



Celebrating the national cuisine that **makes use of everything**

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Catalan cuisine is very brown," said chef Joan Roca, of the three Michelin starred restaurant El Celler de Can Roca, at the presentation of his latest book, *La cuina mediterrània*. "He's right. For example, look at *fricandó* (a beef stew), which in terms of meat dishes is one of the most characteristic and most representative of Catalan cuisine," explains food historian and researcher Vicent Marquès. "The fact that Catalan cuisine is very brown had already been noted by the deceased chef Santi Santamaria, from the El Racó de Can Fabes restaurant, who pointed out that Catalan cuisine is much less showy than Italian cuisine," adds Marquès, who also points to Catalan dishes such as *escudella*, a soup with brown meat but also with green and orange coloured vegetables.

Catalan cuisine, the heart of which is "oil and salt and bread and wine", according to Raül Balam, chef of the two Michelin starred Moments restaurant in Barcelona's Mandarin Oriental Hotel, will be in the global spotlight next year when Catalonia becomes the World Region of Gastronomy 2025. "It's great news for the country because gastronomy is one of the more lovely ways to sell culture," says Albert Adrià, chef of the one Michelin starred restaurant Enigma. Balam agrees and considers the cuisine of Catalonia to be a mirror of its people, "who waste nothing and make use of everything".

Catalan haute cuisine and its top chefs have placed Catalonia on the podium of the best food in the world in recent years. The country boasts 54 restaurants with Michelin stars (5 with 3 stars, 6 with 2 stars and 43 with 1 star), while in June Disfrutar in Barcelona was named the best restaurant in the world by the prestigious World's 50 Best Restaurants ranking, a top spot that El Bulli and El Celler de Can Roca restaurants previously oc-

cupied. "It's a feat that would have been impossible without tradition," says Marquès, author of the ten-volume *History of Catalan and Occitan cuisine*.

Traditional Catalan food and cooking will be in the world spotlight next year as Catalonia takes on the mantle of the World Region of Gastronomy 2025

Mother's kitchen

Albert Adrià, second in the world ranking of the Best Chef Awards, totally agrees: "My base is Catalan cuisine and that's because my base was my mother. At El Bulli with [his brother] Ferran, we innovated a lot, but what always came first was what we remembered from our mother's kitchen, what she taught us. Although everything we created was new, the base was our old way of cooking," he says. He adds that the influence of his mother's cooking changed the brothers as chefs: "Ferran was the first to notice that mother grills the fish, she doesn't steam it. Mother sautees vegetables, she doesn't boil them. And that made us question the excessive influence of French restaurants."

1787

Franciscan friar Sever d'Olot writes 'The Art of Cooking'.



Canelons were traditionally made from Christmas Day le

For Adrià, among the most typical Catalan dishes are *escudella* (a traditional soup made with meat and vegetables), *fricandó* (Catalan beef stew), a variety of cod dishes and the custard dessert known as *crema catalana*. However, he says that if he had to choose just one it would have to be perhaps the simplest: *pa amb tomàquet* (bread rubbed with tomato and seasoned with olive oil and salt). "People around the world are taken aback by it, and only here do we have the ideal tomatoes that when they are rubbed on the bread leave behind only the skin. And it's wonderful to see how each chef makes bread with tomato in his own way," he says.

For his part, Balam points out that bread with tomato comes from using up old bread:





7 PORTES

preparing soups, roasts, and both fresh and salted fish. Food historian Marquès points out that cod was very abundant and mostly consumed by common people and that cod dishes were documented in Catalan for the first time in the year 1575.

Cod recipes take up a large part of the fifth volume of Marquès' History of Catalan and Occitan cuisine. "It was a very abundant fish, caught in northern Europe, which has fed the inhabitants of the continent for centuries and the Catalans and Occitans have always consumed a lot of it." The fact that it could be dried and therefore preserved helped make it popular as refrigeration was still centuries away. Cod with chickpeas is, he says, one of the oldest and most popular recipes in Catalan cuisine, along with cod fritters and cod with hard-boiled eggs.

