!Que aproveche! An American Student's Encounter with The Culture and Language of Spanish Food

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¡Que Aproveche! An American Student’s Encounter with the Culture and Language of Spanish Food

Amanda Mills

For Students

Introduction

How the ¡Que aproveche! project began

Just like you, I studied Spanish in high school. When I went to college, I decided to continue learning Spanish, and I made the choice to study abroad in Spain during my junior year.

There I stood, a 20-year-old, blue-eyed, enthusiastic American college student, with my brand new suitcase and my passport in hand, about to board a plane for Madrid. I wouldn’t be stepping foot on American soil again for another four months. As I gave my tearful mother one final hug and moved toward the gate, I was filled with excitement and apprehension for the upcoming semester of study abroad. In my mind, I had everything mapped out, as if all of my plans and dreams had been carefully packaged and labeled. I had won several scholarships for this trip, and in addition to living and taking classes in Burgos, Spain, I planned to conduct a type of research project that was focused on Spanish food. Since I was planning to be a Spanish teacher, I wanted to develop activities and curriculum based on the food to be able to use in my future classroom.

However, there were a few issues with my plans, and the main one was that I had no idea what to expect in Spain and even less of a clue how to convey my experiences to students. As I lived and ate in Spain, it became clear that this life experience was something extremely valuable that could only truly be learned through living it. Knowledge becomes so much more real and active when you have seen and lived and tasted it for yourself. I couldn’t force my students to live my experiences; I could only tell them about it. You might not be able to travel to a Spanish-speaking country right now, but you can learn so much about the culture from the personal experiences and perspectives of an American student who has done that.

I had a several reasons for creating this website:
1. To share my life experiences and encounters with Spanish food and Spanish culture with students
2. To give your high school Spanish teachers an additional resource to use when teaching you about culture
3. To encourage all of this website's visitors to explore other countries and cultures and to be changed as a result.

¡Que aproveche! That’s what Spanish people say when they see you eating. It expresses a desire for you to enjoy the quality and the experience of the food you’re consuming.

I hope you enjoy your taste of Spanish food and Spanish culture and that it leaves you hungry for more!

## Entering a new culture

### What was I getting myself into?

My Spanish teachers in high school and my professors in college had always told me I was good at Spanish, so my attitude going into my semester of study abroad was, “I’ve got this.” The lenses of hindsight are so much clearer than my warped vision at the time, which was overly confident. I discovered that it’s one thing to “know” Spanish in an American classroom and another thing to actually use this language for communication in daily life!

When my friends and I arrived in Madrid, we ate lunch on our first day near la Puerta del Sol, a famous plaza in downtown Madrid. We were all sure we knew how to order correctly, because what Spanish textbook doesn’t come with a section on how to order food in a restaurant? However, I quickly sensed the waitress’ annoyance and irritation with us; she seemed to think we were ignorant, incompetent Americans (which, at that point, was at least partially true). I left feeling frustrated and a little dissatisfied with my first Spanish dining experience.

The next day, while exploring a different part of Madrid, near the famous Parque Retiro (park), el Prado (art museum), and el Museo de la Reina Sofia (another art museum), I ate lunch at a restaurant with a couple of friends. In Spain, unlike in America, you have to flag the waiter down until he comes to you, and we were well aware of this. However, we could not get the waiter’s attention, no matter how hard we tried. Finally we were able to get one of the young men working to come to our table and take our order.

The waiter asked us what we would like to drink, and I ordered a Coca-Cola. He told us there was no Coke, only “pixie” (at least, that’s what it sounded like to us). We were so confused. What did he mean?? After a couple minutes of American girls speaking broken Spanish, we finally realized that he had said Pepsi! We told him that was fine and proceeded with our order.
One of the girls with me was a vegetarian, so she tried to order one of the choices on the menu without the meat, which we thought was a reasonable request; after all, in the U.S. we could ask for slight changes to our meal like that. The waiter simply told her they couldn’t do that. It turns out that in Spain, what’s on the menu is what’s on the menu, and you generally can’t make changes to it. She either had to change what she was ordering or just pick the meat off the dish herself.

Photo: My lunch that day – I ordered a salad with chicken in it (and yes, all of that light-colored stuff in the middle is dressing).

In Madrid, it seemed like there were American fast food restaurants everywhere, places like McDonalds, Burger King, and others. There was also a giant Starbucks on one of the main street corners. Determined to enjoy Spanish food, I made it my goal to avoid American restaurants as much as I possibly could during my time in Spain; I refused to go near them. After all, I had come to experience authentic Spanish cuisine, not the food I could have anytime back in the United States!

