



CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS . . . *His Gastronomic Persona*

By Lucio Sorré

BACKGROUND

As a wine person, ergo a food person (as wine and food are intimately related) afflicted by Columbus quincennial fever, inquisitiveness prompted a look at what the Admiral of the Ocean Sea and his crews ate during the four voyages to the New World.

The first logical source of information was his diary. It provided the scantiest of information. He wrote that two main meals were served daily, cooked on wood fires set in sand boxes. In addition, at the beginning of his third voyage to the New World, he noted that they stopped in Gomera, Canary Islands where "we stocked up on cheeses of which there is a good deal of good quality."

Attention was then turned to the books written by Gianni Granzotto as well as Samuel Eliot Morison, his indefatigable and lucid biographer. Granzotto cast a light on the Admiral's family life and overall behavior while Morison carefully recorded life aboard the caravels, listed the victuals supplied to them, the daily dietary routine (or perhaps we ought to say the gobbling and swilling routine). No recipes, however.

A check of food historians' literature only highlights Columbus' and other explorers' agricultural contributions to the larders of the old world with yams, potatoes, pineapple, peppers, cocoa, vanilla, papaya, squash, corn, tomatoes and the turkey, a bird unknown to Europe and Asia. It was not a one-way street, as the Old World rapidly introduced sheep, goats, cattle, pigs, olive and walnut trees, wheat, rice, cinnamon, cloves, peaches, apricots and oranges.

Food aboard ship was a source of nourishment, not a hedonistic pleasure. Crews had to be kept strong and reasonably healthy. They had to withstand privations and be able to put in long hours of hard physical work.

They lived in tight quarters. The living arrangements were quite primitive. The shipbuilders, concerned as they were with the speed and sleekness of their crafts did not take into consideration the comfort of crews destined for long journeys. Crews who sailed along the shores of the Mediterranean could go ashore for a night's sleep. No sleeping accommodations existed except for the Admiral or Captain. The sailors simply bedded down anywhere, usually above deck, as any enclosed space would have been used for storage of food, water, firewood, etc. In poor weather, the seamen would have crept below deck to find a dry place among the provisions. Frequent washing and bathing were unknown. Lice and fleas were accepted as natural. There was a pervading smell of unwashed humanity.

That aside, I would have loved to have read gastronomic comments from a crew member reporting on not even a typical meal but at least a favorite dish. In my own dreams I envision what an ordinary crew member, let us say Rodrigo de Triana, the ill-fated lookout on the Pinta, the swiftest of the three caravels, would have written (assuming he could read and write). He is the one who at 2am on Friday, October 12, 1492 spotted land and yelled "tierra-tierra." It was named San Salvador by Columbus. The bonus for the first person to sight land, as established by the Crown, was a life pension of 10,000 maravedis. A generous annuity. Columbus cheated him out of it by claiming that he had seen it hours before (when what he actually had seen were cloud formations that looked like mountains in the horizon.) Triana, as historians tell us, returned to Spain a bitter man. There, according to some reports he died either from wounds suffered fighting the Spaniards after he converted to the Islamic faith or from hanging himself. As a final slap to his memory, the money ended up bequeathed to the Admiral's mistress, Beatrice de Harana, after Columbus' death.

Please join me in my dream and let us read what Triana might have written. "Wednesday, October 10th, the 34th day at sea. Today when I started my day watch (it began at 11am), Pedrito, the steward, prepared a most delicious repast. He boiled salt cod which he had soaked for a couple of days. I know it came from the cold waters of the North Sea, not from Portugal or Spain, because it was less fleshy but more flavorful.

After a few minutes he lifted it from boiling water, removed the bones and skin, placed it in the communal wooden bowl, broke it into small pieces with his hands and while still warm, drizzled it with some good oil from Andalusia. I love salt cod. Some of my sailing friends have told me that it was the food of the Viking sailors and Basque fisherman who benefitted from its protein rich meat. The Vikings even ate it uncooked. I remember running into several Viking sailors in Lofoten, Iceland, a few years ago who raved about biting chunks of dry salt cod with their teeth and chewing them for a very long time until they became easy to swallow." (Salt cod has provided nutritious food not only to sailors but also to generations of fishermen and their families during times of caresty due to inclement weather or other cataclysms. It has also provided palatable food to generations of Catholics during the Lenten period.)



