Conviviality in Catalonia

One way we anthropologists seek to establish our credentials is by bragging about our gastronomic experiences. During the course of my career I have eaten elephant’s trunk and hippopotamus steak, pretty little birds and very plain-looking rats, exotic fruit like the stinking durian, and many different species of insect. These were usually offered as a test of interethnic stamina, the reward being the assurance that “you’re really one of us now.” But in each place I have learned more from consumption of the daily staple that is the essential meaning of the word food in most languages: rice in Asia, steamed banana and cassava in East Africa, pounded plantain and yam in West Africa. Raised on oatmeal and boiled potatoes in Scotland, I have a high tolerance for plain fare, but I am bound to agree with the African elder who told me long ago that “the only thing that really improves with age is your appreciation of food.” So when I embarked on fieldwork in rural Catalonia twenty years ago it was a bonus to discover how much good food matters in this corner of Europe, whether you are in a farm kitchen or the world’s top-rated restaurant, being offered a humble bread-and-tomato snack or the virtuoso performance of mar i muntanya, “sea and mountain,” a rich stew of pigs’ trotters, snails, squid, and any other creature that comes to hand.

With serious gastronomic interests of her own, my wife Francesca needed little inducement to make a home-away-from-home in the village where I had set up a field base. For my research on family relations in times of drastic change I chose Mieres for its apparent ordinariness: a depopulated, unre refurbished rural community, neither sequestered in the mountains nor engulfed by the seaside economy. Set in a valley in the lower reaches of the Pyrenees about an hour from the Mediterranean, the village was visibly in decline. Many of its houses were falling into vacancy, disrepair, and ruin; its fields and meadows were neglected. The younger generation was moving to the towns and cities, and by the early 1990s their parents and grandparents had come to believe with the visceral certainty of their own aging bodies that life in the community as they had known it was coming to an end.

Mercifully for the village and for me, Mieres has not died, and its regeneration soon became the more cheerful focus of my research. Among the most obvious signs of vitality is the astonishing abundance of festive activity, from religious parades to sporting contests, from civic celebrations of the elderly to parties for the expanding contingent of village children. Food and drink play a fundamental role in all of these events, creating and sustaining social interaction and rebuilding a sense of community.

This gut response is deeply rooted in the traditions of the region. Out walking one afternoon early in our stay in Mieres, we came upon a classic Catalan scene: a merry throng, glasses raised, kids milling around, and knives flashing over the corpse of a huge pig. In Catalan lore the annual slaughter, the matança del porc, or simply mata-porc, was a close family affair. Nobody, I was told, would want to kill a pig just to feed the neighbors, but since it took place outside the house on the threshing floor or in the street, it was an inescapably public statement of family prosperity, solidarity, and good husbandry. Rich families could do this two or even three times a year, around Christmas and again.

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in March, but poor families could manage it rarely, if at all. Our neighbor Montse, a recently widowed farmer’s wife, described the fun with happy smiles and nostalgic sighs. The animal was strung up by the ankles on a tall tripod, and its throat slit by one of the men (el matador) who knew how. It was bled into buckets for blood sausages, gutted, and then hauled to a big trestle board to be thoroughly butchered. Hams were dried and cured, and sausages of different consistencies and gauges hung up in the kitchen. The offal and enough of the prime cuts to make the event memorable were grilled and eaten on the spot, in what one Catalan author describes as a “pantagruelian feast.”

The mata-porc remains a visceral, earthy memory of a way of life that has yielded to rural depopulation, formal hygiene regulations, and the cold-shelves of supermarkets. These days, to kill a pig requires a special permit from the municipality, and samples cut from two different parts of the carcass have to be sent to the veterinary officer for inspection. Rural people who have never actually killed a pig take pleasure in shocking squeamish townies with such scenes. I asked our neighbors how they felt about the bloody orgy. Amid the indulgent laughter and sanguinary memories, a couple of the women agreed that there could be twinges of regret about butchering an animal that had been cosseted for many months. It was not done thoughtlessly, said Carmeta, who had never killed a pig but was well practiced in wringing the necks of chickens and rabbits. God has put these creatures in our charge for our benefit. But the conversation turned quickly from the tragedy of the lost friend to the technicalities of fattening-up (special feed, expensive vitamins and medicines), and then, as always, to ham sliced finely from the bone and lip-smacking recipes for pig’s hock stew.

