

PERSPECTIVE



Culinary Connections

in Spain and Morocco

by Simon Laraway (Editing and Publishing '23)

APPETIZER, MAIN COURSE, dessert—the three-course meal is a hallmark of Western culinary culture, and many people from gourmards to casual cooks consider it a superlative way to structure meals. But its origin might surprise you—it was introduced to the world in ninth-century Moorish Andalusia. Every time we divide our dinner into three courses, we continue a tradition started over a millennium ago in what is now Spain, carrying on the Moors' preference for tripartite meals.

This connection between us and the medieval Moors is one example of how food and food traditions connect people, bridging divides in culture, space, and time. Fall 2021 study abroad programs in Spain and Morocco allowed students and professors to experience these culinary connections, often in ways students had not expected.

One of these unlikely connections came in the form of *paella*, a dish that bridges cultural and political divides. The dish is considered a hallmark of Spanish cuisine. The aromatic saffron rice, the seasonal vegetables, the fresh seafood and shrimp like buried treasure throughout the mixture—locals and visitors alike consider it all quintessentially Spanish. Yet *paella* does not have an Iberian origin: both the saffron that gives *paella* its color and the rice that serves as the base of the dish were Muslim introductions to Spanish cuisine.

And *paella* is not just eaten in Spain. “You are going to find *paella* in North Africa,” said Professor Kirk Belnap (Asian and Near Eastern Languages), who led the Morocco program. *Paella* is the result of cultural confluence, and it does not fit easily within the geographical or political boundaries we might associate with it. *Paella* is a part of the culture of Spain and Morocco.

Students attested that cultural interchange produces other great eats: “Not all of the best things I ate in Spain were Spanish cuisine,” said Alexander Peek (Portuguese '25), a student on the fall 2021 Spain Study

Abroad program. “A pizzeria in Barcelona changed my life.” Another recent trend in Spain mirrors a trend in the United States: fusion cuisine. “Fusion with Japanese and Mexican food is really popular in Spain,” said Associate Professor Rex Nielson (Spanish and Portuguese). Spain has in recent years taken to experimenting with other cuisines from around the world.

Of course, not all culinary customs were so readily familiar; no study abroad experience would be complete without a bit of culture shock. One of the biggest adjustments for students in both programs were the odd meal times: in both Spain and Morocco, lunch is the big meal of the day, taking up a couple of hours midafternoon, and dinner is typically eaten later in the day, around 9 or 10 p.m. The custom was a distinct departure from our American preference for light lunches and earlier dinners.

However, as students came to realize, there was a reason behind the later meal-times and more relaxed eating hours. Dr. Nielson commented, “Instead of dinner as something you need to get through with, it becomes, ‘this is what we are going to do tonight. We are going to sit and be together.’” Underlying the unfamiliar practice was a familiar goal: facilitating togetherness between family and friends.

Connections between culinary traditions are everywhere if we look for them—they are often deeply rooted in hundreds or thousands of years of history, but they can be recently forged too. Whether we are traveling to foreign lands and trying foods we never knew existed or uncovering the ancient roots of our own dietary habits, the culinary ties that bind us to others are everywhere. As students learned this past fall in Spain and Morocco (and countless other study abroad programs over the years), food serves to reaffirm our common humanity and remind us just how interconnected we are, even as experiences abroad open our eyes to the diversity of the world. ■