I was hopeful to learn more about Spanish food in my host mom's kitchen; students who had traveled to Spain in previous years had told me that the woman I would stay with in Burgos was a wonderful cook. Half an hour after Marisol greeted me in Burgos with the customary two kisses on the cheek and drove me to her house, I was seated at her kitchen table. Clearly, food was a priority in the Spanish culture; eating was the first thing we did upon our arrival!

Marisol had prepared me some Spanish food, and she explained what it was in slow, well-articulated Spanish so that the americana, who was simultaneously confused, overwhelmed and excited, would understand. One of the dishes she had made was tortilla española (also called tortilla de patata), which I had never heard of before.

Photos: Tortillas de patata at Marisol's house

Marisol tried to explain this new dish to me using a few words in English, and the word she selected to describe it was “omelet”. (I later found out that Marisol normally refused to speak English with the students she hosted, insisting that they would learn as much Spanish as possible from her!) In the first place, I was confused as to how she knew that specific word out of all the words in the English language, and secondly, I wondered why we were eating an omelet at three or four in the afternoon! I suppose “omelet” is the closest American comparison to the tortilla, but, as I learned during my stay in Spain, the tortilla española is definitely not breakfast food.

To Americans, who are so familiar with Mexican food (or at least imitation Mexican food) a tortilla is the flat, circular thing used for the shell of a taco or burrito or as part of a quesadilla. In Spain, however, a tortilla has an entirely different meaning. It’s a dish made of eggs and potatoes, about the size of a pie or a dinner plate and three quarters of an inch thick. It
is cooked in olive oil in a frying pan on the stove, and depending on who makes it, onion and garlic are sometimes added to the eggs and potatoes for flavor.

*Photo: I finally learned how to make tortilla española the last few weeks of staying with Marisol.*

Even before I had been in Spain for a week, I knew that this food adventure was going to be quite different from anything I had ever expected, and I was slightly overwhelmed but curious to learn more.

## Why is food even important?

When reflecting on the culture of Spain, Miguel de Unamuno, the renowned Spanish novelist, poet, playwright, and philosopher, once observed that, “Spanish culture is to be found in the cafés more often than the universities” (quoted in Newton, 2005). Indeed, much of the culture of Spain is built upon its food, and this forms an essential component of the country’s identity. Spanish people take great pride in their food, insisting that it’s the best, as well as very healthy. Food matters. It’s not just something you eat; it’s a way of life.

Food is an essential way to connect with people, a manner expressing what cannot be expressed any other way. Food is their passion! As an American who has traveled abroad, I have had many, many conversations with Spaniards about my perceptions of their country. And I have never had one of these conversations without the other person expressing their opinion (and then going on for several sentences) about Spanish food – they love it!

Food is not merely about delicious tastes or satisfying one’s hunger; it comes with culture and history and is an essential part of who they are! Spaniards are very proud of their food. Later we’ll go into what the diet consists of (in the *What do Spanish people eat?* section) and when the meals are (in the *When and how do Spaniards eat?* section), but there is an essential concept to be familiar with before examining those topics.

Essentially, meals are about relationships.

Anyone who travels to Spain must understand that meals can take a long time. Lunch, the main meal of the day, can easily last two hours or more. It’s not just eating; it’s about the conversation
and the relationships: sharing the latest anecdotes about family members, arguing about politics, telling jokes, and so much more. As an American accustomed to eating lunch quickly and moving on with my day, I became restless and impatient when I had to sit around for a couple of hours and listen to my host mom’s relatives and friends talk for what seemed like forever.

If a family member lives in town, even if they are grown up and live away from other family members, it is completely normal for them to eat with their parents and brothers and sisters on a regular basis. All Spanish mothers and grandmothers are always trying to make sure their children eat a lot and eat well. They always ask if you want more, and they don’t take ‘no’ for an answer. Interestingly, two Spanish women I interviewed about the food in their country noted the importance of food at weddings in their culture. The meal is what people remember, not the bride’s dress!

Photo: Spanish family and friends eating together

Additionally, since meals are about relationships, Spanish people almost never eat alone and never eat on the go. While chatting with one Spanish family that had once traveled to New York, they told me that it seemed impolite and strange to them that Americans would bring Tupperware containers with them (or even carry-out containers from restaurants) and eat lunch wherever they happened to be during the day. They had taken pictures of themselves eating out of Styrofoam carry-out containers in the park and making silly faces!

This caused me reflect on my own culture. As Americans, we like eating, but might not take the time to regularly include family and friends in our enjoyment of food, unless it’s a special occasion. Our enjoyment of food is based on the food itself, not necessarily the relationships. In general, we think it’s acceptable to eat by ourselves or to eat on the go, and in other countries like Spain, this is not the norm. As an American student adjusting to life in Spain, I clearly had a lot to learn.