In bad times, people have had little more than these memories to sustain them. The epoch of wretchedness extending from the onset of the Spanish Civil War in 1936 through to the 1950s, which scarred the lives of more than a generation, is known simply as the misèria. As Republicanism yielded to Fascism, the agonies of partisanship and suspicion splintered communities and families. My efforts to extract a coherent account of who did what, when, and to whom in this traumatic period have always reduced my informants to passionate near-speechlessness. People don’t talk about it because life was so grim, even for those who were children at the time. The most vivid,
visceral memory of the misèria is hunger. However much I pestered people for details of the war and its long, miserable aftermath, the conversation always reverted to food. Food production was curtailed by the conflict and squeezed by all partisans, left and right. Hungry families from the towns and cities would descend like locusts on relatives in the countryside. The Republican authorities collected food for resale at a depot in Mieres, but much of it was barely edible (calabashes, maize). People foraged in hedgerows and woodlands, eating whatever they found, where they found it.

My wife and I brought some arbutus fruit home from a walk one day and showed them to Maria: “We used to eat these in the misèria,” she said unenthusiastically. We thought we might make jam but found them dry and tasteless. A particular hardship was having to eat maize—chicken-feed—which was used to augment the bread flour. People were cheerier about eating foxes, even the ferocious pine martens; certainly rats, and cats, but not dogs (“they are our friends”). I asked about snakes, which generated interesting debates between those who claimed to have eaten “certain types,” and those repelled and shamed by the idea (“don’t say you did that…”).

Those laborers and small artisans without farmland or allotments fared very badly. Some who survived childhood in the 1930s have legs and spines bowed by rickets. Malnourishment measures this cohort off against those that followed. Their grandchildren, like rising generations the world over, tower above them. The pride this generates is often tempered with fear: the physical bulk of these offspring can be intimidating, and the volume and richness of what they eat inspires awe. So too do their clothes, phones, and other possessions, and their manners, what they talk about, the things they know. One elderly neighbor confided that she simply could not cope with daylong visits from her grandson, a very ordinary ten-year-old who appeared to her quite alien in his physical proportions and demeanor.

Food is the essence of conviviality in Catalonia, and although its processes are so ephemeral, the sensual intensity of eating together has a binding power that is everywhere apparent in the social life of Mieres. Food pulls strings and ties knots. Witness the huge Sunday lunches that draw scattered family back home to the valley, or to strategically sited restaurants. The counterpart to this is a sense of discretion about where, when, and with whom one shares a meal, but food itself is the subject of copious conversation. Neighbors are as likely to enquire about one’s fare for the day as one’s health or the weather. Early in my stay, as I was clearing rubble in the basement of our house, our elderly neighbor Caterina stooped to greet me through the window grille. She began by teasing me about being in jail, but the next question followed smoothly: Had we had lunch yet? No? So what were we planning to eat? In other places I have lived and worked such questions would be considered rather rude. Food everywhere is heavily invested with moral meaning, set about with rules, conventions, restrictions, taboos. Eating is often regarded as a private bodily function, but in Catalonia this seems to make it more rather than less interesting. Caterina listened with pursed lips, palms on her knees, as I mumbled something about a sandwich. She then responded with a detailed description of the dish she was planning for herself. She was, we soon discovered, a wonderful cook, and it was our ambition to track her with a camera over the several days it took to plan, prepare, and serve one of her classic family Sunday lunches. People like Caterina who lived through the misèria seem particularly disposed to deliver themselves of lip-smacking recipes, which was probably as close as they could get to a good meal in the bad old days. But her enthusiasm was far from unusual. Having lived and worked in communities where men are conspicuous by their absence from the kitchen, I was struck by the care with which our elderly bachelor neighbors in Mieres prepared their meals, and the relish with which they talked about them.

