

A VEGETARIAN IN SPAIN (AND OTHER TALES OF WOE)

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Spanish Food & Customs

I used to consider myself well-traveled—flexible, able to adapt to a new language and cultural environment with relative ease. After all, I'd spent a total of five months in Argentina, over a month in Mexico, and a summer in Austria. But after recently spending just one week in Spain, I realized I'd never actually “adapted” to a new country before. I'd socialized in another language and dined on local delicacies ...but I'd never lived within another country's rhythm. Spain shook my world. I'm still trying to recover.

The difference this time is that I wasn't a “traveler.” I was a guest—staying with a Spanish family (that one day could be my own), and a potential new member of a long-standing and large group of friends. Though it was often difficult, if not impossible, to follow the flurry of Spanish jokes and euphemisms flying across the table, the real challenge in adapting to the new environment can be summed up with one word: *food*.



Spanish tapas: they keep coming, and coming...

Vegetarianism in Spain

That one word, however, represents many layers. The most obvious (and anticipated) challenge was that I'm vegetarian. I knew my partner's mother was particularly worried about what to cook for me, though some of the pressure was relieved when it was shared that I do occasionally eat seafood. In my "normal" life, this occurs once every three months or so. But in Spain, a meal without meat or seafood is not a real meal (case in point, my partner—albeit lovingly—calls my meals "fake food"). Therefore, the amount and variety of seafood that I ate in one week exceeded the amount I'd eaten in the previous two years.

I tried dishes I'd never dreamed of trying before: calamari, squid, anchovies, scarlet shrimp, mussels, etc. I was encouraged to try octopus, but that is one delicacy I'll save for a more highly developed palette (I've heard our taste buds change every seven years).

I was, however, treated to a rare and incredible vegetarian meal at [*El Estragón Vegetariano*](#) in the company of my partner and two very macho Spanish men. I had been warned in advance that these two men *need* their meat, so the plan was to find a tapas bar at which we could select small plates to suit our contrasting needs. The suggestion to instead eat at a vegetarian restaurant began as a joke, but after passing two vegetarian restaurants in a row, the guys started taking the joke seriously (with visible looks of fear). Despite my insistence that I was uncomfortable with the idea of asking people I'd just met to accommodate my unusual (for Spain) diet, it was decided that we'd first dine at a vegetarian restaurant and afterward stop at McDonald's for the guys (yep).

The men stepped into the restaurant with trepidation. One of them pointed at a sign just inside the door that read, "100% meat-free," and gulped like a child forced to eat broccoli. They began making jokes to mask their discomfort, "This is a vegetarian restaurant, and yet the plants are fake," began Macho #1. "That's because they're afraid the guests

will eat them,” Macho #2 replied. When the menus came, they appeared very focused and confused. Tofo? Seitan? How do you have a meatless lasagna? Eventually they decided on dishes with the most familiar words (eggs, cheese, potatoes). At first, I felt anxiously responsible for their first experience at a vegetarian restaurant to be positive, but when I saw the potential for humor in the situation, I let it go.

When the meals arrived, it was impossible not to chuckle. Traditionally, I’d seen our Spanish company enthusiastically anticipate, and somewhat salivate, upon the arrival of their food. This time, however, was met with their dead silence. It was a lot for them to take in. If I were to surmise, their body language indicated that they were somewhat surprised at how edible it looked. No leaves or otherwise wild-looking substances lay upon their plate. The sauce surrounding Macho #1’s lasagna-like dish however, was met with skepticism. He slowly dipped his fork in the sauce, raised it to his lips, and touched the tip of his tongue to the foreign substance. “I’m not sure I’m going to like this,” he announced. But to his credit, he did not give up.

Macho #2 began to break his silence as well, and before long, jovial conversation returned to the table as everyone dined on their new food-like products without analyzing it further. At the end of the meal, with only some of that questionable sauce remaining on his plate, Macho #1 took what was left of his bread and mopped it up with delight. Success! When asked (after a round of the obligatory dessert and coffee) if they still wanted to go to McDonald’s, they laughed. Who knows what their dinner that night consisted of—probably an extra pound of steak—but I can say with confidence that the men’s first vegetarian meal was much better than they’d thought it would be. Honestly, I could not think of a deeper expression of love for their friend than dining at a vegetarian restaurant in honor of his new girlfriend. I’m touched.

