

In Defense of the Anchovy: Creating New Culinary Memories through Applied Cultural Context

Marcela T. Garcés

Siena College

Abstract

La Centralita Culinary Studio, a small business in Albany, New York I opened in December 2021 with my creative partner Yuri Morejón (from Bilbao, Spain), is dedicated to teaching small groups of people about the cuisines of Spain through private cooking classes, pedagogical tasting experiences, and themed events. As a complement to our respective careers as consultant and professor, we bring our expertise in these areas to each unique event. We started the business after observing a need for contextualized pedagogy about Spain's diverse cuisines in the US. Specifically, our guests often have negative memories of anchovies and are hesitant to try them, often seeing them as an unpopular canned food languishing on grocery store shelves alongside tuna. By contrast, in Spain, anchovies are revered artisanal products cleaned and prepared by hand mostly by women in tinned fish factories. They are valued for their culinary traditions as an expensive delicacy that lend umami to numerous dishes. In this paper, I contrast food discourses about anchovies in Spain versus the US, contending that disdain for anchovies comes from lack of knowledge about their traditional origins and artisanal characteristics combined with improper food storage. To counteract these ideas, at La Centralita, we utilize cultural texts, food storage education, and acknowledge women's labor to teach guests about anchovies as a gourmet food in context. Guests create new memories, thereby enhancing their "culinary competence," replacing old connotations with new memories and an openness to the foodways of others.

Keywords

Foodways of others; culinary tourism; artisanal products; pedagogical tastings; cuisine and memory; Cantabrian anchovies; Basque cuisine

La Centralita Culinary Studio is inspired by traditional Basque gastronomic societies (called *txokos* in Basque: a nook or secret place), private dining clubs dedicated to cooking and enjoying food in community originating in the late nineteenth century. We educate guests about the culinary origins of cuisine, focusing in part on traditions maintained by artisan food producers, whose artisanal products are defined as those "produced either completely by hand or with the help of hand-tools or even mechanical means, as long as the direct manual contribution of the artisan

remains the most substantial component of the finished product” (UNESCO 1997). To further this commitment, in spring 2024, we will take two groups on weeklong bespoke culinary and wine tours to the Basque Country in Northern Spain, a foray into on site food tourism including various visits to artisanal gastronomic producers.

We see ourselves as small-scale ambassadors doing pedagogical work to explain the heritage of many cuisines, for when they are removed from their context and culinary tradition, they are often misunderstood, underestimated, or worse, discounted entirely. This is particularly true with the anchovy in the US, which is neither correctly preserved nor appreciated enough as a gourmet artisanal food packaged largely by women in tinned fish factories in Spain. This study thus focuses on a defense of anchovies from the Cantabrian Sea by discussing their artisanal quality and foodways rooted in a feminist perspective and asserting Spain’s contributions to the world’s table. Anchovies become a microcosm for learning to truly appreciate the work and traditions of artisan food producers, one of our main goals at our culinary studio.

Why the anchovy?

At La Centralita, we regularly observe how people make assumptions about foods they like, or dislike, based on cultural baggage, memories, and prior knowledge. Anchovies are a food that many people we meet are hesitant to try due to several factors. Spain being my second adopted home, I seek to change the image of the anchovy not only through our culinary studio, but also in the United States. While this tiny, delicate fish may be shunned by many, it is deserving of much more attention and respect. If we crack open a tin, and begin to trace the anchovy’s journey from the Cantabrian Sea to our table traveling to the tinned fish factories where women work patiently to hand pack each anchovy, to understanding how anchovies are stored and consumed, especially in small *pintxo* (miniature cuisine, pronounced peen-cho, *pincho* in Spanish) bars in the Basque Country with creations like the “Gilda,” we can become aware of just how meaningful they are. By taking them off the shelf and into the spotlight, small but powerful fish emerge, whose story has a lot to teach us if we are willing to travel to and explore their origins, tradition, and context by experiencing place-based culinary tourism.