Although Catalan has a rich vocabulary for eating to excess, attitudes to food are certainly not brutishly simple. Food weaves its way through the social fabric inside and outside the home, and it soon became apparent to me that if I knew more about its meanings I might understand more about social life generally in Mieres. It also occurred to me that questions about our own diet were our neighbors’ way of getting to understand us better, part of the negotiation of more intimate relationships. Sharing meals has been part of the privilege of being drawn into the family circle of our immediate neighbors. How we do this has been a continuing and always illuminating process of exploration. In my notes from as late as May 2004 I recorded that my wife had casually invited Maria, who lives opposite, for coffee one morning:

The conceptual gap was soon evident: she asks, did we mean “breakfast?” No? Well then, just a drop of coffee (caféita). We sit in the loft, looking across at the flowers on her own windowsill. She talks happily for a couple of hours, but insists on just a quarter cup of coffee with lots of milk, and a digestion biscuit. When she goes, she says she has enjoyed the sentada, sitting together. Maria knows our house well and has charge of it while we are away, so coming in and out is not a problem. No hesitation on the threshold, as with other neighbors—she calls out and walks in. She and Pep have eaten here a couple of times, and
we in their house, but these maneuvers always have an experimental feel to them which is much less apparent when we eat together in restaurants. For all of us, it’s a process of discovery: they ask us over for a snack, and it turns out to be a wonderful fully-fledged Catalan lunch; we take over a bottle of wine, which they accept politely though they’re a bit baffled. When they return the compliment by coming over for lunch with us, Maria brings a bottle of wine “because it’s the English custom.” For one lunch we produce cheese, ham, sausage, salads, and Pep sets about it all with his own sharp pocket knife, picnic style, paring off chunks of bread and eating with knife and fingers. I remember those ethnographically confusing situations in Africa, Malaysia… But entertaining our vegetarian friends in California has been a LOT more confusing than entertaining Maria and Pep.

The hearth, the llar del foc, is the emotional core of the Catalan home, and the centripetal attraction of warmth, food, and intimate company would be familiar to people all over the world. When Teresa’s brother made sweeping modernizations to the house around them, the elderly spinster would not allow him to touch the old fireplace. In tune with her long, frugal life it was primeval simple: no grate, just sticks in a small pyramid on the flat stone; a narrow flue to draw away the smoke; a water pot swung over the embers on an iron crane; and on each side a tiny bench, barely large enough for the buttocks of two wiry Catalans. The new butane gas cooker and oil-fired central-heating radiators installed by her brother seemed to back away discreetly from this anachronism, this swath of the living-room wall blackened with soot and tar.

Robert Hughes evokes the scaled-up and elaborated version of this “sacramental space” in the casa pairal, the classic Catalan patrician home, and the little hierarchic society that clustered around it:

The llar had a fireplace hood the size of a small room, under which a whole family could sit; a swinging crane of oak, from which a cauldron hung on chains; a battery of grills, pokers, and spits; a row of pots and earthenware basins on a long mantlepiece; and straight-backed wooden chairs—with arms and a drawer under the seat for the avi, or “patriarch,” of the clan and his wife, the mestressa or padrina, and plain ones for the rest of the family, starting with the hereu or heir, the oldest son, and the pubilla, or oldest daughter, and going down the fixed line of rank and seniority to the stools for youngest children and farmhands. The same undeviating order was observed in the bench seating around the table at meals.¹