Triana would continue - "The cook also boiled chickpeas and mashed them into a puree adding some olive oil, olives and a few drops of vinegar preparing a delectable dish..

"The sea biscuits served on board fortunately came from the shop of Gaspar Gorricio the best of the many bakeries that crowd Palos. Unlike some of his competitors, his biscuits are fresher and less likely to have weevils. In fact, as is customary when at sea for several weeks, I split the biscuits with my knife and check the cut surface for weevils. If I find any, I would scrape them off with the knife." End of log entry.

But I'm digressing and romanticizing.

The original thought of writing about food aboard Columbus' ships begat another thought - Columbus - his gastronomic persona - what pleased or displeased his palate? More research was warranted - just like the boy who carves a figurine from a piece of wood and levigates it with his penknife to make it smooth. Suddenly he digs a deeper cut and is forced to reshape his creation, changing it into something else.

The main source, once again, came from Samuel Eliot Morison. Additional information was gathered from books on early Genovese, Portuguese and Spanish foods, life in Spain and Portugal in the 15th and 16th centuries, monastic life, the foods and wines of Liguria, Spain, Portugal and Madeira.

We discovered that five different gastronomic conditions shaped the gastronomic makeup of this renowned seafarer ~ his early years in Liguria (Genova) where he was born; life at sea, first in the Mediterranean, then in longer journeys in the Atlantic Ocean; his sojourns in Portugal (Lisbon and Porto Santo in Madeira where he spent his short lived marriage); Spain, and in the New World he discovered.

HIS LIGURIAN DAYS

Let us start in chronological order. Columbus was born in Genova, in 1451, the same year as Queen Isabella of Spain. She is the monarch who played a major role in his discoveries. He was a contemporary of Michelangelo and Botticelli, therefore, part of the volcano of genius that shattered the bleakness of the Middle Ages.

The eldest of four brothers Columbus was born to a family of modest origins who lived alternately in Genova and the nearby city of Savona. His father, Domenico a stubborn, ambitious, master cloth weaver by trade, who later became a merchant in woolens and textiles, was a political activist and a saloon keeper.

Columbus's mother Susanna Fontanarossa came from a mountain village where chestnuts were the main staple of the diet. Her family was not well off, leading us to believe that they enjoyed simple but tasty foods and wines, especially Gavi from nearby Piedmont.

Columbus was primarily a seaman. He spent most of his life at sea beginning at age 13 and was exposed to home cooking only in his very early years.

Genoa, capital of a wealthy seafaring, mercantile republic which was very active in the spice trade when spices were widely used to enhance flavor and mask spoilage.

The Genovese have always been proud and jealous of their cuisine - redolent with the aromas of herbs - sage, rosemary, thyme, oregano, marjoram and basil. Yet, they were always careful not to adopt foreign spices such as cinnamon, pepper, cloves or other strong spices (even though they earned their livelihood trading them), creamy sauces and vegetable oils except olive oil.

There is a reason for the absence of spices in the Genovese diet. The Genovese were deep-sea sailors, whose long voyages took them beyond sight of land and they were assaulted by day and night the odors of pepper from India, cloves from Zanzibar and cinnamon from Ceylon. By the time they docked, the last thing they needed was more spice.

Ligurians were so conservative that they refused to allow coffee to be served in public or private in the early 1600's when at the same time coffee houses were the rage in Venice. Only much later was this restriction lifted.



Genovese cuisine was and still is strongly related to the return of the seaman who, after long months spent on sailing vessels, having endured a monotonous diet of salted meats and fish, dried legumes, sea biscuits and an occasional meal of fresh fish, longed for the exhilarating blizzard of freshness, color and vitamins found in vegetables.