Meanwhile, Sent Soví also contains seafood recipes, for crustaceans such as lobster, prawn and crab and cephalopods such as squid, cuttlefish and octopus, although there are no recipes for shellfish. Tuna preserved in salt, anchovies in oil and the pick-

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"When the bread dried out after a few days, in order to make it soft again it was soaked with tomato to use it up." The chef adds that

Catalan cuisine "comes from humble people" and he recalls that in his hometown of Sant Pol the typical local dishes included cod that had been salted to preserve it. "It's the same as Escala anchovies, which were salted to preserve them and were what common people ate," he says.

In his book presentation mentioned above, chef Joan Roca also pointed out that Catalan cuisine has been recognised around the world for centuries and he cited "the recipe book of the Catalan cook of the King of Naples", from the 15th century.

Robert, the cook of Ferdinand I, son of Al-

fonso the Magnificent, who reigned in Naples between 1458 and 1494, wrote the book that contains 200 recipes. Among them we find such dishes as squid and cuttlefish stew, casserole mackerel and sardines, grilled sturgeon and stuffed cockerel. It was the first cookbook printed in the Iberian Peninsula and was written in Catalan. Until then, recipes had circulated only in handwritten form. Barcino has republished it as part of the Collection of Historical Recipes of Catalan Cuisine promoted by the 7 Portes restaurant. Of course there are no recipes with tomatoes or potatoes, as they still hadn't been brought over yet from the Americas.

Sent Soví

However, Catalan cuisine had already been established in the 14th century in the manuscript known as the Llibre de Sent Soví, the oldest known recipe book in Catalan and the second-oldest in Europe (after the Apicius cookbook that dates back to Roman times). The Llibre de Sent Soví includes recipes for

ling technique known as *escabeche*, which was introduced into the Iberian Peninsula by the Arabs, are also included. As for meat, the book has recipes that include bacon, ham and sausages, as well as recipes with eggs and poultry, duck, pigeon and even peacock. The game present in Sent Soví's recipes are wild rabbits and hares, wild boar, deer, partridges, pheasants, quails, wild pigeons and thrushes.

As is common in other cuisines around the world, Catalan cooking has been influenced by religion, in this case Catholicism. "It's had less influence than in other countries because Christianity doesn't prohibit much, unlike other religions, such as Judaism and Islam, which prohibit pork, for example," says Marquès.

Capuchin cookery

Christianity had the biggest influence on Catalan cuisine through religious orders that helped develop cookery techniques and practices. Capuchin monk and historian Valentí Serra de Manresa has studied the history of his predecessors and their cuisine. The impact of the Capuchins on Catalan cuisine is





above all in the preparation of confits [food cooked slowly in grease or oil over a long period to preserve it] and their practice of developing uses for food surpluses, the friar points out. The Capuchin expert (who is also well-known for his books on medicinal herbs) adds that “both Capuchin and Catalan cuisine underwent a great change from the 18th century, when vegetables from America were definitively incorporated: tomatoes, especially”. According to the friar, the foods most typical from Catalonia’s Capuchin monasteries were “legumes, vegetables, green fruit and dried fruit... although it was not a strictly vegetarian cuisine”.

Coming from America

The historian Maria Àngels Pérez Samper explains in the foreword to the re-issuing of the book *Avisos i instruccions per lo principiant cuiner*, an anonymously written recipe book from the 18th century, that the arrival of new food products from America transformed cooking in Spain. “Barcelona, where the monarchs Ferran and Isabela were living at the time, was the place where these new foods were first introduced and tasted,” writes the historian.

