

On the solution of two fundamental problems

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Abstract This paper consists essentially of two parts. In the first one, we make a short introduction to traditional and modern Catalan cooking. In the second one, we provide a short list of my favorite restaurants.

1. Introduction

With better food we have better science.

Faustino Cordón, Cocinar hizo al hombre (1980)

When attending a conference, or in general when visiting another country, we have two fundamental problems to solve. The first one is where to have dinner/lunch. Once we have solved that question, we have the second problem: what to eat. If, previously, we had not enough information, most probably we will make the wrong choices. As a consequence, either we will have the feeling that food is terrible in that country or we will blame ourselves for choosing so badly. My experience is that, with the adequate information, we can eat quite well almost everywhere. Even in those countries (I am sure that you may think of a couple of them where you have already been) where everybody claims that the local cuisine is terrible.

This short paper aims at helping you in solving the two questions while you are at ETAPS 2004. In particular, in order to help you in solving the latter question, I will first introduce you to Catalan cuisine. This introduction is going to be quite short for the reasons that I will explain later. However, the interested reader may have a look at [Ore 83]. Then, in order to help you in solving the problem of choosing a restaurant, I will provide you with a very personal list of restaurants in Barcelona. This list includes the restaurants that I like and where I go from time to time, but it also includes a couple of places where I have never been but which I would like to visit.

This paper is organized as follows. In the second section I present an overview of Catalan Cuisine, both classical and modern. Then, in the third section, I suggest some restaurants where you can try this cuisine. The paper has no conclusions. I recommend the reader to visit some of these places and draw his/her own conclusions.

2. A short introduction to Catalan Cuisine

Catalonia, just as it has a language, law, customs, its own history and a political ideal, has a cuisine.

Ferran Agulló, Llibre de la Cuina Catalana (1933)

More than twenty years ago, I wrote a more detailed paper on this subject [Ore83]. However, from my point of view, some fundamental things have changed in these 21 years. Especially, Catalan cooking has changed. What I described in [Ore83] corresponds to what we can call the *traditional* Catalan cooking. But, since then, a new Catalan cuisine has emerged that is currently considered by several sources as the most innovative in the world. Actually, the emergence of this new Catalan cuisine started at the end of the seventies, influenced by the French Nouvelle Cuisine and by the Basque New Cuisine (previously influenced by the French one). Obviously, the most advanced forms of this cuisine can only be found in (usually very expensive) restaurants. But this new approach to cooking has also influenced traditional cooking.

In the next subsection we will briefly review the basic aspects of the traditional Catalan cooking. In particular, we will first describe the main cooking techniques used in Catalan cuisine; then we will review the main materials used and, finally, we will present some dishes that you may like to try. In the last subsection we will review the three main approaches to the modern Catalan cuisine. On the other hand, in the second subsection we will present a brief introduction to the main approaches to Catalan modern cuisine.

2.1 Traditional Catalan Cuisine

Traditional Catalan cuisine is, in a way, quite paradoxical. At the same time it is simple and complex. The basic cooking techniques are quite simple but some dishes and some flavours may be very baroque. Technically, in general, it is a “popular cuisine” in contrast with the French Haute Cuisine or with (part of) the Basque Cuisine. There is (what we may call) a *cuisine bourgeois* in Catalonia, but it is highly influenced by the French and Italian cuisines. Actually some of the most traditional dishes in the Barcelona cuisine have an Italian origin¹. The reason is that, in the 19th century, one of the most successful restaurants in Barcelona was Italian and this caused the introduction of this cuisine in the kitchens of the Barcelona’s bourgeoisie.

In my opinion, the most original and successful technique in Catalan Cuisine is the *picada*. In other cuisines, in order to thicken a sauce, we add flour or starch or cream or something similar, or sometimes you thicken it by emulsion as done in the mayonnaise or in the hollandaise sauces. The Catalan solution is the *picada*. A *picada* is made by crushing and mashing in the mortar (now one may use a food processor) some kind of nuts (hazelnuts, pine nuts, almonds, even pistaccio), some garlic, maybe some (fried or roasted) bread or biscuits, maybe some herbs or spices (e.g. saffron), a special kind of dried peppers, sometimes even chocolate. Each dish may have its own *picada*. The *picada* is added to the dish you are cooking a few minutes before finishing. The result, on one hand, is that the sauce thickens as expected. But on the other hand, the *picada* transfers some new flavours to the sauce, like the fresh flavour of the garlic, the aroma of the herbs and the spices, etc. Altogether, the *picada* may give a real complex flavour to an apparently simple dish.