On shore seamen preferred salads, stuffed vegetables such as eggplant and zucchini, vegetable pies, vegetable soups and pasta with pesto sauce. In Liguria basil reigns supreme, devised as a variant to the white garlic sauces of northern Europe. Basil, basilico in Italian, was considered in antiquity a sacred plant, required to be cut only with an instrument made of some noble metal (iron would not do), by a person who had previously performed purificatory rites, and away from anyone in a state of impurity.

Favorite Ligurian dishes of the time included - Insalata Nizzarda (another name for Nicoise salad made with anchovies on a base of crudite and hard boiled eggs drizzled with olive oil and topped with onions and basil not tomatoes.) Others favorites were ratatouille, sardines, anchovies either fried or cooked "in carpione" ~ in a marinade of garlic, wine vinegar and sage.

Fish was the principal source of complete protein. The waters around Genoa were scant with fish so the Genovese imported preserved fish: herring from Flanders, salted fish from Provence or eastern Spain, tuna preserved in oil from Andalusia and caviar from Asia. Other seafood used was of modest character such as sardines, anchovies, squid, mackerel and bottom fish. Fish stew was quite popular, known as "burrida" in Genova (in other parts of Italy it is called Caciucco or Zuppa di pesce) is known the world over ~Bouillabaisse in France, Caldeirada in Portugal, Zarzuela de Mariscos in Spain, Solyanka Rybnaya in Russia, Kakavia in Greece, Oostense Vissoep in Belgium, Chlodnik z Ryby in Poland (served cold), Zivju Zupa in Latvia, Kalakeitto in Finland, etc.

Though seafood dishes are certainly not lacking in Ligurian cooking, meat plays a more important role in the diet than might be expected from a territory which is virtually all coast. On long voyages, the sailors' only fresh food available was fish. They had plenty of it. On land they sought vegetables and meats. The Ligurians made minimal use of poultry but did prize rabbit in a white sauce with olives, as well as pork and veal.

Several other characteristics of Ligurian cooking stem from Genova's vocation for the sea. No pains were too great to be taken to please the returning wayfarer, so that Genovese cooking is distinguished by patience.

Minestrone is made velvety through long slow cooking to develop its symphony of tastes and smells. Pot roasts are cooked lengthily and braised beef is known as stracotto "overcooked," and constantly tended while it smokes over a few glowing embers of coal. The juices are slowly sweated out of the meat, so that they become rich and concentrated and are used as the base for the sauce with which ravioli and lasagne are flavored.

Genovese cooking is elaborate. Every dish has to be festive. Even if it were as humble as a vegetable tart, it was brought to apotheosis as "torta pasqualina," stuffed breasts of veal became the complicated "cima genovese." Fish salad developed into a the towering, layered work of art of that peculiarly Genovese confection, "cappon magron."

Another item in the Italian diet, white bread was consumed with meals. Pasta was served occasionally but did not become a daily staple in Italy until late in the 19th century. Wheat had to be imported because most of the local countryside was too steep to plow.

Columbus's parents, unlike most city people who depended on butcher shops for their supplies of fresh veal and pork, owned a small farm where they raised and butchered hogs for their supply of dried and salted sausages and hams.

Preserving of food required enormous amount of salt, which was one of Genoa's biggest imports and an important part of the import-export trade. Olive oil was also used as a preservative and as the principal cooking fat. Much of this fruity oil came from the villages around the city, whose terraced hills were planted with olive trees.

The family's other food needs came from their garden. Principal crops were peas and broadbeans which were dried for the winter, lettuce and other salad greens, onions, garlic, carrots, parsley and basil. Herbs to be used for medicinal purposes were also grown. Columbus learned about them and in one of his diaries he commented on the use of parsley as a diuretic.

Using table and garden scraps for feed, they probably raised chickens to supply eggs, an important source of protein. Cheese and milk were bought in the town's shops.



Around 1464, at age thirteen, Columbus began accompanying his father's shipments and negotiated transactions.

By 1469 Domenico diversified his businesses and now described himself in business documents as a wool weaver and taverner. Having become a wine dealer, some authors ~ about a century ago ~ concluded incorrectly that Domenico was a drunkard. Domenico and Susanna owned vineyards and traditionally the entire family went out to prune, tie up and weed the vines in March and April and to help the hired hands harvest and make the wine in October.