“CUISINE UNDERWENT GREAT CHANGE FROM THE 18TH CENTURY, WHEN VEGETABLES FROM AMERICA WERE DEFINITELY INCORPORATED”

Pérez Samper says that the incorporation of American foods into Catalan cuisine was not sudden, and each product had a different chronology. Among the plants, beans were immediately adopted by the common classes and to this day they remain one of the main ingredients of many typical Catalan dishes.

“Beans appeared on the tables of the rich but above all on the tables of the poor,” he says and he points out that green and haricot beans appear in the purchasing records of the Hospital de la Santa Creu in the 16th and 17th centuries. Pérez Samper also says that Franciscan cookbooks included beans in different recipes, including what was called the rotten pot, which was made with vegetables, quinces, garlic, chestnuts, plums, beans, chickpeas, rice, noodles, spices and saffron. Meanwhile, green and haricot beans are to be found in the diary of the Baron of Maldà in the 18th century.

Another food from America that was

Books about Catalan cuisine

The 7 Portes ‘Collection of Historical Recipes of Catalan Cuisine’ (Editorial Barcino) tracks Catalan cuisine from the Middle Ages to the 20th century. The ninth volume dedicated to Mallorcan cooking is due this year.

‘The History of Catalan and Occitan cuisine’ (Edicions Sidillà) by Vicent Marquès is considered the Bible of Catalan cooking. So far, six volumes have been published with another four still to come.

In 1995, Jaume Fàbrega published ‘Catalan Cuisine. Catalonia’ (Edicions La Magrana), a total of nine volumes plus three on Mediterranean cuisine.

The ‘Corpus of Catalan Cuisine’ by the Catalan Institute of Cooking (Ara Llibres), is an inventory of 1,200 traditional dishes compiled with the help of restaurants and associations.

Not to be forgotten is ‘The Great Book of Catalan Cuisine’ by Josep Lledonosa (who also wrote ‘The Book of Soups’), as well as books by various contemporary chefs, such as Joan Roca, Carme Ruscalleda, Carles Gaig and Ada Parellada. Meanwhile, for this year’s Sant Jordi festival of books, Montagud Editores published ‘The Book of Catalan Cuisine’ by chef Borja Sierra (from the Granja Elena restaurant) and journalist Òscar Gómez.

quickly integrated into Catalan cuisine were peppers, while over time cocoa (Barcelona would end up becoming the European capital of chocolate), sweet potato, pineapple, potato, corn and, above all, tomatoes also became very popular. Among animal foods, Pérez Samper, says that only turkey was significant.

Regarding potatoes, Josep Lledonosa, author of *La cuina catalana*, a compilation of 800 traditional recipes, stated in a recent in-

1575

Cod as a dish appears documented for the first time in Catalan.

terview that “it took some time for them to be accepted as food” because at first “only the flowers of the plant were used for decoration”. Presumably few at the time in Catalonia would have imagined how ubiquitous the potato would later become.

Catalan has also incorporated ingredients and dishes from neighbouring traditions. For example, *El Corpus de la cuina catalana*, from the Catalan Institute of Cooking and published by Ara Llibres included, after much debate, in its most recent edition in 2023 the cold tomato soup known as *gazpacho*. Toni Massanés, director of the Alicia Foundation, had long been in favour of including this dish originally developed in Spain’s southern region of Andalusia with the argument that “its presence over a long time in the territory” qualify it for inclusion in Catalan cuisine.

Another example is rice, which is now a staple of Catalan cuisine but that arrived with the Arabs in the 8th century. The first rice recipe appears in the *Llibre de Sent Soví* and it was made above all as a food to remedy the sick.

Catalan cuisine’s long history is a worthy subject of study and one worth preserving. In fact, during the presentation of the *Passaig de Gourmets* gastronomy event on Barcelona’s *Passeig de Gràcia* avenue in February, top Catalan chef Carme Ruscalleda expressed her concern about the loss of Catalonia’s gastronomic heritage and she spoke out in favour of teaching it in schools so that future generations of Catalans will know how to feed themselves as their predecessors have done for centuries.

