



Asia discovers Spain

The Spanish are picking up the pace in their efforts to acquaint the world with their cuisine and produce. *Mischa Moselle reports*

El Bulli, Mugaritz, El Celler de Can Roca, Arzak, Martin Berasategui, Asador Etxebarri, El Poblet – these are culinary names to conjure with. Seven of the top 100 restaurants in the world, manned by some contemporary culinary legends, are based in Spain.

While chefs such as Ferran Adria or Paco Torreblanc may be better known for their surprising ingredients and combinations and their unlikely use of food processing technology, even they can rely on the quality

of Spanish ingredients at their simplest.

Ferran Adria, the magician behind the molecular gastronomy of world number one restaurant El Bulli has been happy to develop recipes for Borges olive oil – the company is the world's largest exporter.

Mediterranean neighbours France and Italy also have their distinctive, well-known and well-loved cuisines and produce and both are easy to find across Asia. Spanish food is more difficult to find but this may be about to change.

Spain has a huge variety of produce to export as the country has one of Europe's longest coastlines, which borders both the Mediterranean and the Atlantic oceans, and also contains the full spectrum of climates from mountains to fertile plains to desert.

In the past the Spanish have been happy to consume their own produce but according to the organisers of the trade show Alimentaria, held every two years in Barcelona, the last two decades have seen important changes in Spain's attitude to the outside world. These changes are mirrored in the history of the show itself.

The show started with an edition in Barcelona aimed at Spanish and European buyers. The next stage was a move to Portugal with the opening of Horexpo-Lisboa, closely

Pata Negra House's retail outlet at Great in Hong Kong



are expecting around 20 percent of the expected 150,000 attendees to come from abroad.

Ocean Pine's experience of discovering Spanish food is fairly typical. The Hong Kong company, which has been importing meat for 30 years, only discovered the Spanish jamon (ham) it now imports in the early 1990s. And the company's founder had to go to Spain to make the discovery.

Spanish producers are also being forced to look to the outside world as a market, as the country will be one of the last in Europe to exit the current recession and unemployment stands at roughly 20 percent. According to research commissioned by Alimentaria, Spanish consumers are turning to supermarket own label goods rather than



Spanish wines are stimulating interest in Spanish food

of Fiesta, a company that imports a wide variety of Spanish goods to Hong Kong, it is sportsmen not chefs who have popularised Spanish food in the territory.

"It's Real Madrid footballers, tennis player Rafael Nadal and driver Fernando Alonso who have made Spain exciting over here."

The apparent reluctance of Spanish chefs to work abroad is explained by Borja Sanchez, Secretary General of the Spanish Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong.

"Chefs in Spain don't work for the money. Sure, they want to make a living but they want professional recognition and the high status that being a chef in Spain has," he says.

Unemployment may be forcing the reluctance to work abroad to wane a little but there is certainly no shortage of traffic the other way – foreign chefs can join a long queue of buyers visiting the country to investigate the cuisine. Many will work for free to take *stages* at restaurants such as El Bulli or Arzak.

Fresh olives

Tom Bennell, Managing Director of the Fresh Olive Company in Hong Kong, says the company has been doing business in Spain for 19 years. Aside from Romeo brand olive oil, the company distributes Jalapeño-stuffed olives and saffron from La Mancha

“Spanish products do not operate in terms of price, but rather quality”
Jaime Montalvo

followed by expansions into North and South America with Alimentaria Mexico in Mexico City and Alimentaria Mercosur in Argentina. The show is continuing its project to turn Spain's face to the world by aiming to attract an increasing number of international exhibitors and visitors. Some 1,500 of the 5,000 companies exhibiting in 2010 will be foreign and the Asian component will include representatives of China, Indonesia, India, South Korea, Singapore and Vietnam.

Spain faces the world

The organizers of Alimentaria 2010

premium, branded goods.

Spanish goods do indeed come at a premium. Jaime Montalvo, General Manager for Promotion of the Spanish trade promotion body ICEX told a press conference attended by AHCT in Barcelona that "Spanish products do not operate in terms of price, but rather quality, because of their ability to reach the consumer and satisfy more complex needs."

While Spain has the quality products that Asia wants and a pressing need to export them, it is a little lacking in the ambassadors to bring the products to a wider audience. According to Florence Lo, the founder



Buyers eye up olive oil at Alimentaria 2008



Pata Negra House pigs in an oak forest

amongst other goods.

Bennell believes Spanish food and Chinese diners make a good match because they share a similar attitude to food. Although what is available in the country varies a great deal from north to south, there is a common liking for good food that is not actually fussiness.

"Spain is very similar to China in its attitude to food. People go out to eat at night and the whole family is there regardless of age. Food revolves around freshness."