With the exception of American’s influence on Spain’s food culture (i.e. McDonald’s), I found traditional Spanish cuisine to be of incredible quality. An abundance and variety of fresh vegetables and fruits (I tried

my first [cherimoya](#)!) and an addiction to fresh bread are enough to please even a visiting vegan. The country does enjoy an assortment of fried foods, but even these are cooked in a high quality olive oil—a product so loved and heavily used that five liter jugs are available in abundance at the supermarket. For meat-eaters, I’ve heard foreigners describe [serrano ham](#) as the best Spanish invention. The sight below was a bit of a shock for this visiting vegetarian.



Serrano ham, hung proudly and abundantly at the supermarket.

If you struggle, as I did at first, to consider Spanish eating habits to be healthy, don’t try to argue the point with a Spanish citizen. You will lose. Instead, acquaint yourself with the [“Mediterranean diet”](#) before planning a visit (or dating a Spanish man) and try to remain open to considering that everything you once thought you knew about eating healthy may be subjective. I wish I had.

Spanish Eating Times & Habits

Aside from *what* the Spanish eat, let’s talk about *how* they eat. The Spanish “live to eat, not eat to live,” as my partner says. Anyone who has ever visited Spain knows that food is the nucleus of the country’s culture. It is the most talked about topic of conversation, the most highly

anticipated activity of the day, and the most prolonged process I'd ever experienced. Due to my western upbringing, Spanish meal times are a practice in patience. For starters, they eat five meals per day. FIVE. Breakfast is small, but consists of what I've been raised to consider dessert. *Chocolate con churros* (fried dough dipped in thick hot chocolate) is a breakfast (and late night) standard. Brunch is the next meal, served around 10:30 am as a light snack before lunch, the main meal of the day. Lunch begins around 2:00 pm, to coincide with the mid-day siesta. This is a daily five-course meal, folks. In addition to requiring meat in order to be a "real" meal, bread, fruit (and or a heavier dessert), and coffee are equally mandatory.



My first traditional Spanish breakfast: chocolate con churros

Lunch is a very social event. In contrast to the American pattern of eating lunch quickly (and often alone) before needing to return to the office, or even eating at one's desk, this meal is an excellent opportunity to form tighter bonds with one's colleagues. Spanish culture is, after all, highly based on relationships. After the two to three-hour meal, the *merienda* (of which there is no English translation) is served around 6:00 pm to get one through the rest of the work day and stay satiated until dinner. The merienda is a light meal—another social event that often consists of tapas, or small plates. Around 10:00 pm, dinner is finally

served. While I was in Spain, this took the form of another five-course-meal (I mistakenly did not pace myself, and often ended up teetering out after the appetizers), however at my incredulousness at the amount of food the Spanish put away, my partner insists that the size of this meal (eaten with different hosts each night) was a result of our visit being a special occasion.

Special occasion or not, the Spanish can *eat*. And when you're their guest, they want you to eat too. I tried. Really, I did. My newly expanded stomach is proof of my valiant efforts. But despite those efforts, I never could avoid what I interpreted as looks of disappointment and rebuttals when I declared, "No, thank you, I am full." It's also Spanish culture to insist that you *make* room. I observed with fascination that even though my partner's mother would insist upon each of us eating more, when she chose not to eat more herself, it was the rest of the family's turn to jump in, "What?! Come on! Why not? Eat it!" She replied with equal disdain, "No means no, I said I don't want it. Leave me alone!"

I asked my partner why everyone participates in this game—why do they enjoy hassling people so much about eating more? "Actually, we don't enjoy it, it's annoying," he laughed. "It evolved as retaliation for the years their mother and the mother before that annoyed them." Sometimes you just have to laugh at the absurdity of social tradition. If not, in Spain at least, you'll either end up immensely fat or perpetually annoyed.

In Conclusion...

Despite my own occasional annoyance at what felt like pressure to stuff myself silly and try foods I'd ordinarily never consider, I realized the real source of the charade stemmed from love. To the Spanish, to eat well—to feed your guests well—is an act of pride and pleasure. And even though I was encouraged to eat a lot more food and more often than usual, all of my hosts went to great lengths to provide me with

incredible vegetarian and seafood options—lovingly prepared and generously offered. I truly felt like an esteemed guest throughout my first visit to Spain—not just a traveler. And though that experience did shake my world, I anticipate that it will be hard to ever go back to being “just a traveler.”