The other distinguishing aspect of Catalan cuisine is the use of *strange* food combinations. For example, very typical in Catalan cooking are the *mar i muntanya* (sea and mountain) dishes that mix meat with seafood. Like, for instance, chicken with lobster, or with prawns, or with shrimps, or like cuttlefish with meat balls. Another kind of peculiar combination is poultry with fruits. Like goose with pears or duck with figs or chicken with prunes. This use of “dessert ingredients” (like fruits, honey, cinnamon or chocolate) in main dishes, reminiscent of middle-age cooking, is also typical in Catalan cooking. Finally, there are some dishes that mix some ingredients that, already separately, will disgust some people, like pork feet with snails. What is peculiar in all these dishes is that they may sound very awkward, but when you try them, you may like them or not, but their taste is not strange. For instance, *allioli* (a kind of mayonnaise with garlic) with honey sounds really strange but, actually, it tastes like a soft *allioli*. Or a fish stew including some chocolate in its sauce sounds terrible, but actually if you don’t know the ingredients probably you will not notice the chocolate.

Besides these two aspects, Catalan cuisine is quite simple and similar to other Mediterranean cuisines. Many dishes are based just on frying, boiling, grilling or roasting some kind of food. If the dish is some kind of stew or has some sauce, then there is some kind of canonical recipe that is usually applied. You first start with a *sofregit*. This consists in a basic preparation obtained by slowly frying, with few oil (and sometimes some fat) some onion, with garlic and tomatoes. After cooking this basic sauce for some time (it is said that the longer the better²), on

¹ For instance, cannelloni are very popular in Catalonia. They can have very different ingredients inside (mushrooms, spinach, seafood, meat,...). The most classical ones (stuffed with meat) are considered a typical Christmas dish.

² There are even some dishes where the *sofregit* must be almost burnt. For instance, there is a kind of “black rice”, where the colour is not obtained by the use of ink from a cuttlefish or a squid, but by a very dark *sofregit*.

top of it, you cook the main ingredients of the dish. When you are almost finishing, then you add the picada.

As for other Mediterranean cuisines, Catalan cuisine makes extensive use of vegetables, seafood, rice and some kinds of pasta. In particular, with respect to vegetables, Catalan cooking makes extensive use of tomato, aubergines, zucchini, artichokes, beans (green and white), spinach, broad-bean and, especially, wild mushrooms. With respect to seafood, in Catalonia, like in the rest of Spain, almost all kinds of animals are eaten. Some kind of fish that are especially appreciated in Catalonia are (salted) codfish, cuttlefish and monkfish. With respect to meat, poultry and pork are very commonly used, veal or beef, lamb and rabbit are also used, but to a lesser extent.

Now, in order to give you an idea of what kind of dishes you may eat, we will have a look at a typical meal at a restaurant (at least, this is *my* typical kind of meal at a restaurant). We may start with an appetizer, perhaps consisting of olives, or anchovies or, some Spanish ham (*Jamón Ibérico*).

As first dish, we would usually share several dishes among the people in the table. These dishes will probably include some salad: it may just be a standard green salad or it may be something more special, like a *escalibada* (grilled aubergines and red peppers), *esqueixada* (cod fish, often with white beans) or a salad of broad-bean with fresh mint. They may also include some other kind of vegetables, like wild mushrooms, artichokes, spinach Catalan style (with raisins and pine nuts), or a mixture of various grilled vegetables. Finally, for sure it will include some *small* seafood, like clams or mussels or shrimps (or other kind of shellfish) or small squid or cuttlefish or octopus, or some fried fish.

As main dish there are different possibilities and, possibly the kind of place will be a key aspect in the choice. For instance, I will only ask for a rice dish, for example a Paella or a black rice or a *fideuà* (a dish similar to paella, but where the rice has been replaced by tiny noodles), if it is a speciality of the place. The reason is that these dishes are often terrible in "standard" restaurants. But there are other dishes that do not need a special kind of restaurant. If I ask for fish, I may like to eat a suquet (a kind of fish stew) or some fish *al forn* (roasted in the oven with tomato, onion and maybe potatoes) or just grilled. Also some fish *a la sal* (fish roasted buried inside a mountain of salt) may be very nice. A kind of fish that is very appreciated in Catalan cuisine (that I love) is salted codfish. The most standard recipe in Barcelona is *a la llauna* (fried with garlic and paprika), possibly accompanied by white beans. If I want to have meat, I will probably choose some stew, for instance beef (or bull) tail cooked in red wine. I may also like some roasted lamb or (baby) goat and I usually love pork feet (there are lots of recipes for pork feet: with mushrooms, with snails, stuffed, fried, grilled, etc.)

I am not especially keen of dessert. I may eat some, if I see something that I especially like. However, I may eat no dessert at all. The most typical dessert in Catalan cooking is the *Crema Catalana* (the local version of the *creme brûlée*). Also *Mel i Mató* (cottage cheese with honey) is very typical. But you may also have different kinds of cakes or other possibilities like fruit, ice cream, etc.

