

Food and Food Related Habits in Spain

by Chaklader Mahboob-ul Alam

OVER forty years ago, on a windy autumn evening, my friend Mohammad Aslam Nuri, and I arrived at the Barajas airport near Madrid from Karachi after a sleepless night and several stops at places with mythical (at least that was what seemed to us at that time) names like Damascus (or was it Baghdad?), Cairo, Fumicino, Barcelona, etc. Although physically exhausted, mentally we were very excited because for us it was the beginning of a sojourn, which held out the promises of great expectations.

The Pakistani Charge d'affaires, Mr. Bashir ul Alam (I still remember Mr. Alam, his wife and their daughter Mitra with deep affection and gratitude) had sent an embassy car to collect us at the airport. Manolo, the chauffeur, who had fought in the Spanish civil war on the wrong side, was very efficient and courteous. He propelled us through the customs and immigration formalities at such a speed that even today I have a vague feeling that he misled the police about our status — we were treated as though we were visiting dignitaries from an exotic country. Although neither Aslam Nuri nor I spoke any Spanish, he soon made us feel comfortable in his broken English. It took Manolo only fifteen or twenty minutes to drive us to a hotel in the elegant Salamanca district of Madrid, where the embassy had reserved a room for us until suitable accommodation could be found at one of the halls of residence of the University of Madrid or elsewhere.

It was about 8 o'clock in the evening. Both of us were quite hungry. So after a quick shower, we decided to go downstairs and look for the hotel restaurant. We knew that people in Europe drank alcohol. So it did not come as a shock to us when we found a place close to the hotel lobby, where people were drinking all sorts of alcoholic beverages. But we could not find any place where food was being served. We experienced our first major culture shock while looking for a place to have our dinner. The clerk at the reception desk looked at his watch and said that it was too early for dinner and that we should wait until nine thirty, if we wanted to have a proper dinner. (In most other European countries like the UK, France and Germany, one can have dinner quite early in the evening. Even today, when Spain has become fully integrated into the EEC, no self-respecting restaurant in Madrid or Barcelona would serve dinner before nine o'clock. In my time, both in Dhaka and Karachi, one could have a regular meal virtually at any time of the day. In any case, later we shall cover more fully Spanish

meal times and eating habits.)

He suggested that if we wanted some snacks, we could have them at the bar, where drinks were being served. Although we were rather apprehensive about Spanish food, we decided to wait.

At about nine thirty we came back to the hotel after a short walk. As we approached the restaurant area, we could sense a strange smell, which was disagreeable to the extent of being mildly nauseating. The maître guided us to a table (where there were already two pieces of bread and water) and gave us two huge (I wonder why they make them so big) menus with great ceremony. They were in Spanish. Since we did not understand what was on the menu and also because we wanted to avoid pork, we were at a loss to decide what to order. Besides, that particular smell had by then become pervasive and was gradually making us feel sick. We looked around. At a nearby table, we saw a child eating something which looked like fried eggs, tomatoes and plain white rice (which we later came to learn was called "arroz a la Cubana"). Nothing could be more harmless than that. So when the maître came back to take our order we pointed our fingers towards that table and ordered the same for us. Since we were very hungry, by expressive movement of our hands, we gave him the understanding that not only did we want that dish but also double the quantity served there.

As we eagerly waited for the meal, the waiter served some appetisers, which we tried but did not like. Finally, the meal was served and it hit us like a boxer's punch on the nose. Without really looking for it, we had suddenly found out the source of the foul odour that was bothering us ever since we came close to the restaurant area — it was the olive oil — not only the eggs were fried in olive oil but also there was a generous sprinkling of it on the plain rice. We ate some bread and water. The maître was rather disappointed when we said goodnight to him without really touching the main dish at all.

This was our second culture shock in one day. Later I came to learn that a Spaniard feels more or less the same way when he enters a Bangladeshi home because of the pervasive smell (appetising aroma to us) of the spices. I remember that I had similar experiences in England, when I visited English homes, because of the lingering smell of boiled cabbages and steamed or fried herrings (often butter is used for this purpose). Anyway,

Besides being a physical necessity, eating is also a great source of pleasure for a Spaniard. It is often a family ritual as well, when all the members of the family gather around a table and exchange chit chats and in the process renew their relationships.