The Cuisines of Spain

A personal interest in Food Studies is rooted in my discipline of Iberian cultural studies. Both fields are “inherently interdisciplinary,” and I contribute to the growing body of work about the “food cultures of the Spanish-speaking world as a praxis of ‘cultural studies’ scholarship” (Anderson and Ingram 2020, 471; 473). Emphasizing this multitude of cultures, at La Centralita, we highlight what culinary historian María José Sevilla calls the *Cocinas de España* (cuisines of Spain), stressing

the plurality of regional cuisines and the “unique character of each part of the country” (2019, 252). Spain is divided into 17 *comunidades autónomas*, autonomous communities, (called regions here for simplicity) and two autonomous cities. Here, I predominantly address the region known in English as the Basque Country, conceived of as a ‘peripheral culture’ along with Galicia and Catalonia.

Foodways and Culinary Competence

Carol Counihan’s description of *foodways* serves as a framework for this study, defined as “the beliefs and behavior surrounding the production, distribution, and consumption of food” (1999, 2). Building upon this idea, opening La Centralita allows us to promote culinary tourism as

the intentional, exploratory participation in the foodways of the Other, [...] including the consumption—or preparation and presentation for consumption—of a food item, cuisine, meal system, or eating style considered as belonging to a culinary system not one’s own (Long 2004, 21).

Intentional participation can be achieved by examining the cultural context of the anchovy, bearing in mind that “food cultivation, preparation and consumption share an ephemerality that can only be incompletely captured in representations. Yet, food discourses allow us to study how people think with food, using it to mark identities, to establish and/or to dispute power relationships” (Anderson and Ingram 2020, 471). The idea of how people think—and learn—with food is of particular interest to me. At our culinary studio, hands-on learning with food creates sensory experiences, which contrast with the conditions of formal education that prioritize cognitive learning and allow us to practice what Stowe and Johnston deem “a pedagogy of the senses” (2012, 463). Our guests’ prior knowledge is key to how they think about and learn with food. Fabio Parasecoli deems this “culinary competence” (2008, 127).

In the United States, culinary knowledge of anchovies is varied. One recent article unenthusiastically calls them “stinky little fish that come in tin cans” (Morgan 2023, para. no). Drawing on popular culture, they are sometimes remembered dismissively as the preferred pizza topping of Michelangelo, a cartoon Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle from the late 1980s. Often, our guests at La Centralita do not have positive memories of consuming anchovies and are hesitant to try them. Yet in Spain, they have a completely different connotation: a pricey delicacy, a burst of umami in numerous *pintxos*; a tiny fish revered and eaten fresh or preserved in a miniscule tin packed with care by women in factories. But why are ideas about anchovies so disparate?

Discounting the anchovy’s importance and cultural context is a microcosm of a larger oversight: the contributions of Spain to the world’s table. Recent scholarship notes that historically, more consideration has been given to “gastronomically

hegemonic” areas such as France and Italy, but not to the Transhispanic world, resulting in a “lack of scholarship on Spain and [...] limited attention paid to Latin America and Latinx-focused food cultures in the United States” (Anderson and Ingram 2020, 472—73).

Creating New Memories: Imparting Cultural Context

At La Centralita, we attempt to enhance culinary competence by helping guests create new memories, employing cultural tools to teach them about anchovies. To uphold culinary heritage in context, part of our business includes a small Mercado where we sell select gourmet products imported from Spain including many *conservas* (preserved foods) that we incorporate in our dishes, encouraging guests to do so as well to both increase variety in their cooking and as an alternative to finding substitute ingredients that are not from Spain. Working in the United States, preserved foods from Spain are an important part of our repertoire since fresh items from there are hard to come by given the geographical distance.

We believe in situating food firmly within a cultural context, understanding that “each individual experiences food in different ways, from the perception of flavors to the culinary meaning attributed to ingredients, dishes, and traditions” (Parasecoli 2011, 649). For example, some guests are afraid to try anchovies as they are very unfamiliar. While many New Yorkers may have tasted anchovies via Italian American cuisine, they do not usually see the fish in its original form, using it in paste form instead, or melted into pasta sauces and Caesar salad dressing, so it is less palatable to them as a recognizable fish.

