

Franciscan Values in Spanish Culinary Culture: From Eiximenis to Altamiras

Vicky Hayward

ABSTRACT: The Franciscan friars of early modern Spain fulfilled their commitment to “holy poverty” through mendicant food sourcing and a complementary nutritional regime (Speed and Wright, 1985, p. 1). Their food sourcing, which relied on kitchen gardening, donations of food alms and limited purchases made with funds from institutional and individual patronage, followed defined codes of practice and was often documented in friary accounts. However, when it came to cookery there were few or no rules. Even novitiates’ doctrinal handbooks covering every other area of everyday life, including refectory manners, left the subject of cookery untouched. Spanish Franciscan cooks instead followed simple principles drawn from medieval philosophical writings, most notably the avoidance of complex spicing, while the order’s Statutes defined three Lents and obliged the friars to respect local abstinence and fasting practises. Reforms within the order sought “a visible alignment” between friary eating and the diet of the poor (Yungman, 2014, unpublished), but published commentary was limited to the writings of individual Spanish friary authors who explored their own ideas for configuring diet to express humility. This tradition of early modern Franciscan food writing, largely unremarked, may be traced from Francesc Eiximenis’s late fifteenth century pedagogic texts on food and wine in *Lo Crestià* (Eiximenis and Gracia, 1977) to Juan Altamiras’s 1745 recipe collection entitled *Nuevo arte de cocina*, which became the most frequently reprinted Spanish cookbook of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Altamiras and Hayward, 2017). This paper suggests that a close reading of *Nuevo arte* set against the longer tradition of Spanish friary food writing reveals the extent to which his repertoire reflected earlier Franciscan thinkers’ gastronomic values. Eiximenis’s volume of *Lo Crestià* dedicated to eating and drinking and written in Catalan had proposed a diet balancing very simple foodstuffs with refinement; for example, he laid down a method for wine-tasting and listed his preferences among fine wines (Eiximenis and Gifrau, 2011, pp. 12–15). In the following century Antonio de Guevara, a notable Franciscan preacher at court and one of the most widely published authors of his time, dedicated a late work entitled *Menosprecio de corte y alabanza de aldea* (c.1537) to the praise of rural life, including its food culture. In an earlier analysis of national power Guevara had also concluded that self-sufficient smallholdings of land provided the ideal structure for an equitable and peaceful society (Guevara, A. and Rosenblat, A., *Reloj de principes*, p. 34). In the following decades Bernadino de Sahagún, the Franciscan missionary,

compiled *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* (1547-69) in Spanish and nahuatl, reflecting the order’s interest in the food practices of other societies, even when pagan, through the inclusion of Mexican food preparations in his catalogue of pre-hispanic cultural ways. Forty years later Juan de Pineda, a widely read Franciscan author, gave his own advice about eating in a popular didactic work entitled *Diálogos familiares de la agricultura cristiana* (1589). He placed as much value on first-hand observation and friary food metaphors as received ideas about humoral medicine, and he gave equal respect to lowly and courtly ingredients (Meseguer Fernandez, J., and Pineda, J. de, 1963, Vol 1, p. 190). Friary chronicles from which texts were extracted for reading aloud from the refectory pulpit while the friars ate in silence provided other easily assimilable commentary. In these chronicles we find examples of miraculous cooking by the angels, which the author describes as emphatically popular rather than courtly, and the more delicious for it (Altamiras and Hayward, 2017, p. 118). Taking an overview of this tradition of food writing one can see how key ideas had been developed within it – for example, the balance of humble eating with refinement at table; the appreciation of a very wide range of vegetables and other lowly ingredients; the interest in selected culinary techniques from other food cultures; the value placed on intense flavor without the use of spices; and the validation of local oral culinary culture. These tacitly underlay Altamiras’s recipes, which carried them into the wider Spanish repertoire accompanied by a direct critique of the food of the powerful as unnecessarily extravagant. It is no surprise, then, that historian Serrano Larráyoiz has argued perceptively of eighteenth-century Franciscan recipes, “while one cannot note any particular rupture with earlier cookery, in truth it could not but happen since the friary kitchen is ... so closely related to popular cookery” (2008, p. 175).

About the author

Vicky Hayward grew up in England and trained as a cook before studying history at the University of Cambridge. Her interest in social and cultural history shaped her work as a book editor and features writer in London, and in 1990 her writing about Spanish food and travel essays brought her to Madrid. Features for the international press since then have covered food culture and areas of the arts, in particular flamenco, while her travel writing includes essays on food and place, and three pocket guides. During the 1990s her interests in history and food came together,

and in 2016 she finished her translation and modern retelling of *New Art of Cookery, Drawn From the School of Economic Experience*, a groundbreaking eighteenth-century book of popular Spanish cookery written by Juan Altamiras, a Franciscan lay friar from southern Aragon.

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