

Rosi Song and Anna Riera *A Taste of Barcelona: The History of Catalan Cooking and Eating*

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Review of Song, R.; Riera, A. (2019). *A Taste of Barcelona: The History of Catalan Cooking and Eating*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 240 pp.

As many of us know Food Studies has become, in the last twenty years, a major field of research halfway between Environmental and Cultural Studies. Terry Eagleton declared in “Edible Ecriture”:

If there is one sure thing about food, it is that it is never just food... Like the post-structuralist text, food is endlessly interpretable, as gift, threat, poison, recompense, barter, seduction, solidarity, suffocation.¹

It is a major feat to publish a volume such as the one under review in the “Big City Food Biographies”, a series that considers cities as living organisms. Volumes in the series aim not to be companions or substitutes to a guidebook, but rather serve as real biographies that

¹ *Times Higher Education*, October 24, 1997, <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/edible-ecriture/104281.article>.



Edizioni
Ca' Foscari

Submitted 2022-05-11
Published 2022-06-22

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Citation Bou, E. (2022). Review of *A Taste of Barcelona: The History of Catalan Cooking and Eating*, by Song, R.; Riera, A. *Rassegna iberistica*, 45(117), 203-206.

DOI 10.30687/Ri/2037-6588/2022/18/019

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explain the urban infrastructure, the natural resources and each city's history, people and neighbourhoods. Thus, it is not an accident that the authors begin with a survey of Catalan history that starts in the Middle Ages and goes all the way to the recent 2017 independence movement, a general crisis that has not been addressed yet in a civilised (political) way.

The authors pay attention to some of the best experts of Catalan cuisine such as Néstor Luján (*Vint segles de cuina a Barcelona. De les ostres de Barcino als restaurants d'avui*) or Jaume Fàbrega (*La cuina modernista*). Under their guidance, the authors detect lard and olive oil, aromatic herbs (remnants of some strong Provençal influences), the Aragonese tradition of stews, as some of the main elements that have contributed to the creation of a unique blending that is to be found in Catalan restaurants and homes. The first chapter ("At the Top of the Gastronomic World: Nature, Science, Foam") focuses on the gastronomic transformation of Barcelona from the late twentieth century until the present. As in other areas in Spain, particularly in Euskadi with chef Juan Mari Arzak, Catalan chefs received inspiration from France's *nouvelle cuisine*. The authors also convincingly link the revival of Catalan cuisine to a fight for survival amidst an unfriendly state. They follow the steps of masters such as Néstor Luján or Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, but most importantly, from a United States perspective, the path opened by Colman Andrews, whose 1988 *Catalan Cuisine: Europe's Last Great Culinary Secret* was an eye opener at the time of its publication, and a major wake-up call for those, professional or just connoisseurs, interested in culinary matters. On page 31 they claim that Spanish chefs are successful, because of these chefs' presence in the Michelin guide. I would not be so optimistic. The authors do not acknowledge the (corrupt) limits of such a guide, which covers only restaurants from one single country, and they do not compete with French or Italian restaurants which may be miles ahead of them, as other more reliable restaurant ratings do.

The second chapter ("Medieval Cooking in Catalonia") addresses the history of Catalonia's culinary tradition, including the medieval recipe books that are still used today. The chapter also examines what the feudal system that organised Catalan society meant in terms of food production and consumption. It ends with a discussion of some of the medieval recipes that were popular during the Middle Ages. Chapter 3 ("Cooking Up a Nation", a title borrowed from Lara Anderson's book) focuses on the political disappearance of Catalonia as a separate entity from Spain and the rebuilding of Barcelona after the 1714 siege that brought the city under the rule of the Bourbons. The major point of interest is the cultural and political rebuilding (*Renaixença*) during the nineteenth century, when the city and the region, thanks to the contribution of *indianos* or the com-

mercial exchanges with the America's, underwent a period of great wealth and urban transformation that built the Barcelona that is the basis of the one we recognise today. Of great interest is the history of the city's lively cafés and the organisation of the World's Fair of 1888. Construction of the Restaurant del Parc (now Museum of Zoology in the Parc de la Ciutadella) or the Hotel Internacional, built in less than two months, but which did not survive the aftermath of the World Fair, are good examples of the impact the event had. Political tensions that characterised the turn of the century are discussed in terms of food scarcity and political radicalisation (anarchism). Their version of Els Quatre Gats is remarkable, a unique café modelled on Paris' Le Chat Noir. This is where *modernista* artists such as Santiago Rusiñol or Ramon Casas, under the guidance of Josep Romeu, established their headquarters and even Picasso contributed to the development of an artistic bohemian atmosphere. Chapter 4 examines the history of the "Greatest Fresh Markets in the World". Characteristic of Spain is the presence of market halls in most cities. In Barcelona since the late 1800s through the 1930's up to thirty-nine markets were built. Combined with *queviures* or *colmado* stores, they were essential places to distribute food before the advent of super-market chains. They analyse social and political reasons that motivated these urban projects, and also how these spaces were integrated in the daily functioning of the city and to the social life of each neighbourhood, and the increasing connection between the market and the food culture of the city.

The last two chapters have a much more practical emphasis. Chapter 5 ("Detecting Catalan Cuisine: Following the Trail of Pepe Carvalho") pays attention to the favourite restaurants of Vázquez Montalbán's fictional detective Pepe Carvalho as a device to review the city's restaurant scene. The authors do a good job detecting some recent restaurants although their recollection confirms Baudelaire's lament in "Le Cygne": "la forme d'une ville | Change plus vite, hélas! que le cœur d'un mortel". Many of those restaurants are already history, but their account provides witness to the swift transformation of the food scene in any major city. The last chapter covers "Traditional Catalan Dishes Today" and constitutes an excellent summary of tested recipes.

Maybe this is the occasion to clarify a sort of plagiarism by chef Ferran Adrià. He was not the inventor of *truita de patates xips* as he claims, but 'il sottoscritto' (the undersigned), who already cooked this versatile recipe back in the 1970s when the notorious chef was still in his infancy. Another necessary clarification: there are some wonderful restaurants in Barcelona and nearby areas as attested in this book, which focuses on an impressive array of venues, but as is the case of most tourist cities, visitors have to be aware of the many chances (or should I say dangers) of falling in a tourist trap. There-

fore, bicarbonate may be helpful to have at hand. Missing in the bibliography are Ignasi Domènech's book on eating during and after the *Guerra d'Espanya*, *Cocina de recursos (Deseo mi comida)* (1940), or Joan de Déu Domènech's account of Baró de Maldà's eating habits, *Xocolata tots els dies* (2004), a portrait of Catalan culinary culture from the second half of the eighteenth century based on the 71 volumes that make up *Calaix de sastre*. These are minor *descuits* in a volume that is very well researched, very entertaining and - I may add - fully delicious.