2.2 Modern Catalan Cuisine

The emergence of modern Catalan cuisine started in the 70's influenced by the French and the Basque *nouvelle cuisines*. Originally, the Catalan new cuisine followed the patterns of the French and the Basque ones. The Catalan cooks were developing or adapting dishes taking into account that they had to be inspired (in one way or another) in the traditional cuisine; the ingredients had to be very fresh and of high quality; the resulting dish had to be reasonably light, and the flavours of the ingredients had to be clearly identified, which meant that they should not be overcooked. Some of the findings of this new cuisine may now be considered classical, in the sense that they have influenced the way that we cook nowadays.

Currently, the modern Catalan cuisine is far more sophisticated than the new cuisine of the 70's. In my opinion, we may currently distinguish three basic schools, although a specific restaurant may not clearly be classified in one school or another. In all these three approaches, the techniques (and the technology used) may be very innovative but the resulting dishes (i.e. what you get on the table) are quite different.

The first approach can be represented by the restaurant Can Fabes (first restaurant that obtained the 3 Michelin stars in Catalonia). In this approach, the results can be considered quite classical in the sense that the dishes consist of a combination of very neat flavours. However the combinations may be very surprising (for instance, pork lard with caviar, in the spirit of the sea and mountain dishes). Also, sometimes the textures are surprising (for instance a combination of crispy and soft ingredients). The interested reader may consult [San99].

In the second school, whose main representative may be the restaurant Sant Pau, even if the main ingredients have a very neat taste, the flavour of a dish may be very baroque, in the spirit of the richness of flavours that you may get with a good picada.

The third approach, the best known one, is represented by the restaurant El Bulli (they have written about this restaurant in newspapers all over the world). In this case, the dishes may involve all sorts of innovation, including true research on cooking techniques. Among the successful inventions that have been reproduced by other cooks, we may cite the *espumas* (foams) that can be described as very light mousses where there is no need to use emulsifiers, like egg-whites. We may also mention the hot jellies or the hot/cold combinations in a single soup dish. Or, to end this section, we may mention the concept of deconstruction: you take a certain dish; you isolate the different flavours that are part of it; then you reconstruct the dish using the same combination of flavours but with a completely different combination of textures. The interested reader may consult [ASA02, ASA03].

3. Restaurants in Barcelona: a very personal selection

There are many good restaurants in Barcelona. As a consequence it is not easy to make a selection which is short enough to be useful for the participants of a conference like ETAPS. The list below includes three kinds of restaurants. First, I have included some of my favorite places. Second, you can also find some places, which I also like, that might be useful because of their location. Finally, I have also included a couple of restaurants where I have never been, but that I think that I (and ETAPS participants) would like. At list that is the impression obtained from the information I have. Some restaurants in Barcelona not included in the list may be better than the ones included. In these cases, perhaps I have never been there or, if I was there, then either I did not like them especially or, for some reason, I found them inadequate for this list. In particular I have not included the best and most expensive restaurants in Barcelona (around 100 € or more per person). If someone wants to go to a restaurant of this kind, you can contact me for advice.

3.1 Tapas bars

Traditionally, Barcelona has never been a good city for tapas. However, in the last years tapas have become very fashionable, especially Basque tapas (called pintxos). As a consequence, now there are plenty of tapas bars in Barcelona, especially in the center. In my opinion, in general, the level is not very good, but there are some good places (and many acceptable ones). The one I like the best is:

Taktika Berri (Valencia 169). Closed on Sunday and holidays. The best pintxos that I have seen in Barcelona. In my opinion, even in the Basque Country they would be considered very good. They also have a bask restaurant, but I have not been there in the last two years because, at that time, it was needed to make a reservation several weeks in advance. The quality of the restaurant was excellent and the prices quite low. Dining in the restaurant would cost around 20 €. If you only plan to dine in the bar, then the cost will depend on the amount of pintxos you eat.

Two places that represent a Catalan approach to tapas, where I have never been are:

Comerç 24 (Comerç 24, close to the Picasso Museum). Closed on Saturdays at lunch time and Sundays. The owner worked in El Bulli. Very fashionable place: Mick Jagger visited the restaurant in his last visit to Barcelona. You can eat a tapas set menu. Around 35 euros.

La Vinya del Senyor (Pl. Santa Maria del Mar, not far from the Picasso Museum). Located in front of the Church of Santa Maria, possibly the most beautiful gothic church in Barcelona. The

place is a wine bar where you can eat some tapas. What you will have to pay will depend on the wine chosen (they have some excellent wines) and on the amount of tapas.