Genoa at that time was an excellent wine market ~ one of the largest exporters of wine after Apulia and Calabria in southern Italy. Vernaccia, a most prized wine was drunk by the wealthy. Malvasia was less expensive and more readily available as was Vermentino and Muscat (Moscato) and Grenache (Cannonau). Also present were the red Dolcetto (today known as Ormeasco, tasting quite different from its Piemontese cousin), and the white Gavi, from nearby Piedmont.

HIS EARLY DAYS AT SEA

Columbus probably first went to sea as a merchant's assistant at about the age of thirteen (boys from poorer families would have gone at a younger age - as early as 10 as cabin attendants.) Initially the trips were short but between the ages of 15 and 23 (from 1466 to 1474) Columbus embarked on several long voyages. He also spent a lengthy time ashore helping his father run his businesses.

THE CUISINE OF THE SEA

The captains or ship owners, were responsible for the complete supplying of victuals and men. The basic staples were salt-cured meats (beef and pork), salt cod, sardines, anchovies, sea biscuits (hardtack), olives, olive oil, rice, dry chickpeas, peas (they had great keeping powers) beans (black-eyed peas ~ as the other types of beans originated in the New World), wine, water, molasses and raisins.

Ship biscuits date back to ancient Roman and Greek days. The word comes from "bis coctus," twice baked. The Romans called it "panis nauticus" or nautical bread. The dough of seasoned wheat flour and water was baked in molds twice or even more times for long voyages. To make a more compact paste, after the initial baking the biscuits were broken up, pounded, re-mixed with water, re-shaped and baked again. To eat them, if you did not want to lose your teeth, you had to soak them in water or soup.

They, as well as the salted meats and fish, wine, olive oil and water were stored in wooden casks, often of faulty construction. All the victuals were stored in the driest part of the hold, which meant very little as the stumpy ships leaked and water and humidity played havoc with the food.

Columbus was suited for life at sea and its rigors. He was self-assured to the point of megalomania, possessed a strong and egotistical personality, was highly intelligent and articulate. He was also known for his "impenetrable silences," was ashamed of his modest origins and dreamt of aristocratic immortality. His pride was notorious and he was contemptuous of those who opposed him. He enjoyed the company of monks - Franciscans, with whom he had great affinity and Dominicans and stayed with them periodically. He also sought the company of seasoned "sea salts" with whom he discussed navigation and foreign lands.

He was a man of simple tastes, temperate in his diet, just like his contemporary, Queen Isabella. His clothing and footwear were sober. He observed the fasts of the church and, just like most sailors of his time, was very religious going to confession and taking communion often.

HIS PORTUGUESE (LISBON) DAYS

In 1476, Columbus sailed to northern Europe, engaged in warfare with a French task force, was supposedly shipwrecked near Lagos on the southern coast of Portugal. According to some sources, he was able to swim ashore. Other experts opine that Columbus found his way to Portugal in a less romantic fashion, attracted, like other sailors as well as merchants from all over the Mediterranean, to cash in on the opportunities offered by the country. Portugal was perhaps the liveliest and most progressive nation in Europe at the time and at the height of her golden age of exploration.

Eventually he joined his brother, Bartholomew, a chartmaker in Lisbon. This was not a lucrative position, so he decided to go back to sea and in 1478, gained more Atlantic experience by sailing to Madeira to purchase sugar as an agent for Italian merchants. A lawsuit stemming from this voyage was what forced him to return to Genoa in 1479 to testify. This record helps establish his Genovese origins.

Columbus' returned to Lisbon and resumed his chartmaking duties for his brother. In his spare time he frequented sailors' haunts, located in the sizeable Genovese colony in Lisbon, to hear their tales of the high seas.



The port of Lisbon was the merchandise market of Europe at that time. Portuguese ships carried a flourishing trade between Lisbon and England, Ireland, Iceland, Madeira, the Azores and Africa. Ships from every country in Europe stopped there to unload goods and take on supplies.