Sometimes, it is an occasion for wider social interactions, when the group (maybe the extended family or the neighbours or kinsmen from the village or simply professional

colleagues) gets together ostensibly for a common meal but really to reaffirm the members' loyalty to the group.

we shall discuss all this another day. Let us now get back to olive oil. Little did I know at that time about how taste buds gradually become used to foreign food and new habits are slowly formed. Today, I do not enjoy a good salad if there is not a generous sprinkling of olive oil in it. Needless to say, of course, I did not know that then that much later I shall spend two years of my professional life in helping a multinational corporation to acquire several olive oil factories in Spain. In that process, I learnt a little about the Spanish food industry, in general and edible oils, in particular.

As in the sub-continent we have something called the Bengali diet, which consists of rice, fresh vegetables, greens, mustard oil, river fish, onions, garlic, coriander leaves and small quantities of various aromatic spices, equally in Spain, there is something called the Spanish diet (otherwise known as the Mediterranean diet), which is considered to be very healthy. Although it consists of brown bread, vegetables, greens, legumes, fruit, plenty of sea fish, onions, garlic, some mild spices and small quantities of wine (preferably red), olive oil occupies a central position in its composition. According to some experts, this diet is primarily responsible for the longevity of the Spanish people, which is reputed to be the second in the world only after that of the Japanese. According to a recently (January 20, 2000) published report on research conducted on heart diseases at the Josep Trueta Medical University of Girona, the incidence of heart attack in Spain is the lowest in Europe (200 per 100,000 inhabitants) and only second in the world after China (180 per 100,000). For some the highest rate (800 per 100,000).

This is true that the Spaniards were not aware of the excellence of their diet. Actually, it was only after the end of the Vietnam war that the scientists became particularly aware of the direct relationship between the level of a substance called cholesterol in blood and

heart diseases. People with high cholesterol content in their blood serum, frequently suffer from a heart disease called atherosclerosis (a form of arteriosclerosis), which is caused by the gradual accumulation of a fatty substance around the walls of the arteries. This process slowly but steadily blocks the normal circulation of blood, which finally leads to heart failure and death. Since cholesterol is an alcohol, it is rarely present in blood in its natural form, but is always found mixed with proteins and fatty acids (lipoproteins). The lipoproteins can be broadly divided into two groups — high density lipoproteins (HDL) and low density lipoproteins (LDL). Since the objective is not to be too technical, for the purpose of this paper, we should just remember that generally speaking LDL is more dangerous for the health than HDL because LDL adheres to the arterial walls more firmly than HDL. For the prevention of heart diseases it is also important to make a distinction between unsaturated fatty acids (liquid fatty acids) and saturated acids (solid fatty acids), because of their very nature it is easier to transport liquid fatty acids than solid fatty acids (usually animal fat) through the arterial system. The unsaturated fatty acids can further be classified into two groups — the monounsaturated and the polyunsaturated. By and large, monounsaturated fatty acids are better than polyunsaturated ones because besides lowering total cholesterol level, they also help maintain the correct proportion of HDL and LDL in the blood. Therefore, a diet containing more monounsaturated fats and less saturated fats would eventually lower the risk of heart attacks.

Unrefined olive oil, (aceite de oliva virgen), which is at the heart of the Mediterranean diet contains 80 per cent monounsaturated fatty acids and only 14 per cent saturated fatty acids. Other vegetable oils such as soybean oil and sunflower seed oil, although contain more unsaturated fatty acids than

saturated ones, are not considered to be as healthy as olive oil because of the presence of very high levels of polyunsaturated fats and lower levels of monounsaturated ones. Olive oil has another advantage over other vegetable oils because it can be heated to 200 degrees centigrade without any fear of its fatty acids becoming saturated. Most other vegetable oils available in the West can stand a temperature of only up to 100 degrees centigrade before their fatty acids become saturated. Since in most Mediterranean countries, people like to eat fried fish, chips and fried vegetables, the use of olive oil for these purposes is considered less harmful than the use of other vegetable oils. Olive oil is also reputed to have a high content of vitamin E.

Another significant characteristic of the Spanish diet is the regular consumption of fresh fish. Although Spanish youngsters like beef steaks, as they grow older they prefer fish to meat. Again, according to certain statistics, the per capita consumption of fish in Spain is only second to that of the Japanese. Recent studies show that the Eskimos of Greenland, who basically survive on fish and consume very little vegetable oil, (not to speak of any olive oil), have very low levels of LDL in their blood serum.