When introducing anchovies to our guests, I start with a comprehension check of each visitor’s culinary competence, inquiring about their prior anchovy experiences. While some people like them, I often see a few fearful faces as they mention how anchovies are a “bad pizza topping,” and if they have tried them at all, they have had very salty anchovies and did not like them. There are reasons why people in the US have such negative ideas about anchovies.

Enhancing Culinary Knowledge through Proper Food Storage

Unfavorable experiences have resulted from tasting anchovies that were likely not cared for properly. At La Centralita, I explain that anchovies are a *semi* preserved food, despite being tinned. I show images from Spain of refrigerated anchovies in grocery stores, removed only when it is time to eat them. They do not undergo the same preservation process as tinned fish like tuna and have a shorter shelf life since they do not undergo autoclave sterilization. We refrigerate ours, and recommend our guests do the same. Marta Olass of one the Basque tinned fish factory with which we are acquainted, Olasagasti, noted the following about preservation in 2015:

Anchovy fillets are cured with salt and canned within an expiry date of 10-18 months. Even though semi preserved anchovies do not perish once the expiry date is over, it is true that after 8-12 months the premium quality diminishes: the flesh loses intensity in color and texture. Therefore, it is best to keep semi preserved anchovies in the fridge and consume them within the first months of canning to ensure maximum quality and flavour.

The box protecting the tin of another Basque brand available in the US, Arroyabe, states that anchovies should be kept between 41—54 degrees Fahrenheit (5-12 degrees Celsius). Regardless, they are regularly stored on grocery store shelves in the United States. In her cookbook *Tin to Table*, Anna Hezel writes that anchovies should be refrigerated, seeking to spread the word to consumers and grocery stores. Hezel affirms the experience of many consumers in the US: “If you’ve only ever had brown, mushy anchovies, it’s not your fault (or the anchovies’ fault). A lot of grocery stores just don’t keep them cold enough or turn over product quickly enough” (2023, 17). Improper storage is clearly affecting the way that consumers experience anchovies since their quality and flavor are diminished by storing them on a shelf. Proper food storage is critical culinary knowledge, and the reputation of anchovies could be improved by preserving them properly.

Shifting Tides for Tinned Fish

In another example, one article’s subtitle tells two opposing tales of anchovies: “you may not want them on your pizza, but along the Mediterranean they’re a prized delicacy and a cultural treasure” (Hall 2005, para. No). The “but” in the subtitle reflects a desire to recast anchovies’ reputation. Slowly, things are changing for the anchovy and other tinned fish stateside. In an interesting shift, cookbooks and restaurants are popularizing tinned fish in the United States in recent years, which we show to our guests. New York City Restaurateur Chris McDade’s 2021 cookbook titled *The Magic of Tinned Fish*, conjures favorable language about the tiny cans, both in its title and subtitle “Elevate Your Cooking with Canned Anchovies, Sardines, Mackerel, Crab, and Other Amazing Seafood.” (2021, 3). Within the text, McDade emphasizes the rich history and tradition of anchovies: “originating in Greece and championed by the Romans, garum, a fermented fish sauce, was one of the earliest uses of anchovies” (2021, 20). Hezel’s (2023) cookbook, also published in the US, points out that the spring 2020 COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in selling and utilizing tinned fish in grocery markets as people had to rely more on home cooking than ever before; additionally, due to interest in cutting down on meat consumption, “canned fish offers a happy alternative” (2023, 10).

At La Centralita, educating our guests about the cultural context of anchovies from the Cantabrian Sea means keeping in mind that “[...] a specific food cannot be decoded based solely on its flavor, visual aspect, texture, or temperature; the full width of its meaning cannot be grasped without analyzing its interaction with other

discourses, practices, and cultural texts” (Parasecoli 2011, 655). Teaching people about proper storage, top quality, and cultural origins helps to change peoples’ minds about anchovies.