The age of Portuguese expansion and exploration began during the reign of King John I (1385-1433.) His son, Prince Henry, known as "the Navigator" founded the School of Navigation at Sagres in the Algarve in 1416 and revolutionized the science of oceanic navigation. His sailors discovered and colonized the Madeira Islands, the Azores and reached the west coast of Africa, bringing in riches in gold, ivory and spices.

Not far from Columbus' brother's chartmaking shop was a convent where the daughters of Portuguese nobility were schooled, and where young men went courting. It was in the convent's chapel that Columbus met his future wife, Dona Felipa Perestrelo y Moniz, the daughter of Isabel Moniz and deceased Bartolomeo Perestrelo. Perestrelo had been a seagoing man, and was appointed hereditary governor of Porto Santo, a small island 30 miles northeast of Madeira, by Prince Henry. Both sides of Felipa's family were illustrious, her grandfather on her mother's side was one of the richest seigniories of the Algarve and her father descended from the noble Italian Pelestrellos of Piacenza (Emilia Romagna - Italy's food valley).

Bartolomeo Perestrelo had died in 1457 and his wife and daughter moved from Porto Santo to Lisbon where Felipa met Columbus. After their marriage, Columbus and his wife continued to live in Lisbon with her mother. By virtue of his marriage, Columbus acquired Portuguese citizenship and, therefore, the right to trade in all Portuguese overseas possessions. He sailed the north and south Atlantic from Iceland to Africa, learned the currents, travelled various routes and eventually integrated their lessons into a scheme for re-establishing direct trade with Asia by sailing west.

During their stay in Lisbon, the family probably ate fish stews, tuna, conger eels, grilled anchovies and the ubiquitous sardines. In his book, North Atlantic Seafood, Alan Davidson writes that sardines are immature pilchards and explains that the reason they are so abundant in Portuguese waters is that pilchards do not mature well in southerly climes.

Thanks to his deceased father-in-law's Piacenza heritage, Columbus was likely treated to such Italian specialties as bomba di riso (boiled rice pressed into a round mold, surrounded by some roasted pigeon in mushroom sauce, sprinkled with bread crumbs, spotted with rosettes of butter and baked in the oven.

He may have also enjoyed lepre sfilata, hare, boiled in salted water, boned, then fried with diced pancetta, onion, basil and parsley and some of the liquid saved from its beginning preparation.

"Isacas," another Lisbon classic he undoubtedly ate, is made with pork or calves liver, bay leaves and wine. Pork is a popular meat dish in the area east and south of Lisbon due to the hogs diet of chestnuts and acorns from the cork oaks which grow there.

Other Lisbon-styled specialties included Caldeirada or fish stew (without the tomatoes which are an ingredient in present day dishes) and rich desserts such as "Doces de Ovos" extraordinary confections compounded primarily of egg yolks and sugar, believed to have been introduced to Spain and Portugal by the Moors.

HIS PORTUGUESE DAYS - PORTO SANTO, MADEIRA

Eventually, Columbus, his wife and mother-in-law moved to Porto Santo in the Madeira islands, to live with Dona Felipa's brother who had inherited his father's governorship. There Columbus heard many of seafaring stories such as that of the pilot who saw, far west of Cape St. Vincent, a strange piece of wood that had not been carved by iron and that had been blown by the west wind from unknown islands across the ocean and of mariners venturing beyond the Azores and Canaries ~ who had seen islands on the horizon.

Columbus was one husband who seemed to have had more reason than most to bless his mother-in-law. While on Porto Santo, Dona Isabel recognized Columbus' restless interest in everything about oceanic voyaging and distant lands. It is reported that she "gave him the journals and sea charts left by her husband," and a result Columbus's passion was "still more inflamed." It is said that it was the papers of Bartolomeo Perestrelo, who had sailed for Prince Henry, and the information from Portuguese seamen that fixed Columbus' mind on the westward ocean crossing.

While on Porto Santo, he enjoyed spending evenings on the beach with Felipa. Columbus had a fine tenor voice and loved singing the mournful fados (Portuguese song typically accompanied by guitar). His first son, Diego was probably born on the island in 1480.