When and how do Spaniards eat?
It was noon, I was sitting in my Spanish history class at the University of Burgos, and my stomach was rumbling. Was it lunchtime yet? My body, so accustomed to twenty years of the American eating schedule, was more than ready for some food. However, I still had a couple more hours of class and a walk home before I could even think about eating.

The most difficult thing for me when I was adjusting to the Spanish lifestyle was the food and the timing of their meals. In Baedeker’s Spain (Arnold, 1996), travelers are informed that people in Spain eat lunch around 2 p.m. and their meal in the evening about 10 o’clock (p. 504). Arnold’s (1996) description continues:

“Breakfast (desayuno) in Spain is rather simple and is usually taken in a bar. It consists of a cup of coffee and toast or a small cake, or particularly in the south, churros, deep-fried doughnuts…Lunch (almuerzo) and dinner (cena) are more substantial and the Spaniards tend to linger over these meals. Both meals consist of three of four courses” (p. 504)

Months of personal observation revealed that Spaniards start the day with breakfast, which is usually small and consists of coffee and bread or toast with jam or chocolate spread. When late morning rolls around, usually about eleven or twelve o’clock, it is customary for them to have a snack called el almuerzo if they are hungry. This could include coffee, a pastry, a small sandwich, or something like tortilla española. A study on Spanish food habits published by Distribución y Consumo (2008) reports that 23.1 percent of Spanish adults regularly consume mid-morning snack, and I observed while in Spain that this practice is much more common for children, especially in schools. La comida, lunch, is the largest meal of the day, and people eat anytime between 1:30 and 4 o’clock p.m. As mentioned previously, this meal can last over two hours and be accompanied by lively, extended conversation with family and friends. This is referred to as sobremesa, a Spanish for “over the table”, which perfectly captures the interaction that takes place over and around the table. They don’t rush to get on to the next commitment, but rather enjoy each other and the time they spend together.

Photo: A Spanish family enjoying a meal (la comida) together

Lonely Planet’s travel guide for Europe (2001) advises travelers going to Spain to change their stomach's clock if they prefer not to eat by themselves or with other foreigners, and personal experience confirms this! Many times when I traveled with other American students, we and other tourists were the only ones eating at certain times of the day. If I had taken the time to read a travel guide like that one before embarking on my adventures in Spain, I would have been more aware of one of the biggest cultural differences that exists between American and Spanish cultures. I regret not preparing more, as it would have made my transition so much easier.

After lunch, there is time to rest, to take a siesta (nap), before continuing with the rest of the day. Many stores in Spain are closed between two o'clock and four or five o'clock p.m. in order to give people time to go home and eat with their families. As an American, it was very
inconvenient to find shops closed at an hour in the middle of the day when I expected them to be open.

Many people in Spain have a late afternoon snack around six or seven o'clock p.m., called la merienda, but not everyone eats this on a daily basis. Distribución y Consumo (2008) reports that approximately 37.3 percent of Spanish adults tend to eat la merienda, including 45.7 percent of Spaniards between the ages of 18 and 35 and 31.7 percent of those between 56 and 70 years old. La merienda typically consists of a sandwich made with some sort of meat or with chocolate, and like el almuerzo, it is a more common practice for children than adults.

Dinner, called la cena, could start at nine or ten o’clock, or sometimes even later. According to my Spanish friends, nine o’clock is considered an early hour to be eating dinner, but, as an American, I always felt like dinner was extremely late. This is partly because at first, I didn’t understand the concepts of the almuerzo and the merienda, small snacks to help you make it through the day, and I tried to survive from early breakfasts until late lunches. The stretches of time before lunch and before dinner were so hard – I was so hungry! And when my stash of American snacks ran out after a couple of weeks, I didn’t know what to do.

It seemed like lunch and dinner were always later than I wanted them to be. My host mom typically would leave the house around 8 o’clock to spend time with her friends in the evenings, and she would leave dinner for me in the kitchen. As soon as I heard the front door click shut, I would scamper down the stairs as fast as I could and begin eating. Eventually, though, I caught on to the customs, adjusted to the time schedule, and my stomach was much more satisfied.

To summarize the meals of the day in Spain, breakfast (el desayuno), lunch (la comida), and dinner (la cena), are the most common meals in Spain, carried out by the overwhelming majority of the population. Distribución y Consumo (2008) found that the number of Spaniards who consume these meals are 92.6 percent, 94.9 percent, and 94.6 percent, respectively. The almuerzo and the merienda are recognized as snacks between meals but tend to be more common for children than for adults.