Regal Notions of Anchovies in Cultural Products

To work towards shifting negative opinions about anchovies, we show a scene from our 2017 gastronomic documentary film about Basque cuisine, *The Txoko Experience*. It provides background about how chefs and culinary writers extol anchovies and other tinned fish while paying homage to the women who carefully clean each fish by showing them hard at work. San Sebastián-based Chef Kevin Patricio states: “

the king is the anchovy. I actually think it’s one of the secret ingredients to Basque cuisine [...] it’s this umami factor that comes in, because you have anchovies in the vast majority of *pintxos*, in some way, shape or form, so it’s this salt-acid-umami combination that makes *pintxos* [...] so addicting” (Morejón 2017, 23:34-24:12).

This kind of regal description is seen elsewhere. Anchovies and their preparers are given royal status on the front-page of the cuisine section in the Basque newspaper *El Correo*, calling the women who prepare them “*Las reinas de la anchoa*” – “The Queens of the Anchovy” – while a subtitle deems the anchovy “the salty princess of the Cantabrian [Sea]” (Méndez Molano 2023). For her part, María José Sevilla elevates the tiny fish as well: “preserving fish is an art passed from generation to generation all along the Cantabrian coast” (2019, 261). In the following 2019 passage, Sevilla evokes art, tradition, and history, further explaining their origins and variations:

Anchovies are a good reason to visit a particular village or bar at the beginning of the summer. If they are fresh they are known as *bocartes*, but if they are preserved in salt local people call them *anchoas*. Across the bay from Laredo, Santoña is a place where people have Italian names almost as much as Castilian ones. In the nineteenth century a number of Sicilian families moved to the area, bringing with them a cottage industry that soon became one of the most important businesses on the northern coast.

Having seen women processing anchovies upon visiting several factories in the Basque Country and neighboring Cantabria (Arroyabe, Olasagasti, Zallo, and Conservas La Machina de Santoña) firsthand, and enjoying anchovies from places specifically dedicated to them such as Antxoa Taberna in Bilbao or Santoña’s Anchoateca, a café-library for anchovies (a play on the Spanish word ‘*biblioteca*’), I share my knowledge and passion with our guests as La Centralita.

Appreciating Artisanal Labor: Gender and Literature

It is fundamental to acknowledge the physical labor involved in producing anchovies, which is rooted in cultural studies scholarship:

as well as [Roland] Barthes, [...] Claude Lévi-Strauss, Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu, Luce Girard and Sidney Mintz have all declared food – and the sites and bodies engaged in its production, preparation and consumption – to be culturally meaningful (Anderson and Ingram 2020, 473).

While men from the Cantabrian coast have been lauded for catching fish, women deserve more credit for their work in the arduous preparation of anchovies. Unfortunately, in many countries, it is not uncommon for women to see their roles in producing food or maintaining culinary traditions misrepresented or completely ignored (Parasecoli 2010, 473). This can even be true with feminist scholars, as Rebecca Ingram posits: “[...] food’s association with women and domesticity has long discouraged serious consideration, even among feminist scholars who continue to frame the kitchen and food practices as spaces of oppression rather than creativity” (2022, 143). Highlighting women’s roles in processing anchovies demonstrates that “[...] food discourse more often than not transcends food; that is, that textual, visual, and media representations of food do not just instruct us in the right way to eat or think about food, they also teach us the right way to think about our identity” (Anderson 2020, 4). By accentuating the meticulous artisanal production of anchovies, the following media serve to assert just how important they are by accentuating the identity of those who process and enjoy them.

The acknowledgement of the bodies that labor in tinned fish production is present in literature produced by Spaniards. For example, a line from Galician poet Luisa Castro’s poem “My Mother Works in a Canning Factory” (translated by Keith Payne) pays homage to women’s labor in factories. One verse declares: “One day my mother said to me: *love is a work of art in a can*” (Payne 2024). The poem recognizes the physical work but also the labor of love done to provide for one’s family. To further recognize women’s roles in the production of anchovies, another pedagogical tool we utilize at La Centralita is a poem written by Basque writer Kirmen Uribe titled “Back from the Cannery,” which tells the story of how hard his female relatives worked at the canneries, and his nostalgia for anchovy sandwiches: “The women at our house worked in the cannery and, afterward, at home” (Uribe 2020). Women’s work in Uribe’s poem both inside and outside the home is acknowledged, and its author venerates them by considering how their bodies are affected by their domestic and industrial labor. Reading this salient poem has a positive effect on how our guests see anchovies—they recognize how someone can have favorable memories of them, therefore learning to appreciate the hands that prepared them.