Rabbits were plentiful here and young people, including Columbus and his wife, enjoyed hunting them at night. Afterward they would sip Madeira wine with their friends. Columbus ate rabbit ~ cooked in different styles - roasted; in a stew; fried in tiny morsels as an appetizer; fricasseed; and occasionally in a soup (of which he was not too fond). He would have also eaten "funcho" or fennel, sauteed or grilled. When Henry the navigator stepped ashore on the island of Madeira early in the 15th century, the air was so filled with the sweetness of fennel that they named the place Funchal. Fennel still grows wild in Madeira and on her various islands.

When he returned from his long voyages where sea biscuits, fish, meat and dried legumes were the daily staple, Columbus indulged in fish soups, and fish stews (ranchos) ubiquitous on every sailor's table, probably spicier than he was accustomed to in Italy as spices played a greater role in Portuguese cuisine. Certainly he would have opted for "grellos" the pungent spring greens beloved by the Portuguese possibly served with carne de vinho e alhos. This Madeira pork specialty, now popular all over mainland Portugal, consists of boiling meat before browning it, a most ancient method of cooking.

In Madeira it is said that his favorite dish was espetada, meaning "pierced," a shish kebab popular in Porto Santo and Madeira. It is beef cubes seasoned in Madeira wine and bay leaves, then pierced with a bay stick and roasted over an open fire. This dish was drunk with the wine of Madeira ~ made with grapes from vines imported from Cyprus and Crete under order of Prince Henry ~ quite different from that of today as that Madeira was not heat-treated and fortified with brandy.

Since land transport of wines at that time was costly, Columbus probably accompanied his meals with the white topaz-colored wine of Carcavelos which lies less than 10 miles west of Lisbon. Or, perhaps he preferred the fine whites and reds of Colares, a tiny area of sea cliffs and sandy beaches about 20 miles west of Lisbon, the two major wine producing areas at that time. Today these wines are practically non-existent as much of the land in the area has been sold to urban commuters to build vacation villas.

Another favorite white of the time was Bucelas, a dry wine, slightly acidic and excellent with grilled sardines and fish soup. A red, Charneco, which also came from Bucelas was quite appreciated.

Had Columbus selected a wine with one of Portugal's traditional desserts such as orange pudding for which Madeira is famous, he might have quaffed a Malvasia. At holiday time, he was likely served Moscatel de Setubal, a richly perfumed, honey-sweet wine made with muscat grapes grown near the port of Setubal not far from Lisbon.

During this time period he appealed to Portuguese court for backing of an expedition to reach the Indies. In Columbus' calculations, the size of the world which he believed was round ~ a belief not shared by many of the populace ~ was only about 2/3 of its actual size.

This miscalculation led him to place Japan closer to Europe, obviously not realizing that the North American continent and the Pacific Ocean were in the way.

Two royal scientific commissions advised the King against backing Columbus because they believed his calculations were incorrect. His request was denied. It was at this time that, when told of the negative answer to his request for an impossible venture that Columbus asked for a hard boiled egg and challenged his interlocutors to try to stand it on end ~ which, of course, they could not. He then cracked one end and stood it up. The meaning was clear ~ all things are difficult or impossible until you find the solution, then all will follow.

In 1485 Columbus' wife died of consumption. He returned to Lisbon and began sailing to the west coast of Africa. Columbus still believed that an even richer trade with the Indies could be developed by going west, rather than east, thus avoiding the long voyage around the southernmost tip of Africa, a voyage too long to be practical.

HIS SPANISH DAYS

Following the death of his wife Dona Felipa and after being turned down by the Portuguese Court in his search for backing of an expedition to reach the Indies, Columbus settled in Spain, near the Portuguese border with his five year old son. He decided to try his luck with Queen Isabella of Castile and King Ferdinand II of Aragon whose marriage unified Spain.

They were Columbus' last hope to follow his dream. In Italy the city/states had lost their communal freedom through an inability to maintain order, due to feuds among families and the conflict of the classes. The economy in Italy remained local and unstructured, even though their fleets and products reached distant ports. They offered no concerted resistance to the expansion of France, Spain and Germany into regions once dominated by Italy. The Atlantic nations flourished and the Mediterranean ceased to be the favored home of man's economic life.