Again, observing Spanish customs made me more aware of my own cultural practices. We as Americans just eat whenever we feel like it; the schedule of our meals is not very structured around a time of day. We don’t place a high value on eating together with family, except for special occasions. After a while, the meal schedule in Spain began to make a lot sense to me. The largest meal happens in the middle of the day, when people need energy to complete daily tasks, instead of at night like in the United States. Furthermore, people don’t tend get hungry right before bed, because they have just eaten dinner. While adjusting to the Spanish timetable for eating posed a challenge to me, another adjustment I faced was becoming accustomed to the types of foods Spaniards eat.
What do Spanish people eat?
A closer look at *la dieta mediterranea*

It's not Mexican food

Although it should have been very obvious, the first realization I had about Spanish food is that it is not the same as Mexican food. I'm not quite sure why, but I somehow expected countries that share the same language, Spanish, to also partake in the same foods and cultural traditions. Interestingly, Spanish people will make it very clear that their spoken Spanish is drastically different (and in their opinion, much better) than Spanish spoken in Mexico; they also have a similar opinion about the food. Spanish people take great pride in their cuisine and consider it much better than the food made and served in other countries. In a casual conversation with a Spanish friend, a conversation that had nothing to do with food, she mentioned that Spanish is a very beautiful and nice language, and the food is even more so!

The Mediterranean diet

While I expected to see tacos, burritos, nachos, and salsa, I was confronted with a diet that was entirely unfamiliar to me! Spaniards, as part of their cultural heritage, closely follow the Mediterranean diet, which has incredible health benefits, including a reduced risk of heart disease and stroke. Werner (2013), describes it as follows:

“The Mediterranean diet is one of the healthiest diets in the world. The cornerstone of this diet is the variety of locally grown vegetables, grains, legumes, and fruit. Products such as virgin olive oil, saffron, locally raised livestock, and locally caught fish are also important components in Spain. In fact, after Japan, Spain is the world’s second largest per capita consumer of fish” (p. 29).

This diet is certainly healthier and more consistent than what we eat in the United States. One study showed that compared to children in the United States, children in Spain more closely followed recommended intakes for the five food groups, except for cereals (Royo-Bordonada, et al., 2003). The Mediterranean diet has been found to be an incredibly beneficial diet for weight loss and for health in general (Pérez Guisado, Muñoz-Serrano, Alonso-Moraga, 2008). Additionally, the Mediterranean diet is highly recommended for preventing cardiovascular disease (Estruch, et al., 2013).

The Mediterranean diet in Spain is also a cultural and historical tradition.
Martínez Llopis' *Historia de la gastronomía española* (1981) maintains that in Spanish cooking, people can see glimpses of the food of centuries past, especially certain foods and traditions that make it distinctly Spanish (p. 402). There were food shortages during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, but ever since the post-war era, when non-essential food could be prepared again, Spaniards have been interested in maintaining the traditional way of Spanish cooking (Martínez Llopis, 1981). As a result, from the end of the civil war in 1936 and for most of the twentieth century, many Spanish cookbooks were published, and interest in knowing about traditional dishes from the different regions of the country grew (Martínez Llopis, 1981). Spain's different regions began to attract and continue to draw tourists from all over the world because of their excellent gastronomy (Martínez Llopis, 1981).

What are common foods in Spaniards' diet? According to one travel guide for Spain, common foods in Spain include: *chorizo* (spicy sausage), *jamón serrano* (a special type of ham), seafood, lobsters, olives, *gazpacho* (cold tomato soup), *tortilla*, grilled or roasted meats (including pork, lamb, rabbit), fish, excellent cheeses, and desserts such as *turrón* and *flan* (Arnold, 1996). I certainly found these to be typical during my time there.

Moreno, Sarría, and Popkin (2002) found that the Spanish diet has shifted over the past few decades to include "a very high level of fat intake, high fruit and dairy intake, and moderate vegetable intake" (p. 992). Meat and fish consumption increased greatly from the 1960s to the 1990s. Additionally, compared to the rest of Europe, Spaniards have the highest dairy and fruit intakes. While I lived in Spain, I noticed that fruit was eaten with almost every meal and that milk, along with milk products like cheese, was present as well.

According to the Spanish Food Pyramid, foods like bread and potatoes "should be the basis of everyday diet" (Avanceta & Serra-Majem, L., 2001, p. 1405), and my experience living in Spain confirmed this. It became evident to me was that Spanish people can’t eat a meal without bread. Spaniards are particular about their bread, too. It must be *pan de hoy*, bread that is fresh-baked that day, and it is very normal for them to go to a bakery to buy bread every day. Upon my return to the U.S., I couldn’t figure out how to eat without a piece of bread to help me push food onto my fork, as I was accustomed to doing in Spain. Also, the "consumption of lean meats and plant oils, especially olive oil, is recommended"(Avanceta & Serra-Majem, L., 2001, p. 1405), and I noticed that almost every Spaniard I met used olive oil when cooking.