Although in idea there may be a simple link between a family and a house, in reality many buildings have been shared, especially by poorer tenant and laboring families. For them, the hearth is the most potent symbol of autonomy and identity. The presence of more than one family in a house is signaled to the wider world by the number of chimneys. In the past, these provided a ready reckoning of population: in 1553, Mieres was recorded as a village of forty-one hearths rather than so-many souls. Smoke rising from a chimney still announces presence, life, activity. In winter months this is how people round about get to know that my wife and I are back home in Mieres. As the focus of food-preparation the hearth has been most closely and singularly associated with a woman. There is a strong sense of proprietary interest and hierarchy, dominated by the mother or mother-in-law, the mestressa, the mistress of the house. Sharing a hearth is a legendary source of tension. When we shared our house for several years with our Spanish friends, the greatest mystery of cohabitation to our neighbors was how the two women could live amicably with the one small gas cooker. Why did one of them not take over the living-room chimney for a stove of her own? We explained that we ate together but took turns at preparing meals. It amused us to think that in California, the bathroom would have outranked the kitchen as the unshareable facility. As we husbands elbowed each other at the sink after meals, we wondered why nobody seemed to regard this as a zone of contention, probably because no respectable Catalan male would be seen dead there. When I joined our neighbors outside on summer evenings after a postprandial session at the sink, Pep would declare: “If they made me wash dishes I’d smash ‘em all.” His wife delivered her retort to the night air: “Next time, I’m going to marry an Englishman.”

For years I have joked with anthropology students that you can’t begin to understand other people until you know what they have for breakfast, that most idiosyncratic of meals. It can range from nothing, to scrapings from last night’s supper pot, to the hearty meal of porridge, bacon and eggs, toast and marmalade, and tea with which my mother set us up for the day in Scotland. A reading of the supermarket shelves in Catalan towns over the last fifteen years indicates a shift in the younger generation toward the international norms of confectionary cereals, but older Mierencs still start the day by “killing the worm” gnawing at their gut: the trenca el cuec is a piece of chocolate, a little bread, and a sip of water, wine, or milk taken on rising at about six o’clock.² Isabel reminisced:

When we were children, we drank milk, and ate pieces of chocolate. Honestly, our parents brought us up well. Every Tuesday my father went to Banyoles and brought back bananas for us, oranges. Nothing was lacking. My father always got up very early to work in the fields. He
would bring us bread and chocolate in bed. He was very, very fond of children, my father. And my mother too. But there was a lot of work, too. Bread and chocolate in bed—well, honestly, people don’t do that now.

For working people, breakfast proper is around ten in the morning, a substantial meal with pantomáquet (bread or toast smeared with garlic, oil, and squeezed tomato) and perhaps a grilled sausage or lamb chop. For professionals and office staff who no longer take the three-hour afternoon break that has until recently been the Mediterranean norm, there is a tendency for the later breakfast to merge with lunch at around one o’clock. The “proper” time for this main meal of the day is nearer to three, still the favored time for big family lunches at the weekend. Descriptions of everyday lunch menus tend to become very expansive; never, I was told, less than two courses for hard-working people, beginning with soup or meat, then rice or potatoes with a piece of pork or a sausage, then a salad. At night there was a light supper of bread, cheese, or dried sausage.

Our daily bread—el nostre pa de cada dia—is basic to the diet. Even modest village houses had cavernous ovens set into their walls, and a remarkable object in the larger household was the pastera, the big coffin-like box in which the dough was set to rise. Milk has always been important, drawn fresh from the cow in the good old days, before regulations about pasteurizing and homogenizing led to the variant now being sold in shrink-wrapped, multipack, liter cartons. People still cook mainly with lard (sagi). It is striking how little olive oil is used in this region, now mainly in salads or on pantomáquet. For working people lard did not translate into surplus body weight—the rigors of manual labor took care of that. I have never seen a fat peasant farmer anywhere (fat landlords or overseers—yes) and archive pictures of the small, wiry people at work in the fields indicate that Catalonia was no exception. People like to say they ate well, but descriptions tend to get exaggerated by culinary nostalgia. All meals become the meal as the whole repertoire collapses into a single carnivorous collage, in which the mundane cabbage or carrot bears no mention. When conversation turns to the bleak times of the misèria, older people often make a virtue of enforced frugality, excoriating today’s extravagances and dilating on how a very simple diet of home-produced vegetables can
be augmented with skill, imagination, and the addition of
foraged snails or mushrooms. The care with which they still
assemble meals owes as much to die-hard habits of poverty
as appreciation of latter-day abundance.

