

FORK IN THE ROAD



Tuna tartare at Mont Bar, a new hidden gem in Barcelona.



Spaniards preserve the bounty of their waters in tin cans.



Traditional gazpacho at Monvinic restaurant.

A far cry from paella

Spain's Catalan cuisine reveals several unique culinary traditions

By **STEVE DOLINSKY**
Chicago Tribune

BARCELONA, Spain — It's high noon in this sun-drenched city along the Mediterranean coast, and lunch is still a good 90 minutes away, but this being the region of Catalonia, the snacks and drinks are already flowing as freely as in a "Mad Men" episode.

"If we were in the Basque country, we would have pintxos (PEEN-chos) before lunch; in Andalucia, it's tapas. But here in Catalonia, we have vermut," said food writer Xavier Agullo. As a summer sipper, vermouth is as big in Barcelona as sangria is elsewhere (most bars have it on tap, or de grifo, serving it over ice with a bit of lemony soda and an orange slice). And the tradition of vermut — munching on salty potato chips, fruity olives and briny white anchovies (boquerones) or sardines before lunch — is purely Catalanian.

Spending a few days in the northeastern corner of Spain reveals several unique culinary traditions that go well beyond chilled gazpacho. For one thing, the streets are not littered with paella pans, despite sandwich boards in front of nearly every restaurant claiming otherwise (that dish is the specialty of Valencia). Instead of rice and seafood, in Catalonia you must first think of bread and tomatoes.

"Pan con tomate is one of the essential snacks here," said Isabel Brunet, the general manager at Monvinic, a restaurant in the Eixample District with one of the most impressive wine lists in a city that worships cold beer. Sipping a chilled glass of txakoli (CHALK-oh-lee), a dry white wine from the Basque region, I couldn't help but think back over the previous four days of eating and drinking, which included plenty of that griddled or toasted French bread with the thinnest schmear of tomato pulp — an ideal companion for all of the seafood still to come.

The Mediterranean is a round-the-clock temptation here. (Shouldn't we go to the beach? Can we do a boat ride?) In a city with plenty of cultural and architectural treasures in the Gothic and Raval districts, you could spend all of your time wandering the narrow cobblestone streets, weaving in and out of Picasso museums and Gaudi edifices. But then you'd never see the water. It's important to carve out at least a half a day away from the well-trodden tourist highlights and make time for the sea.

With all of that deep blue water staring back at you, one would think the majority of shellfish on local menus would come from fisherman unloading their boats at the local docks each morning. The reality is, most of what's served in bars and restaurants in Barcelona is actually coming from Galicia, some 600 miles away on the Atlantic side of the country, and



STEVE DOLINSKY/PHOTOS FOR THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE

Despite Barcelona's position on the Mediterranean coast, you could spend all your time wandering its narrow streets without making it to the sea.



Bodega 1900 is a casual and boisterous restaurant owned by the famous Adria brothers.

ending up here in cans.

"I remember going to my grandmother's house, and she would always have tins of seafood on her shelves," said Frank Beltri, one of the cooks at Bodega 1900, a casual-and-boisterous restaurant owned by the famous Adria brothers in the Poble-Sec area of the

city. The Adrias were known for their perennial best-in-the-world restaurant El Bulli, in the town of Roses, where molecular gastronomy was born. But here at Bodega 1900, and across the street at the whimsical Tickets, they've downshifted: hearty stewed meatballs with poached

cuttlefish, fried Iberian ham croquettes — impossibly crispy on the outside and filled with a creamy, molten bechamel — and plenty of canned cockles, mussels and umami-rich sardines, packed in oil especially for the restaurant. "If the tin says 'natural,' that means it's packed

If you go

- Monvinic, Carrer de la Diputacio, 249, 08007 Barcelona
- Bodega 1900, Carrer de Tamarit, 91, 08015 Barcelona
- Mont Bar, Carrer de la Diputacio, 220, 08011 Barcelona
- La Boqueria Market, La Rambla, 91, 08001 Barcelona

in the water it came from, with a bit of salt," Beltri said. But we also get them escabeche (pickled) and sometimes with paprika, garlic and bay leaf."

This, of course, shatters every American's idea of what canned seafood should be. Where we mock it, serving it to our cats or combining it with just enough mayonnaise to obliterate its flavor, the Spaniards have had a tradition dating back more than a century of preserving the bounty of their waters in cans, at the peak of freshness, usually beneath a blanket of high-quality olive oil.

Near the University of Barcelona, the diminutive Mont Bar is one of the city's new hidden gems. Recommended by several food writer friends, the restaurant displays a small picture on a back wall of the chef greeting Ferran Adria, the only indication this kitchen might be reaching for more than canned seafood. Again, meatballs here are studded with bits of fresh cuttlefish; brandade (salt cod) warm croquettes walk that magical fine line

between crisp and soft — the perfect bar snack; rows of delicate, briny anchovies dressed in olive oil are accompanied by a majestic beef tartare that commands our table's attention, like witnessing a Calatrava architectural creation for the first time.

One of the best places to see (and taste) the Catalan larder is at world famous La Boqueria Market, nearly as riotous as Tokyo's Tsukiji and with more eating options than New York's Chelsea or Stockholm's Saluhall. Don't lollygag outside on La Rambla, talking to street vendors, or you'll lose your chance to claim a seat inside at one of the seafood counters.

The sheer number of sea creatures, sweets vendors and fresh-fruit-smoothie hawkers is overwhelming. Pull up a stool, and then get ready for some serious snacking.

Remember, there's always time for a little vermut later.

Steve Dolinsky is restaurant critic for WLS television.