lenten confectionery.

By then, the conquest of the Americas was looming on the horizon, and with it would come the last key ingredients of Catalan cuisine. Tomato, for example, added the finishing touch to the sublime simplicity of pa amb tomaquet - toasted bread with garlic, tomato and olive oil - while chocolate found its way into the saucepan to jazz up hare.

Once again,  
new flavours went to add layers of complexity  
and riches to the Catalan pot,  
bringing it very close to culinary heaven.

It is testament to the incomparable art  
of contemporary Catalan chefs like Ferran Adrià of El Bulli  
and Santi Santamaria of Can Fabes  
that they managed to improve on it.

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