



Spain



Barcelona 1992

REDISCOVERING THE MEDITERRANEAN



For the XXV Olympiad, the Games returned to the shores of the sea that had seen their birth in Classical Antiquity and their rebirth in modern times. Thirty-two years after their visit to the Mediterranean and Rome in 1960, the Games returned in 1992 to the Mare Nostrum and Barcelona.

The Barcelona Games were held around the time people were discovering the virtues of the Mediterranean diet, or "Mediterranean cuisine". From a gastronomic point of view, Barcelona '92 therefore heralded the rediscovery of the Mediterranean.

The site was most appropriate. Catalonia, in the north-east corner of Spain, is a gateway to the Mediterranean. Hence, all of the peoples that have left their mark on Mediterranean civilization, in which cooking is an important component, have at some point passed through. The Phoenicians, the Greeks, the Ro-

by **Cristino Alvarez**



mans, the Byzantines and the Arabs have all been in Catalonia, and Catalan cuisine has retained the best features of their culinary traditions.

One author has called Catalan cuisine "Europe's last culinary secret". It is both simple and complex, and raises to the level of *haute cuisine* foods that originally were simply the daily fare of *pagés* (peasants) or fishermen, combining in unusual dishes ingredients that most gastronomes would at first sight consider completely incompatible.

A good recipe to begin with is the most popular hors-d'oeuvre in Catalonia, a marvel of both simplicity and nutritional value: *pa amb tomàquet* (bread with tomato) is served as an accompaniment or as a base for other delicious combinations.

In Spain in summer it is difficult to resist the temptation of one of the world's most famous cold soups: gazpacho. This soup originally comes from Andalusia, but there is a very large Andalusian community in Catalonia and particularly in Barcelona.

Catalan cuisine also offers some excellent cold salads, including a pleasant combination of seafood and farm produce. One is *xató*, a combination of salt cod with tinned tuna dressed with *romesco* sauce, a Catalan speciality), which is seasoned with *ñora*, a very unusual dried pepper that must be soaked before it is used. *Escalivada* is a salad made entirely with vegetables: auber-

A self-service counter.





gines, tomatoes and onions roasted in ashes and dressed with virgin olive oil and a touch of minced garlic.

Another salad with a great deal of character is the *esqueixada*, whose main ingredient is shredded salt cod (skin and bones removed) which is then mixed with thinly sliced onion rings, diced tomatoes, strips of red and green pepper, virgin olive oil and good wine vinegar. Some people make the dish even more colourful by adding pitted black olives. Naturally, fish is a very important part of Catalan cuisine, as it is in all Mediterranean cooking. Excellent seafood is found on its shores, such as the red shrimp and lobsters of the Costa Brava, the strange *espartenyès* (sea cucumbers) and the diminutive *pulpets* (baby octopi). As is so often the case, it was the fishermen who first created some of the wonderful dishes that have since become popular, and which have been refined and are now served in the best restaurants.

The most characteristic dish is the *suquet*, a word that comes from the verb *suquejar* (to release a juice), in which the fish releases its flavours into the sauce. This was originally prepared with inexpensive fish, but today it is often cooked with more expensive varieties, particularly angler fish.

But I must also briefly mention the excellent and extremely unusual Catalan

sausages with their wide range of black or white *butifarras*, some that may be eaten raw and others that must be cooked. One typical dish, more suited to cold weather than summer dining combines Catalan sausages with *mongetes* (dried beans).

Now a few words about some dishes known as *mar i muntanya* ("surf and turf"), which may at first seem outlandish.

They are combinations of seafood and meat and the most common example is *pollastre amb llagosta* (chicken with crawfish), but endless variations and interpretations are possible. The result is usually delicious.

which surprises people who consider such mixtures daring and unorthodox. The Catalan method for preparing large domestic fowl such as duck or goose also bears mentioning, and recipes combine the meat with fruit, in particular the excellent pears of the region.

Catalonia offers some wonderful variations on one of the fundamental ingredients in the Mediterranean diet: wine, from the classic *cavas* (sparkling wine) to the venerable but now rejuvenated wines of the Priorat, which produces a range of reds with a great deal of character. Famous grape varieties such as white Chardonnay and red Cabernet Sau-



Entry to the restaurant.

A traditional Catalan dish.



vignon have adapted perfectly to the Penedès region, providing a broad selection that is recognized for its quality. I am sure that the food figures prominently in the memories of anyone who attended the Games of the XXV Olympiad in Barcelona in 1992, for the discovery of the delights of Mediterranean cooking was, for many people, unforgettable.