Entering into the alimentary spirit of Mieres meant try-
ing to decipher the rules about eating in private and eating
in public. In the ordinary run of daily life families do not
eat outside the house. I was told that however much people
might like to talk about food, the everyday frugal reality
should be kept behind closed doors. This resonates with my
own upbringing, so I was surprised to see neighbors straying
from the table out into the plaçita, eating an apple or an ice
cream. In my childhood even that was considered decadent
(the thrill was smuggling tidbits from the table to share with
our friends outside), and at my draconian Scottish board-
ing school we got thrashed for it. In Catalonia, kin gather
from far and wide to eat together, but there is no tradition
of inviting neighbors in to share a meal. For that, people go
out into public spaces, where a degree of formality applies.
Thus, our neighbors occasionally carry a trayful of cake,
soft drinks, and ratafia out into the plaçita for a verbena (or
revella in Catalan) to mark an anniversary or special event,
and we have learned to do likewise—for example, when we
inaugurated our new doorway. Participation is defined very
pragmatically by the same group of people who gather out-
side their homes to chat on long summer evenings. Even so,
maintaining reciprocity is something of a problem, and it
is noticeable that those who are uneasy about this intimacy
tend to keep their distance.

There is no lack of enthusiasm for eating outside when
it is properly sanctioned. Communal feasting is a venera-
able Mediterranean tradition, the formal opportunity for
a big blowout, freed from anxieties about reciprocity or
the quality of the fare.7 In Mieres, alfresco dinners have
become one of the principal ways of asserting community
membership and local solidarity. They may involve prepar-
ing food together, or buying a ticket for a catered meal, as
at the finale of the annual Fiesta in August. Events like
this provide newcomers and expatriate Mierencs with an
immediate point of purchase on the community, and it is
often they who have taken the initiative in a new variant of
public feasting in Mieres, the barrio dinner party (sopar de
barrí). I know best the sopar that celebrated the neighbor-
hood that includes our house, and thus ourselves. The most
immediate precedent for the party was a supper organized
in 1987 to raise funds for the repair of the barrio chapel. On
that occasion word went out to everyone who could trace
an association with the neighborhood, and a memorable
evening raised almost enough to pay the repair bills. The
next sopar was held in 2001, with about fifty participants,
including ourselves. The moving force has been the mostly
expatriate middle generation, the sons and daughters
who were raised in Mieres, who left to get jobs and raise
their own families elsewhere, and whose Mieres parents
are either elderly or deceased. In this new “tradition” the
plaçita was decorated with festive bunting, mostly Catalan
flags, crisscrossed among the houses from drainpipes, balco-
nies, and electric cables. Trestle tables and a big barbecue
grill were rented from the municipality. The central rite
of the sopar was a shared dinner consisting mainly of carns
a la brassa, the Catalan bestiary of barbecued chicken,
lamb, pork, and sausage, accompanied by bread and a
salad. “Afters” (postres) were cake (coca) and (instant) cof-
fee. Copious amounts of red wine, champagne, and bottled
water were followed by muscatel, whisky, cognac, and gin.
The salads were prepared in the afternoon by several of
the women, and around 8 p.m. the men fired up the grill, and
the meat was ready for a prompt 9 p.m. start to the dinner.
We brought our own chairs, crockery, and utensils, and
families established themselves in groups around the three
ranks of tables. During the course of the meal people wan-
dered around, greeting one another and changing places.
Toward the end of the evening, the costs were calculated
and subscriptions collected in cash from the participants.
The toasts were brief and spontaneous—there was no
obvious master of ceremonies. The party wound up around
midnight, the local residents folding up the tables and
sweeping the plaçita. Next morning, all that remained was
the bunting, rustling in the breeze.