The overwhelming majority of Spaniards are consistent in following the Mediterranean diet. In casual conversations with friends, individuals would tell me exactly what they thought about the health of American foods and our diet compared to Spanish dietary traditions. I realized that we as Americans tend to eat whatever we want. In general, there isn’t one specific diet that we follow, and our eating habits as a whole seem to be much less healthy healthy.

**Fast food in Spain and the United States**

How does fast food impact a setting in which a traditional diet like the Mediterranean diet is followed? There has been an increase of fast food establishments in both Spain and the United States since the 1970s. A 2008 study by Bryant and Dundes revealed that 48 percent of Spanish college students objected to the growth in the number of fast food restaurants in their country,
compared to only 18 percent of American students in the United States. Furthermore, 69 percent of American college students felt that the convenience of fast food was important, compared to 48 percent of Spanish college students (Bryant & Dundes, 2008).

Adiós, American food!

At first, any trip seems like a grand adventure, until you start missing things from home. This certainly applies to food. While in Spain, even though I enjoyed the adventure of trying new dishes, I definitely missed food from home.

Due to globalization, American brands and products have influenced food choices in many parts of the world, and Spain is no exception. Both Pepsi and Coke are both common soft drinks there, and we saw specific American food products in stores in Spain, including Chips Ahoy, Oreos, M&Ms, and more. American fast food restaurants were also common, like McDonald’s and Burger King. There was also a Starbucks in Madrid. Even though these American products were there, they had a distinctively different flavor than what we were used to back home. Two girls who arrived in Spain before I did asked me to bring them specific "junk food" from the U.S. because the Spanish versions just didn't taste the same!

Studying in Spain with a group of eighteen Americans meant that our conversations often turned to what we missed from home. Many of us expressed how much we missed eating peanut butter. Spanish stores sell a type of peanut butter, but it is definitely not what we were used to eating on the other side of the Atlantic. Pizza was missed, too. There was actually a Domino's Pizza in Burgos, where my friend's host brother worked. One day, he brought several types of pizza home for us, and we were quite confused as to why there was corn on top of a barbecue pizza. He patiently explained to us that corn was perceived as a very American food, so why wouldn’t it go well with American pizza? That didn’t make complete sense to us, but thankfully the pizza tasted much better than we expected.

Not only did we have to say "adiós" to American food, but we also had to bid our American expectations farewell. As seen in one of my stories from Chapter 1, we couldn’t request changes to what was on the menu at restaurants. Another thing we realized is that Americans are paranoid about food safety. It was common in Spain for our host families to leave food, even meat, out all
night on the counter or unrefrigerated in a cupboard. Even though that seemed unsafe to me at first, these practices never caused me to get sick at all.

As I interacted with Spaniards, including my host mom's adult children, Spanish young people, and students at the school where I taught English, their perception of American food was very clear. Everyone thought Americans ate hamburgers and french fries all the time! My host mom's daughter expressed her surprise at being able to eat the best salad she had ever tasted when she visited Chicago! One night, some Spanish friends prepared "American food" for me: hamburgers, potato chips, and Jell-o. It was a slightly different than what I was used to; the meat was very thin and flat, the buns were huge, and the ketchup tasted strangely sweet. Another time, my host mom made me hot dogs for dinner and left to go out with friends. When she got back, she asked why the hot dogs were still there, and told her that I didn't like hot dogs. She asked me if I was sure I was American!

 Again, my experience with food in Spain made me consider my life in the United States. Even though the rest of the world may perceive hamburgers and hot dogs as our national foods, I realized we don’t really have a typical dish that’s “American”; we like to eat food from all over the world and embrace it as our own.

**Tapas: A category of its own**

If an individual in the United States has even a small knowledge of Spanish food, it’s likely that he or she has heard about *tapas*, a culinary tradition characteristic of Spain. *Tapas* are small snacks eaten not at home, but in local restaurants or cafés, between meals. In some regions of the country, tapas are also called *pinchos*.

From personal experience and conversations about food with Spaniards, the concept of *tapas* is as follows:

In Spain, social life is lived outside of one’s home; the Spanish phrase is “en la calle”, meaning “in the street”. While the social life generally occurs in a setting outside of the house, the main meals are at home. In comparison, in the United States a large portion of our lives, including our social lives, are carried out within the comfort and security of our homes.
Spaniards tend to work all morning, then come home for lunch (maybe around 3), have time to eat a good meal and to rest. Then, it’s time to go back to work for a while or to go for a walk or meet with friends and “tomar algo” (eat/drink something). Later, when people are tired at the end of the day, it’s time to return home for the evening to eat dinner and then go to bed. Tapas are eaten in the morning or afternoon, outside of one’s house, with friends or acquaintances in local restaurants or establishments.