Together with heart diseases, cancers are claiming more and more lives in the Western world. It is not the purpose of this paper to analyse all the causes of this phenomenon. However, it is perhaps not out of context to mention that scientists have discovered that the lack of enough natural roughage in the standard diet in rich industrialised countries is one of the principal reasons for cancerous growths in the colon, and the rectum. The regular consumption of vegetables, greens and salad (which are important components of the Spanish diet) seem to lower these risks.

Now a few words about the

eating habits of the Spaniards. On week days, the Spaniards eat scanty breakfasts — often a coffee and nothing else. Sometimes a half-hearted attempt is made to eat a small round sweetened roll with the coffee. Since most people leave home for work at about 8 o'clock in the morning without really having a break, they usually take a break at about 11 o'clock to have a snack and a coffee. On weekends, they prefer to have a late but big breakfast. Unlike the British, who like fried or poached eggs, bacon, sausages and toasts for breakfast, the Spaniards prefer chocolate (thick hot cocoa) or coffee with "churros" (deep-fried dough sprinkled with sugar). In my opinion, the most interesting feature of the Spanish eating habit as far as the breakfast is concerned is that they prefer a bar (please note that coffee and soft drinks are also served in a bar) to their home for this purpose. An average Spaniard usually visits a bar at least twice a day. Very often a Spaniard would meet with his client at a bar to have a quick discussion over a business deal or to sort out a problem. Actually, bars serve as meeting places not only for business but also for students. No wonder, bar hopping is considered as an integral part of Spanish life. This is one of the reasons why there are so many of them in Spanish towns and villages.

Needless to say, after the 11 o'clock snack, a Spaniard is not hungry at 12 or 12.30, which is when lunch is eaten in Paris, London or Berlin. Unlike in

most other European countries, lunch is the main meal (a three course affair) of the day in Spain and is eaten between 2 and 4 in the afternoon. One starts the lunch with either a hot soup, vegetables (note the vegetables are eaten separately rather than with the main course), salad (there are many varieties of salad), or a plate of appetisers. The main course consists of either meat or fish. The dessert consists of either fresh fruit (there is an incredible variety of apples, pears, strawberries, citrus fruits, melons etc. etc.) or pudding or ice cream. Most Spaniards would drink a glass or two of red wine with the meal and finish it with a small cup of black coffee.

As you would appreciate after such a copious lunch, one cannot feel very hungry at dinner time, which in any case, nowadays is served between 9 and 10 in the evening. If one lives in a small town, the dinner is often replaced by a light meal at a "tapas" bar (typical of Spain), sampling a variety of Spanish dishes in small portions. I remember, many years ago, when Madrid was a cosy little town and women did not work outside their homes, after office hours, many of my colleagues used to meet with their respective wives near the office and stroll (a "paseo") back home. On the way, they used to stop at these "tapas" bars. One can, of course, have a three course dinner at any restaurant, if one feels like it.

While it has become a standard practice in most of Spain to serve more or less the same sort of breakfast, coffee and bun or coffee and "churros", the ingredients for lunch and dinner will depend on the region, where one happens to be in. Spain is a big country and its cuisine varies from region to region because of differing geographical and climatic conditions. For example, in northern Spain (Basque country, Galicia, Asturias and Cantabria), fresh fish and seafood from the Atlantic are so varied (hake, cod, trout, salmon, octopus, oysters,

Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority

222, New Eskaton Road, Dhaka-1000

Tender Notice

No-37/99-2000

Dated: 03-05-2000

Sealed tenders are invited from contractors as per eligibility for the undermentioned works under Bangladesh Export Processing Zone Authority:

Serial No.	Name of work	Estimated cost (in Taka)	Eligibility of contractor	Prescribed time for completion of work (in days)	Price of tender document (in Taka) (non-refundable)
1	Construction of customs gate & gate office at Syedpur EPZ, Sangsali, Nilphamari project area.	Tk. 41,71,336.00	Govt/semi-govt/autonomous organisation enlisted contractors having experience of building construction work worth minimum Tk 22 lakh under a single work order.	180 (one hundred eighty) days.	Tk 1000.00
2	Construction of one 'A' type residential building at Comilla EPZ, Comilla Airport project area.	Tk 1,16,94,503/-	Govt/semi-govt/autonomous organisation enlisted contractors having experience of building construction work worth minimum Tk 59 lakh under a single work order.	365 (three hundred sixty-five) days.	Tk 2000.00
3	Construction of one 'B' type residential building at Comilla EPZ, Comilla Airport project area.	Tk 95,94,194/-	Govt/semi-govt/autonomous organisation enlisted contractors having experience of building construction work worth minimum Tk 48 lakh under a single work order.	365 (three hundred sixty-five) days.	Tk 1500.00
4	Construction of one 'D' type residential building at Comilla EPZ, Comilla Airport project area.	Tk 70,03,674/-	Govt/semi-govt/autonomous organisation enlisted contractors having experience of building construction work worth minimum Tk 36 lakh under a single work order.	240 (two hundred forty) days.	Tk 1500.00
5	Construction of one 'B' type residential building at Ishurdi EPZ, Paksey, Pabna.	Tk 94,02,296/-	Govt/semi-govt/autonomous organisation enlisted contractors having experience of building construction work worth Tk 48 lakh under a single work order.	365 (three hundred sixty-five) days.	Tk 1500.00
6	Construction of a second 'D' type residential building at Ishurdi EPZ, Paksey, Pabna.	Tk 59,12,944/-	Govt/semi-govt/autonomous organisation enlisted contractors having experience of building construction work worth Tk 30 lakh under a single work order.	240 (two hundred forty) days.	Tk 1500.00

Not more than one work taken at valuation above Tk one crore will be offered to one contractor during the same financial year for zones & projects under BEPZA.

Separate tender should be submitted for each work. Earnest money stated in the tender should be submitted with each tender through Bank Draft/Pay Order from any scheduled bank in favour of BEPZA.

Contractors must submit attested true copy of the undermentioned documents in support of their eligibility with the tender. Otherwise tender will be treated as cancelled.

- 1) Current year trade licence.
- 2) Current year enlistment certificate of the contractor.
- 3) Taxpayer's certificate (TIN) in favour of the contractor from Income Tax Authority & VAT registration certificate.

4) Work order & work completion certificate from an officer of minimum Executive Engineer's status.

If any of the documents submitted with the tender is found to be false or fake, then the earnest money submitted with tender will be forfeited and the tender cancelled.

Tenders can be purchased from BEPZA Executive Office, 222, New Eskaton Road, Dhaka, Chittagong EPZ, South Halishahar, Chittagong, Dhaka EPZ, Ganbari, Savar, Dhaka, Syedpur EPZ, Nilphamari (only for the work at serial No. 1); Comilla EPZ, Comilla (only for the work at serial No. 4); Ishurdi EPZ, Paksey, Pabna (only for the work at serial Nos 5-6); and all Divisional Commissioners office upto 31-05-2000. In case of purchasing tender document from Divisional Commissioners office, the prescribed price of tender should be deposited through Pay Order/Bank Draft from any scheduled bank in favour of BEPZA. Acknowledgment receipt/monkey receipt against payment of the said amount should be enclosed with the tender.

Tenders will be received at the office chamber of Chief Engineer at BEPZA Executive Office, Project Engineer's office chamber at Chittagong & Dhaka EPZ, and all Divisional Commissioners' office up to 12-00 Noon of 01-06-2000. Besides, the tenders for the work at serial No. 1 will be received at Project Engineer's office of Syedpur EPZ, tenders for the works at serial Nos 2-4 at Project Engineer's office of Comilla EPZ & tenders for the works at serial Nos. 5-6 at Project Engineer's office of Ishurdi EPZ.

Tenders submitted at different divisions/offices will be opened only at the office of the Chief Engineer at BEPZA Executive Office on 04-06-2000 at 10-00 AM in presence (if any) of the tenders.

If the last date of selling tender happens to be a govt. holiday under any circumstance, the tender can be purchased up to the next working day and in that case the tenders can be submitted up to the next day of the changed last date of purchase. If the submitting/opening date of tender happens to be a govt. holiday, then it can be submitted/opened on the next working day.

If tenders are submitted at the lowest limit as per tender terms & conditions i.e. 10% below the estimated cost by more than one firm, then lottery will be held on the next day of the opening date of tender i.e. 05-06-2000 at 3-00 PM at BEPZA Executive Office in presence of the tenders concerned. If the documents submitted by the 1st successful tenderer in the lottery are found correct after scrutiny as per terms & conditions of tender, then the firm will be issued work order. Otherwise necessary steps will be taken to examine documents of 2nd & 3rd tenders and issue work order by turn.

The authority reserves the right to accept any or reject any or all of the submitted tenders without assigning any reason whatsoever.

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Abu Reza Khan
Chief Engineer.

Garfield ®



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