The mood is sentimental, and the sopar is a viscer-
ally satisfying way of asserting that life goes on in a village
threatened with depopulation. But the inspiration for this
new genre is drawn largely from urban experience, the
street parties of the towns and cities that serve essentially
the same purpose of expressing local esprit de corps. The
success of our sopar animated the other barrios of the
village, and very soon the people on the main street got
permission to close the thoroughfare to traffic, set up tables,
and hold a dinner that reportedly outdid ours in attendance
(120 people), conviviality, and fare. The first two years a
subscription was collected, but in 2004 people brought their
own food and drink out into the street to eat and share:
freshly made pizza, sautéed snails, salads, and desserts. They
have organized a supper each July since, a matter of satis-
faction to the street’s residents, especially since ours ran
out of steam after three years, mainly because two of our
elderly sponsors had died. In 2006 I went down with my
camera to investigate the mainstreet party, and although I
was welcomed by friends and acquaintances and invited to eat, the sense of privacy in the closed-off street was palpable. Back in our own barrio ten minutes later I was debriefed on what felt very much like an espionage mission. The little screen on my digital camera was scrutinized to see who was there. Was there music? What were they eating? The idea of taking your own food out into the street rather than preparing it together was derided, but a sense of regret about the loss of our own sopar hung heavily in the air.

The Mieres municipality understands the political virtues of providing drinks and snacks—refrigeris—and serves them gratis at the various civic events. Even quite modest development projects like the inauguration of a new septictank are the occasion for a mini-fiesta, of which there may be three or four in a busy year. In 2001 I attended the official opening of a half-kilometer stretch of repaved road near the village. The mayor delivered a substantial speech to a dozen of us, and a colleague from a nearby town cut the yellow tape. A gang of children had gathered in a shady ditch freshly lined with white cement, in anticipation of the main attraction: a buffet catered by one of the local restaurants. As soon as the signal—a burst of amplified Catalan music—was given, they swarmed over the treats. The adults made the most of the champagne, wine, and beer, an odd music—was given, they swarmed over the treats. The adults

In the interest of “fomenting culture” the municipality also subsidizes refreshments at other social events, for example the annual fireworks party for the Feast of Saint John. It was started by the people of the newest barrio, but in 2004 a notice in the shop window announcing municipal refrigeris opened the event explicitly to all comers, and people in the other village barrios felt they had the right, and maybe also the duty, to participate. By 2006 the noise and fun had increased exponentially, and a new social institution was evidently locked into place.

The counterpoint to everyday frugality is the massive restaurant blowout, in which Catalonia merits truly global ratings. For epicure dining Catalonia boasts a galaxy of Michelin stars. Ferran Adrià is considered by many the world’s greatest chef, and if you want a seat in his El Bulli restaurant on the Costa Brava you should know that there are already 250 people in the queue ahead of you. Away from the tourist zones the countryside is dotted with excellent restaurants catering to a very exacting popular clientele; and they serve as strategic meeting-points for fragmented extended families. On the pretext of one anniversary or another, the families pack themselves in at the weekends to stuff themselves, shedding significant chunks of disposable income on the pretext of sparing the labor of the womenfolk. People feast at long refectory-style boards or on tables ganged together, relatives rubbing shoulders with strangers, familiarity expanding as course follows course. These restaurants are monuments to conviviality (Mieres, with a resident population of about 350, has two of them), and because everyone talks so much about food they have become familiar even to people who have never eaten there. Inspired by this hearsay, we joined the throng one Sunday at Can Tura in Sant Aniol, a gastronomic outpost tucked into a small valley over the ridge from Mieres. We were accompanied by our Spanish friends, a couple from Madrid who were as dazed by the experience as we were. Post-recovery, I composed the following ethnographic notes:

There was nothing in the least nouvelle or macciol about the cuisine. It was cuisine pig-out, every peasant’s dream of what lunch really ought to be. When we opened the door of this farmhouse establishment at 2.30 it was already jammed with people yelling cheerfully at each other. A young man with a fancy keyboard kept the decibels pumped up.