Frequently, when cities or towns have local celebrations, booths are set up in some of the main plazas of the city, and it's common to do a "ruta de tapas", going to multiple booths to eat various tapas.

While in Spain, I liked the idea of tapas, going out with friends or family members to have something to eat in a casual setting. Instead of eating a whole meal at one restaurant or café, when Spaniards want to "ir de tapas" (go to get tapas), they go to multiple places and get one or two tapas in each of the establishments they visit.

I realized that as Americans, we tend to eat on the go, and Spaniards tend to fully enjoy their food and their culinary experience. Almost everyone takes the time to sit and talk, even if they are just eating something small like tapas.

The Spanish language and Spanish food

Language and culture are inextricably related; it is incredibly difficult to describe what a culture is like without using words from their language. And as much as I try to explain in English what is meant, my words will always fall short and fail to encompass the meaning of the words and ideas in Spanish.
You can’t just translate “la comida” as “lunch”. There’s a deeper meaning, a feeling of lots of food, good food, family, and a sense of togetherness that the word “lunch” just doesn’t convey. “Lunch” to an American might bring to mind the idea of a brown paper sack and a sandwich or of a meal eaten around noon, but la comida is so much more than that!

I briefly mentioned earlier that each type of meal/eating has its own verb (see the following table). So, instead of saying “I ate breakfast”, a Spanish person would literally say, “I breakfasted”. To me, this means the food and the meals in Spain hold a high importance.

### Spanish Words for Meals: Nouns and Verbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English word</th>
<th>Spanish noun</th>
<th>Spanish verb</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breakfast</td>
<td>El desayuno</td>
<td>desayunar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>La comida</td>
<td>comer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dinner</td>
<td>La cena</td>
<td>cenar</td>
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Furthermore, meals hold such cultural importance in Spain that Spaniards base their greetings to each other not based on the time of day, but based on what meals they have or have not already eaten. For example, if a Spaniard greets someone, saying, “Buenos días,” which translates to “good morning”, this does not mean that the clock has not yet struck noon, but rather that to this person, lunchtime has not yet occurred. (Keep in mind that lunch could be at 3:00 p.m., so it would not be strange to hear “Buenos días” at 2:30!).

Once a Spanish woman called me around 9 p.m. and greeted me by saying, “Buenas tardes”, which we would translate to “good afternoon”. This didn’t make much sense to me because I was spending time with Americans that day and had eaten dinner over two hours before. To me, it was nighttime, not the afternoon. Instances such as these helped me to understand the culture and the language and how closely they are related.

### The United States and Spain: Greetings and When They Are Used

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English expression</th>
<th>American time of day</th>
<th>Spanish expression</th>
<th>Spanish time of day</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good morning</td>
<td>Before 12:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Buenos días</td>
<td>Before lunch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good afternoon</td>
<td>Between 12:00 p.m. and 5:00 or 6:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Buenas tardes</td>
<td>After lunch but before dinner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good evening</td>
<td>After 6:00 or 7:00 p.m.</td>
<td>Buenas noches</td>
<td>After dinner</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It dawned on me that in the United States, when we say “good morning”, “good afternoon”, or “good evening” the greeting is based on the time the clock shows, not based on whether we have or haven’t eaten. Even our word “afternoon” reflects the time of day, which shows that the United States has a more time-oriented culture, whereas Spain’s culture tends to be more event-oriented.
Mercados and Supermercados

How is the Spanish diet today different from the Spanish diet of the past?

Due to modernization, Spanish diet and food have changed significantly in the last fifteen to twenty years (Werner, 2013). Traditionally, Spanish food came from the garden or the farm almost directly to the table. Foods that were fresh and local were the basis of the Spanish diet. People would buy their food at local markets, with specific booths for meat, bread, eggs, cheese, fruits, and vegetables. Certainly, markets with fresh products like these (mercados) are still a part of daily life in Spain, and many Spaniards frequent these markets to buy their food, especially fresh produce, meat, fish, and cheese (Werner, 2013). However with the enormous population shift from rural to urban areas of Spain during the 20th century, there is now a greater distance between agriculture and the consumer.

As a result, many Spanish people today go to supermarkets to purchase their food instead of to the traditional mercados. Although I never went grocery shopping with my host mom, I know that she bought some of her food at the local market and other foods at the supermarket. I visited both places myself, but I was much more comfortable visiting the supermarket, since that’s what I was used to doing at home. Even though supermarkets were a more familiar setting for me, it was fascinating to watch Spaniards in the mercados purchase cheeses, meats, and produce by the kilogram and carry on conversations with the local people running each booth.