In this sense, we can look again to Ingram’s 2022 book:

As we head into the second decade of the twenty-first century, it is clearer than ever that “food politics is a feminist issue.” Women are the most involved in the paid and unpaid labor of producing food, the emotional and caring work to support families, communities, and countries. And yet, all of this work is still tied up in structures of dominance and hierarchies.

Considering Ingram’s assertions, Uribe’s point of view is a welcome change if we consider the traditional binary gendered distinctions between the domestic versus the public spheres. Along these lines, feminist scholars Marjorie DeVault and Dorothy Smith point out that many societies are structured around distinctions between the private realm of domesticity (women) and the public sphere of social life (men). The importance attributed to male public activities and the devaluation of the public activities of women (and of men’s domestic activities) leads to male dominance and a patriarchal organization of society. Even when cooking, cultivation and preparation of food have important social and economic functions, they are still considered as part of the female domestic life and hence irrelevant for the public and visible world of trade and politics (DeVault 1999; Smith 1990, quoted in Parasecoli 2010, 469-70).

This is changing slowly, evidenced by another significant initiative to give women more credit for their labor: a book dedicated to those who work with anchovies, called *Sobadoras de anchoa* (2016). Focusing on narratives about the lives of 35 women in Santoña, Cantabria along with striking photographs of each one, the book begins with a 1992 ‘murga,’ a musical-theatrical piece performed at *Carnaval* celebrations, called “Las Conserveras” about the necessity of women’s work in preserving fish, especially when their husbands are at sea, setting up a gendered work dynamic (Gil and Martínez 2016, 7). A further example of recognizing women’s labor in *conserveras* comes from Santoña: the factory Conservas La Machina de Santoña places small labels inside of each tin featuring the women’s names who packed them. This allows the consumer to recognize the meticulous labor of the person involved in hand packing each small fish. Of course, adding women’s names to anchovy tins is a marketing move that appeals to certain sectors, for more and more consumers are beginning to appreciate “the manual skills” and the “know-how of artisanal food producers and their ties with specific places and material cultures shaped by history” (Parasecoli 2010, 467). This type of insider knowledge is valuable to foodies seeking places off the beaten path, and we can rightly be critical of this kind of culinary tourism available only to those in the know. Nevertheless, we might instead frame it as a productive move to recognize women’s involvement in behind-the-scenes food production labor. Rebecca O’Flynn’s ideas about heeding the importance of artisan food producers are useful here, “as arguably their role is more nuanced than at first glance, identifying them as both purveyors and preservers of food culture, heritage and traditions, linked to the past, key advocates for sustainability, necessary to preserve the future” (2022, 208). When our guests at La Centralita learn all this background information about women artisanal food

producers, they are more likely to try anchovies because they learn to appreciate them. If more people kept the foodways and traditions surrounding anchovies—and arguably many other artisanal products—in mind, perhaps they would value them more as well.

Creating the *Pintxo* Gilda: Understanding History, Celebrating the Anchovy

It is in this spirit of affirming the role of artisan food producers of anchovies that we invite our guests at La Centralita to utilize the anchovy in a specific, participatory context to create a popular Basque *pintxo*. They are given three ingredients: a pit-less green olive, a Basque anchovy, and a *piparra*, a Basque pickled pepper, to wrap around a stick to make a *pintxo* called the *Gilda*, a reference to the 1946 film of the same name starring Rita Hayworth (Née Margarita Carmen Cansino, born in Brooklyn, NY to a father from Spain and a mother of Irish/English descent). Basques liked Hayworth so much that in 1948 at Bar Casa Vallés in San Sebastián, they christened the *pintxo* Gilda, affirming that like her, it was “*verde, salada, y un poco picante*” (green/sensual, salty/nice, and a little spicy) (*Gilda*, 2021). At La Centralita, we celebrate this culinary creation named for a woman, pointing to a work of art we found in San Sebastián by artist Javier Aramburu: an image featuring a seductive one-gloved Hayworth smiling, a picture of strength and confidence holding up a *piparra* – while “Piparras for Gilda” is written above her head.

