

REPORT FROM ALIMENTARIA 2016

Discovering the Mediterranean allure of Spanish cuisine

BY SHARON OLSON

Mediterranean cuisine is captivating with flavors that comfort and intrigue with a halo of healthfulness that adds to its allure. The gastronomy of Spain has inspired our tastes for decades bringing tapas that were once a novelty on specialty restaurant menus to a mainstream trend. Small plates have become a permanent part of the American culinary landscape. As much as the cutting-edge chefs from Spain have influenced world cuisine, Spain is somewhat of a late-comer to the export business.

As popular as many Spanish foods and wines are in the U.S., the six large exhibit halls at Alimentaria 2016 in Barcelona proved that Spain might indeed be the least discovered of the Mediterranean cuisines. And this journey of culinary discovery is one that is perfect for the deli to share with American consumers.

With more than 30,000 food companies in Spain, the country has more

food manufacturers than any other country in the European Union. Yet most of the food businesses in Spain are small and medium-sized producers rather than the mega-companies in other countries. Of these companies, about 13,000 of them have export programs feeding the appetite of deli consumers for specialty foods from smaller, more exclusive producers.

Alimentaria included all segments of the food industry including supermarket, gourmet retail, foodservice, hotels, catering and distribution. Hot spots with chef demonstrations inspired those attending with recipes, menu concepts, culinary techniques and contemporary mixology. World-renowned chefs and up-and-coming stars on the culinary scene conducted cooking demos and master workshops.

Even food trucks, which have become an expected part of the street food scene around the world, demonstrated innovation. Vintage gourmet was the rage featuring vehicles with decades-

old design and modern-kitchen equipment serving up everything from Peruvian ceviche to smoked fish and meat with an Alaskan theme. The vintage-inspired vans demonstrated how the concept of fast food and quality could go hand in hand.

Driving Consumer Interest

For the mainstream consumer, the escapades of famous chefs from Spain have been more of a culinary thrill ride than an approachable cuisine. Yet walking the exhibit floor at Alimentaria, one was constantly reminded that authentic, delicious food, sustainably produced and well prepared would always be on trend.

This was a long show that ran for four consecutive full days. Many shows struggle to capture the attention of an audience for more than a few hours, yet here many exhibitors built small cafes within their exhibits to give customers



a chance to truly explore their foods and wines and talk with experts from the vendors about the products.

Travel, not just to Spain, but other European countries where most of Spain's exports go has increased interest and demand for the foods and flavors this country has to offer. The regions of Spain offer unique cultural and culinary treasures, and a taste tour of the regions of the country was an important part of the Alimentaria experience.

Products Beyond The Expected

Food and wines from Spain have long been available as private label brands, yet high quality branded products are building consumer demand throughout the world. Cheese, wine and olive oil from Spain are well known, yet the depth of variety of products and packaging available was breathtaking.

The olive oil tasting bar extended for several aisles and offered an exceptional tasting opportunity of more than 100 different olive oils. The oils included well-known varieties like Picual, Cornicabra and Arbequina to less familiar ones such as Changlot Real, Royal and Arróniz. More than half of the national olive oil production of Spain is exported, so there are many opportunities to find unique and appealing varieties in the U.S.

One of a kind packaging helped to differentiate the various offerings as much as the different taste profiles and characteristics. Packaging for premium olive oils was reminiscent of what one might

expect for high-end spirits. Others were packaged in what appeared to be hand-crafted decanters, each with its own allure for everyday use at home, special occasions or even gift giving.

There were more than 500 meat exhibitors spread over two halls creating a carnivore's paradise. Spain's top meat producing regions are Asturias, Extremadura, Castile-Leon, Galicia and La Rioja. The slicing and serving demonstrated how to turn a simple service into an unforgettable experience for the customer. The diversity of offerings included everything from exquisite Jamon Ibérico to bite-sized nuggets of sausage in an easy to transport to-go container.