In recent years Spain has seen a “shift from fresh, locally grown foods to processed foods” (Werner, 2013, p. 29), and has led to growing obesity, and illnesses that are diet related, like diabetes and heart disease. Some trends in the Spanish diet in the last few decades include an increased fat intake and higher obesity levels (Moreno, Sarría & Popkin, 2002). Additionally, Moreno, Sarría and Popkin (2002) observe that the Spanish diet has a high fruit and dairy intake (one of the highest in Europe), with only a moderate vegetable intake.

The supermarkets in Spain look much like their American counterparts; there are all kinds of foods, both fresh and packaged, as well as a variety of non-food products. Unlike the mercados, which close mid-day for lunch, the supermercados stay open all day, making them a more convenient option for many.

As I mentioned before, in my daily life in the United States I don’t tend to frequent markets; supermarkets are where I tend to do my grocery shopping. Although farmers’ markets exist here, it is much more common for individuals and families to visit the supermarkets. I appreciated seeing some Spaniards still taking advantage of the mercados to purchase fresh, local food, and I
wished I could do something similar in the U.S., but it looks like both Spain and the United States are headed in the direction of supermarkets over local foods for convenience’s sake.

What did I learn?
Reflections on returning to the United States

Not everyone in the world thinks about life (or food) the way we do.

Different cultures have different ways of viewing the world, and these perspectives stood out to me in the area of food. What I considered "normal" was not natural to the people I interacted with daily, and their "normal" didn't feel natural to me. These contrasts in ideas appeared in meal times, types of food eaten, times of day specific foods are eaten, and --. I had never encountered such differences in viewpoints before, and it really caused me to think.

Differences can be good and healthy.

There isn't one "right" way to live or to eat; it truly depends on the culture. If everything I experienced in Spain had been identical to America, I believe I would have been a little disappointed. The differences in daily life and in food made each day an adventure. Furthermore, I think that the food I ate in Spain was much healthier than the food I usually eat in the United States, even though I would consider myself to be a fairly healthy eater. I grew to enjoy the way Spanish traditions worked within their culture and how American customs work within ours.

Encountering other cultures causes us to reflect and grow.

If you have never had the opportunity to interact with someone from another culture, you probably have no idea what you are missing. Once I was outside of my own cultural setting, I learned so much about myself and the way I think and operate on a daily basis. It caused me to question some of the things I do automatically, as well as consider other alternatives that I would not normally consider. I grew so much as a person as a result of this cross-cultural experience, and I love to be able to share what I have learned with others.

My advice to anyone interacting with another culture: Make friends. Ask questions. Don't be afraid to explore places, customs, or ideas. You will learn and grow in incredible ways as a result.
¡Que aproveche!
Writing prompts

Answer the following questions in paragraph form, making sure to address all aspects of the question.

1. What were some of the things that surprised the American student about the food when she first arrived in Spain? What would you have done differently than she did?

2. How important do you think food is to Americans? How does that compare to the importance Spaniards place on their food?

3. What surprised you about the food schedule in Spain? How does that compare to the food schedule you are accustomed to?

4. How would you describe the typical diet in America? Describe how you think a Spanish person might react if they saw what you eat on a regular basis.

5. What American foods do you think you would miss if you traveled to Spain (or any other country)? Would you bring anything along in your suitcase?

6. What do you like or dislike about the concept of tapas? Why? What do you believe is the American equivalent of tapas?

7. How do we use the English language to express our ideas about food? Give at least two examples, and compare these to how Spaniards use the Spanish language to express their ideas about their food?

8. If you lived in Spain, would you choose to buy food in a mercado (market) or a supermercado (supermarket)? Explain your choice.

9. How did your view of Spanish food change or stay the same from reading this website and looking at the pictures?
¡Que aproveche!
Escríbelo en español

Muestra tus habilidades con tu segundo idioma; contesta las preguntas con un párrafo en español.

1. ¿Que le sorprendió a Mandi cuando llegó a España? ¿Qué harías tú si estuvieras allí?

2. ¿Piensas que la comida es muy importante para la cultura americana? ¿Por qué?

3. ¿Qué piensas del horario de las comidas en España? ¿Cómo es diferente de tu horario de comer en los Estados Unidos?

4. ¿Cómo es la dieta normal en los Estados Unidos? ¿Qué pensaría una persona española de tu dieta?

5. ¿Qué tipos de comida americana echarías de menos si viajaras a otro país? ¿Llevarías algún tipo de comida en tu maleta?