The film *Gilda* made a splash in 1940s Spain, and its ripple effect endures in the present. Diana Norton contextualizes the film’s cultural reception in Spain noting that “*Gilda* caused a scandal in Spain because Hayworth—a woman of Spanish descent—flouted societal norms dictating women’s behaviour and restraining female sexuality” (2018, 110). The film had a broad impact in Spain: “[...] not only were tickets for *Gilda* so popular at first that they could be purchased up to five days in advance, but the film influenced fashion and food trends in ways that called attention to its licentiousness,” since the t-strap shoes Hayworth sported in the film became an instant favorite among a certain group of middle class Spanish women (Norton 2018, 114). The *pintxo* Gilda has proven its continued relevance: it was born during the 1940s and remains popular today. Other examples of this kind of marketing of Hollywood personas in Spain are Quely (and Quelitas) crackers from Mallorca, inspired by the admiration the company owners felt for Grace Kelly after she honeymooned on the island in 1956 (Ayén 2020). Even a Gilda-inspired cocktail was invented at Madrid’s Museo Chicote (a famous nightclub) which consisted of gin, mint and curaçao (Norton 2018, 114). All these examples affirm Hayworth’s *Gilda* made “an affective splash” in Spain (Norton 2018, 110-111).

The *pintxo* Gilda's impact can also be interpreted as a cuisine to enjoy and celebrate during a time when many people in Spain suffered from hunger. In 1997, Kathleen Vernon wrote about the connection between cinema and deprivation:

The scandal surrounding *Gilda* in some sense both enlarged and reduced the potential response to the film itself, as the title alone came to serve as a kind of short-hand reference to the political and psychic repression and material deprivation of the most stringent years of the dictatorship, the 40s decade of the *años de hambre* (the years of hunger).

Vernon is referring to the years of autarky (self-sufficiency) endured during the Francoist dictatorship (1939-1975). Autarky in Spain lasted from 1939-1959, when a national stabilization plan was established, encompassing more openness to foreign influence and, later, the flourishing of tourism. Given the context of repression and self-sufficiency, the creation of the *pintxo* Gilda may also be seen as a small act of rebellion. Its popularity is still seen in the present, as there are numerous bars in the Northern Basque city of Bilbao with Rita Hayworth's image outside, much like the film had when it opened, called "Gilda Toki" (*toki* means 'place' in Basque) – these bars exclusively feature a selection of Gilda *pintxos*.

The famous *pintxo* Gilda packs punch due to its history and power to change people's minds about anchovies. We call the Gilda a 'game-changer' at La Centralita as guests often arrive with their mostly negative preconceived notions about anchovies, but after learning about, putting together, and tasting the iconic *pintxo* they are wowed by it and surprised by how much flavor is present in the combination of its three elements, especially from the umami in the anchovies. They often purchase all three ingredients to make Gildas at home, thereby incorporating the *pintxo* into their own culinary repertoire: a small step towards giving anchovies their place in the spotlight and evidence that culinary competence can be altered when culinary context is provided.

Casting a Line into the Future of Anchovies

To promote more acceptance of foods like anchovies, visiting culinary studios like La Centralita can affirm the value of artisanal food producers, highlight place-based tourism, and serve to incorporate new items into the foodways of others, thereby helping them to appreciate and truly value cultures different from their own. It is essential to do this as we look to the future, for "recognising the importance of food as an element of, as well as a vehicle to explore and experience, the culture, heritage and traditions of places, arguably it is important to preserve and protect it for future generations too" (O'Flynn 2022, 208). Still, further defense of anchovies is needed in the future, given their artisanal production. They deserve more official recognition in Spain as well, as Patricia Tobías Velar, manager of one of the factories in which they are produced, notes: "we are reclaiming a protected Designation of Origin for

the anchovy” (Méndez Molano 2023, 3). This would place anchovies on par with other artisanal products recognized with this marker of quality such as other *conservas*, cheese, and wines from Spain, and give recognition to the artisanal process involved, conferring anchovies and the women who carefully preserve them the respect they deserve.

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