The menu reminded me of village feasts in places like Kashmir, with its relentless succession of carnivorous dishes. This, I think, is part of the peasant heritage: people who eat cabbage and beans every day of life make sure these are banished from sight on high days and Holy days. These folk, gorging themselves on meat and fish, were definitely not the Catalan elite, they were farmers and provincial clerks, small-town laborers and shop assistants. As lamb followed duck, and duck followed sausage, we would have killed for a bit of green vegetable, but the scraps of bruised lettuce under the anchovies was as much as we ever saw. If they had been truly hungry and very determined, our vegetarian friends in Santa Barbara would have been able to do nothing more than fish out the odd mushroom.

The style was table d’hôte, which I think was not meant to imply that the chef made authoritative choices on the diner’s behalf, but rather that she served her clients every creature they could conceivably wish to eat, flying, walking, swimming, or slithering, in a relentless procession. Dishes presented as individual courses quickly yielded to bowls stacked up on each other on wicker trays. There was certainly enough to provision two couples like ourselves for a week of gluttony, though everyone else around us ate as if there was no tomorrow and a great many empty yesterdays. Six young people at the next table—we guessed that one couple had just got married, or might be about to do so if they survived the meal—stuffed themselves with great whoops of gle. The fellow in Levis and T-shirt facing me was pure Breughel...
large bottoms and flushed faces whirled round between the tightly packed tables. It was scary to think of all those lunches in motion—never have so many snails been made to move so fast. The floorboards heaved alarmingly. To avoid looking so conspicuous, we staggered to our feet and cavorted a little to an international medley.

The next run of courses, from the cheeses to the gateaux, are a blur. The staff who egged us on with cheery cries and little squeezings of our arms had certainly noticed the mounting anguish with which we received each new offering. Incredulous, we asked if anyone ever ate the whole meal, but it was already apparent that they did. The wispy little teenager at the next table ate fourteen times her body weight while we picked and poked. The host told us that after one family had wiped their dishes clean, he asked if they were still hungry. They ordered—and were served—freshly grilled steaks.

At around five-thirty the joviality reached a climax when the staff abandoned their duties and dived into the throng, spinning and stamping and whooping with the rest of them. Just when one might expect them to be on their last legs, they were only beginning to find their form. I was stuck in a corner watching the young man whop the key-board, but through the veil of Havana smoke I could vaguely discern Francesca and Elisa spinning across the ceiling from one set of brawny Catalan arms into another.
It was extremely difficult to extract a bill from Mine Host and Hostess, so absorbed were they in these sacraments. Eventually we found that several thousand pesetas had been slashed from our account, we suspect because they had tactically skipped the odd course.

In retrospect I am surprised that after this convivial glut I had the stamina to relive the experience in so much detail. But that is the way with memorable meals—we continue to feed off them long after they have been digested. So often, recollections of a particular place and time proceed outward from the visceral memory of a particular dish, eventually embracing the company of particular people. One canapé or a freshly picked apple may be all it takes, but the Catalan Sunday lunch, like the mata-porc before it, argues unashamedly that the bigger the blowout the fonder the embrace.

NOTES

My special thanks to Francesca Bray, Ramon Guardans, Elisa Martin, Juan Gamella, and all our foodie friends in Mieres.


4. The Garrotxa word fartanega—eating to excess, getting stuffed—is especially graphic. See Ramon Llongarriu, Un any a pagès: La comarca d’Olot. Una agricultura cerealista i de subsistència (Girona, Llibres de Batet, 1995), 112.


6. The Spanish have long been lusty consumers of chocolate, a byproduct of their colonial interests in Central America.