6. ¿Qué te gusta o no te gusta de la idea de tapas? ¿Por qué? ¿Qué tenemos en América que es parecido a las tapas?

7. ¿Por qué crees que la cultura de un país o región afecta las palabras que se utilizan allí?

8. ¿Si vivieras en España, preferirías comprar tu comida en un mercado o un supermercado? Expíicate.

9. ¿Qué has aprendido de la comida española de esta página Web?
1. True or false: Tacos are a staple food of the Spanish diet.
2. True or false: Spaniards almost never eat lunch at noon.
3. True or false: Breakfast and dinner in Spain tend to be smaller meals.
4. True or false: In Spain, lunch is a quick, on-the-go meal.
5. What time do Spaniards typically eat dinner?
   A. 5 or 6 p.m, possibly even earlier
   B. 7 or 8 p.m.
   C. 9 or 10 p.m., possibly even later
   D. Whenever they want to
6. How would you say the world “lunch” in Spain?
   A. Comida
   B. Almuerzo
   C. Loncho
   D. Desayuno
7. Spanish people tend to eat lunch:
   A. Alone
   B. With their co-workers
   C. With their significant other
   D. With family and friends
8. What is a tortilla española?
   A. An omelet made of eggs and potatoes
   B. A typical Spanish-style sandwich
   C. A flat, round type of food, used to make tacos and burritos
   D. A type of special Spanish wheat bread
9. What are tapas?
   A. A tradition unique to Spain
   B. A snack served between meals at Spanish restaurants
   C. An opportunity to meet and talk with friends
   D. All of the above
10. What is one significant difference between a mercado and a supermercado?
    A. The hours of operation
    B. The types and variety of food offered
    C. The prices
    D. The people who shop there
¡Que Aproveche! An American Student’s Encounter with the Culture and Language of Spanish Food

Amanda Mills

For Teachers

Teaching culture: creating relatable experiences

As a teacher, culture is one of the most challenging things to adequately and accurately convey to students. It is relatively straightforward to introduce grammar and vocabulary to them, but culture is an entirely different topic, an unquantifiable experience, a topic that can be both extremely broad and incredibly specific. Culture adds a level of complexity to learning, a depth that is difficult to describe and harder to convey. We wish we could give students a living, breathing experience of what it is like to visit or live in a Spanish-speaking country, but our budgets and instructional hours typically do not allow for that. So, what do we do to teach culture to our students in a meaningful way?

The value in personal experience

As a Spanish teacher, you cannot possibly know every detail about all of the Spanish-speaking cultures in the world. You may know quite a bit of information about food, festivals, traditions, and history, but it's almost impossible to keep track of all of that information for each country.

It is my firm belief that students (and teachers) learn culture best from personal experience. I recognize that not everyone can organize a school trip to a Spanish-speaking country and that not everyone who studies Spanish will use it in real life. It is unrealistic to expect those things.

It's possible that your students have never traveled outside of the country or even outside of their home state. They may not continue studying a language, and they might not visit another country ever in their lives. However, if students cannot learn a
country's culture from their own experience, the next best way is to learn it from another person's experience, conveyed in a way that relates to students' lives.

Connecting students and experience

When I created this website, I wanted to give students a taste of culture, based on my personal experience with Spanish food. I wrote from an American student's perspective so that students could relate; it's not a long text of facts, but rather a collection of anecdotes and experiences, backed by research, that point to the larger picture that makes up the culture in Spain.

My goal is to give students a glimpse of what happens in another area of the world, opening their perspective beyond their school, community, and country, to recognize that the world is bigger than they can imagine and available to be explored. As an American, I acknowledge that I do not fully understand Spanish culture myself, but I wanted to let students experience much of what I went through when dealing with another culture.

Furthermore, students' familiarity with technology and the Internet will allow them to explore this page and this topic better than they ever could with textbooks or handouts. This site is available in a mobile version as well, which makes it even more practical and accessible for them.

Quizzes and questions

Teachers, here are some resources available to help your students learn about the culture and language of Spanish food. These will indicate to you how much students learned, and can be utilized and adjusted for every level of Spanish class.

Multiple-choice pre- and post-quiz

Use this quiz to gauge students' basic knowledge of Spanish food and culture before and after reading various posts on this site.
Writing prompts in English

What did you think about this American student's experience in Spain, and how does that relate to your life. How would you respond? These questions are designed to help with writing and higher-level thinking skills after spending some time on the website.

¡Escríbelo en español!

For advanced classes (Spanish III and above), students can answer the writing prompts in Spanish instead of in English. This gives students the opportunity to use the language skills and vocabulary they already have to express their own opinions on this topic.


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