In addition to these places, I would only cite the two bars that started this pintxos fashion in Barcelona:

Euskal Etxea (Placeta de Moncada, 1-3, Very close to the Picasso Museum). Closed on Sunday evening and on Monday. Very large selection of pintxos and big crowds fighting to get them. Reasonable quality but not extraordinary. There is also a bask restaurant which is quite good (around 30 €).

Irtati (Cardenal Casañas 17: very close to the Ramblas). Closed on Sunday evening and on Monday. Very similar to Euskal Etxea in the large selection and quality of the pintxos. The crowds are not so big, but this may be because the bar is quite narrow. They also have a quite good bask restaurant with similar prices.

3.2 Restaurants (reasonably) close to University

El Mató de Pedralbes (Bisbe Catalá, 10, almost in P. Reina Elisenda, very close to the Monastery of Padralbes). Closed on Sunday and holidays. Traditional Catalan cooking at reasonable prices 20 €).

Casa Joana (Major de Sarrià, 59: in the quarter of Sarrià). Closed on Sunday and on holidays. This is one of the restaurants I go more often. The reason is that I live very close to it. Very basic Catalan food of reasonable quality and reasonable price: around 15-20 €.

Tram-Tram (Major de Sarrià, 121: also in Sarrià). Closed on Sunday and on holidays. Very nice restaurant with food on a high level "modern Catalan" style. One of my favorites. The problem is that it is not cheap. However, in my opinion the ratio between quality and price is very good. A dinner might cost around 50 €.

Bonanova (Sant Gervasi de Cassoles, 103). Closed on Sunday and on holidays. This is the restaurant more distant to University of this group. However you can easily reach it by taking any of the buses that go along Reina Elisenda and the Pg. de la Bonanova (e.g. 22 and 75). It is very close to the Bonanova Square. This is also one of my favorite restaurants. The place is very nice, with beautiful tiles. The kind of food served is mainly Catalan style. The materials they use (seafood, vegetables) are of excellent quality. The only problem is that, a priori, you never know how much you are going to pay. You can eat quite cheaply (below 20€). But if you ask for the delicacies they offer daily (seafood, wild mushrooms, ...) then the bill may reach the 60 €

3.3 Restaurants in the center.

Agut (Cignas 16, very close to the main Post Office). Closed on Sunday evening and on Monday. A restaurant with traditional Catalan cooking of quite good quality and very reasonable prices (around 20 €).

Senyor Parellada (Argenteria 37, close to the Cathedral). Closed on Sunday and on holidays. A very nice and very pleasant restaurant with traditional (and sometimes new) Catalan cooking of very good quality and very reasonable prices (20-25 €). However, sometimes service may be terrible.

Suquet de l'Almirall (Pg. Joan de Borbó 65, in the harbour area). Closed on Sunday evening and on Monday. My favorite restaurant in the harbour area. Excellent seafood. Their "arros de barca" is one of the best rice dishes I have tasted. The place is very nice. With respect to the prices, unfortunately seafood is not cheap. A dinner here will cost you around 30-35 € (or more if you ask for some kind of expensive seafood dishes).

Can Majó (Almirall Aixada 23, in front of the beach). Closed on Sunday evening and on Monday. My second favorite restaurant in the harbour area. Very good seafood and excellent rice dishes (Paella, black rice,...). A bit cheaper than the Suquet de l'Almirall. A dinner here will cost you around 25-30 € (or more if you ask for some kind of expensive seafood dishes).

Piccola Italia (Maremagnum). Very simple Italian restaurant. It may be an option if you are visiting the Maremagnum (at the end of the Ramblas). Owned by a family from Naples, the pizzas have an unusual good quality. Reasonable prices (below 20 €)

7 Portes (Pg. Isabel II, 14, close to the harbour area). One of the oldest restaurants in Barcelona. Good rice dishes, but also all kinds of Catalan dishes. A dinner here will cost you around 30 €

Barceloneta (L'Escar 22, in the harbour area). Another seafood place in the harbour area. The restaurant is large and nice, overlooking the harbour. However it is often crowded. I prefer the Suquet de l'Almirall or Can Majó. But it is not bad. A dinner here will cost you around 35 €

Bilbao (Perill 33). Not really in the center, but in the quarter of Gràcia, at the end of the Pg. de Gràcia. Closed on Sunday and holidays. Another of my favorite restaurants in Barcelona. Catalan cooking with ingredients of excellent quality (vegetables, seafood, meat). If you like meat, try the bull's filet. If you like vegetables, try the artichokes or the green beans (they are not good for vegetarians because they have some ham). They have a very good wine list with very reasonable prices. If you do not choose an expensive wine a dinner here may cost you 20-25 €. However, be careful: they don't accept credit cards

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