Cheeses were generously available to sample from individual exhibitors, and an exclusive area offered tastings of 100

cheeses from Spain. For a nominal fee, guests were able to enjoy a self-guided tasting and sit with colleagues or new acquaintances at communal tables to share tasting notes. In addition to widely known varieties of cheeses from Spain, a wide range of artisan cheeses were available from Catalonia, the Balearic Islands, Cantabria, Castile – Leon, the Basque Country and Navarre.

Twenty percent of Spanish cheeses are produced by micro-enterprises, which are largely family farms. The majority of Spanish traditional cheeses, including all of the Protected Denominations of Origin (DOP's) and many new cheeses are produced by these small cheese dairies, which offer a great opportunity for delis in the U.S. to source exceptional and not widely available specialty cheeses for their





customers. “These micro-enterprises may be the ones producing the oldest and most traditional cheeses, but they are also the ones introducing the most innovations in their production methods,” says Eric Canut, the coordinator of the Land of 100 Cheeses exhibition.

Wine tasting was done in large and small venues to provide a full range of the Spanish wine offerings. One space was dedicated to “vignerons,” small-scale grape growers and winemakers who opt for limited production in harmony with nature. These small vintners who are devoted to designing unique signature wines of exceptional quality were given a wine barrel over which they sampled and discussed their offerings with potential customers.

An exclusive section for fine foods featured the jewels of Spanish food and wine in a private area that looked more couture than culinary. Jamon Ibérico was sampled and displayed in red lacquered cases reminiscent of concert instruments. Mannequins flanked the latest fashions in cheese, and sleek white leather seating allowed customers to relax and enjoy the entire scene.

Kitchen News

Demonstration kitchens that bring consumers into the kitchen for an interactive learning experience were sleek and modern yet also inviting and approachable. An in-store teaching kitchen can engage consumers with store experts and build brand loyalty. Creating convenient opportunities for in-store learning can entice consumers who want to hone their skills. Even if an in-store cooking demonstration is simply a

diversion that creates interest in purchasing fully prepared items from the deli, it is a win-win.

Innovation And Trends

Innovation was showcased across all categories at this show in a major exposition area that featured display and seminars. The sessions were educational, thought provoking, sometimes controversial and designed to encourage discussion

and debate. The Mediterranean Diet, climate change and the food industry, and new diets including Paleo, Nordic and raw foodism were among the topics.

Three mega trends evident in the 300 new products on display included: pleasure, health and practicality. Among the many aspects of pleasure included indulgence, sophistication and luxury packaging. Many products characterized among those with healthful attributes seemed surprising until one realized that natural or organic ingredients with integrity were considered part of this trend. Practicality focused on con-

venient packaging and right-size portions.

The emerging trend of ultra-personalization of diets is expected to foster the growth of healthy, organic, natural and functional products. The search for pleasure, entertainment and fun characterizes the whole foodie experience that continues to gain momentum. Many consider the Flexitarian Diet to be an American invention, yet it has a global following. Vegetables take center stage attention in meals but consumers are not necessarily relinquishing their enjoyment of meat and seafood; they are simply raising their quality expectations.

Many of the new product innovations had a practical nature designed to feed consumer desires for quick and easy preparation; easy to eat anytime anywhere; and available in a right-sized portion, individual or family size. Some examples included: fully prepared dishes and salads that do not require refrigeration; international specialties served in a pot ready to refresh and heat in minutes; chef-designed recipes in microwavable packaging; sausage snacks and toppings and cheese in wedges or slices without the rind.

Experiencing some of these premium products in convenient packaging leads to the idea that snacking is being elevated

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with a gastronomic twist that is very likely to delight consumers. The food culture, romance and terroir of the small producers from the different regions of Spain can easily become the next irresistible pleasure for deli consumers.

Alimentaria celebrated 40 years this year and has been international since 1998. With more than 140,000 visitors from 157 countries and world-class educational opportunities, this show clearly takes its place on the world stage for presenting culinary influence and innovation along with ANUGA and SIAL. **DB**