Fiesta sells Grupo SOS's Carbonell

A Belota ham from Ocean Pine



Intramuscular fat gives Iberico ham its flavour



pure Duroc. Pure Duroc is red and a kind of breed with a particularly high content of intramuscular fat that makes it particularly tasty.”

The Pata Negra House is another company in Hong Kong specialising in Spanish products. Well-known for its retail ‘footprint’ in stores such as Great, the company also sells to many leading hotels.

The company’s Sales and Marketing manager Tristan Saint Raymond tells *AHCT*

Recebo quality is partly acorn fed and partly grain fed on a farm to bring it up to weight.

The regions are Valle de los pedroches near Cordoba, Jabugo, Guijelo and Extramadurra. According to Saint Raymond each has a different quality as different oaks growing in different soils will have different flavours.

Fiesta’s Lo adds another factor into the mix, the marbling. Lo holds a packet of Iberico next to a packet of Serrano ham and the difference in the quantity of marbling is plain to see and the reason for the premium price of the Iberico also becomes apparent.

Olivier Pacific is the Hong Kong importer of, amongst many other products, 5J Iberico ham. According to the company’s Managing Director Oliver Win this is the benchmark standard for jamon. The 5J means Cinco Jotas or Five Reasons why the jamon is supposed to be so good.

The first reason is the 100 percent purity of the pigs, which live free range in a national park from April-December. Then there is the traditional curing, using a technique developed in 1879, and the unique climate of the Jabugo region where the pigs come from and finally the use of master craftsmen to create the product.

Win believes that Mediterranean restaurants are becoming more popular and that diners looking for new experiences will be happy to see Spanish food added to the existing available mix of Italian and French.

Win also points out that jamon carving has become widespread in top hotel restaurants and the sight of a leg of ham on a stand is now far from unusual.

Perhaps much of the widespread growth of interest in Spanish food is also due to greater interest in Spanish wine. The Wines from Spain campaign has helped promote the drink, as has the large presence of Spanish producers at Asian trade fairs.

Spain is now the second largest producer of wine by volume in the world, not far behind Italy and delegating France to third place, according to the International Organisation of Vine and Wine. **AHCT**

brand olive oil, made from olives grown all over Spain. Lo points out that olive oil fits in with the healthy Mediterranean diet, a way of life that meets many contemporary concerns about food and health.

Probably the most ubiquitous of Spanish products currently is ham or jamon, also known as olive trees with legs for their fat content. Surprisingly this is not as unhealthy as it sounds. The fat is said to be cholesterol free and to lower existing cholesterol in the diner.

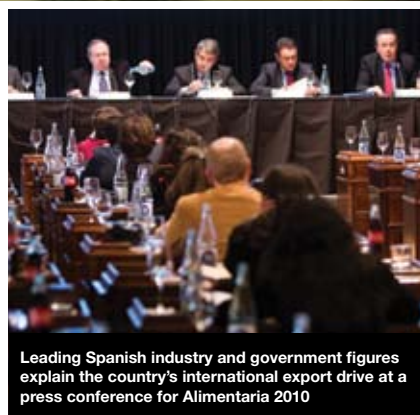
Francisco Sensat, President of the Association for the Advancement of the Mediterranean Diet told the Alimentaria press conference that the diet is far more than a question of what is eaten but also an attitude to life that emphasises healthy habits and balance. The Mediterranean diet is said to not only be good for the heart and longevity but also prevent depression.

A conference on the diet will be a feature of Alimentaria 2010.

Healthy hams

Ocean Pine’s Manager for Business Development Gary Chan explains the varieties of Spanish jamon.

“Iberico ham and Serrano ham are from different breeds of pig, using different feeds and animal husbandry. Iberico Ham is cured from Iberian Black Hoof Pig and the pigs are mainly from the south-western part of Spain close to Portugal. Serrano ham is cured from a cross breed of white pig that includes



Leading Spanish industry and government figures explain the country’s international export drive at a press conference for Alimentaria 2010

that Pata Negra means black foot and comes from the Iberian breed of pig that is the source of much of the jamon sold by the company.

“The pigs live in oak forests in the south of Spain where they eat acorns that give them a specific taste. After slaughter the ham is salted for roughly two weeks, depending on the weight, and then washed, dried and cured for between 24-48 months. The average is 36 months but sometimes longer is taken to give a stronger taste,” says Saint Raymond.

He adds that there are two basic qualities of jamon and four regions to be aware of. Belota (the word means acorn) quality is the best and from a pig that is minimum 75 percent Iberian breed and had a diet high in acorns. These pigs are mostly free-range forest dwellers.

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