In his long journeys to the constantly moving court of Spain (so designed so that no locality would bear the entire cost of supporting the sovereigns), Columbus chose to stay in monasteries, some Dominican, often Franciscan.

He was smart to stay in monasteries as the inns at that time were dirty, filthy from fireplaces that belched black smoke and usually flea infested. The food served was so dismal that many travelers brought their own.

The monks, instead, provided spartan but clean quarters and excellent hospitality ~ as long as it did not interfere with the contemplative nature of their lives. The food was ample and good tasting. Meals rarely included meat, but often consisted of fish. They were always accompanied by a pint of wine whose ration was increased on feast days. The monks also fasted once a week on bread and water. Eventually Columbus left his son, Diego, with Franciscan friars to seek support from the Spanish Crown for his voyage to the Indies. He persisted in this quest for six years.

The would-be discoverer, spent much of his time in Andalucia, the seaports of Cadiz and Palos, in the south of Spain. A parched and arid region (land is best suited to grape vines and olive trees), its people are the gayest in Spain, enjoying life with a devil-may-care attitude that is light years away from that of the more sedate and business-oriented northerners. The Andalucian cuisine unlike that of the Basque country and Cataluna, reflects the simplicity and respect for the integrity of the basic food.

The exquisite fish available along this southern coastline, coupled with Andalucians' seemingly intuitive talent for frying it exactly right ~ succulent within; crisp and golden without. Early area specialties included Flamenquines (pork and ham rolls), Pollo al Horno (roasted chicken with Sherry), Caldo de Perro Gaditano (Cadiz-style fish broth) and Caballa a la Vinagreta (mackerel vinaigrette). Mackerel is a highly prize fish in Spain, and is often difficult to find except in the seaside city of Cadiz where the supply is always abundant.

Spanish cuisine in those days consisted of plenty of abundant fish and fresh produce, was generally poor in dairy products but did have eggs, pork, lamb and veal and olive oil as a cooking base. Columbus very likely indulged in sardines or anchovies either grilled or fried, olives and chestnuts and probably some goat meat. Surely he ate Huevos a la Flamenca (baked eggs with ham, sausage and asparagus). This dish originated in the gypsy lands of Andalucia and has all the color and gaiety of that most vivacious area of Spain. More specifically, the dish is said to have been created in Sevilla. Another Sevilla specialty is the delicious and unusual Pato a la Sevillana (Duck with Olives in Sherry Sauce).

The wines of Spain, at that time, were not very good, they had a reputation for being impure products. Often they were contained in whole pigskins minus a foot (cueros) for access, turned inside out and dabbled with pitch to make them waterproof. Since Columbus spent much time in Cadiz, he surely drank Jerez (sherry) one of the worlds' oldest wines, savored and praised over the centuries for its fine quality and unique taste.

Cadiz from where Columbus would sail for the Indies, is located near to Xeres (Jerez). Vines were brought to Xeres by the Phoenicians followed by the Greeks (who called the land Xera) and then Romans who were finally driven out, following 500 years of domination, by the Visigoths and Vandals ~ tribes from central Europe. Eventually the "Vandals" gave their name to this area which became known as Andalucia. After 300 years these tribes were routed by the Moors from North Africa.

By 1487 Columbus had moved to Seville. To survive, started a branch of his brother's cartography business and fought the infidels, the Moors, not far from Huelva.

He continued to write the king of Portugal asking him to underwrite the cost of the expedition to the west. In 1488, Bartholomew Dias who had been dispatched from Lisbon, by the Portuguese king, rounded the Cape of "Storms" (changed to "Good Hope" to foster trade) in Africa and discovered the sea route to the Indies. The prospect of reaching Asia by way of Africa meant the end of any chance Columbus might have had of arousing the king's interest in a westward route.

Finally Spain expelled the Moors and Isabella and Ferdinand were eager to outstrip their Portuguese rivals in the race for the Indies and the immense wealth that was to be obtained. Both Isabella and Ferdinand realized that the investment was minimal and the profit potential enormous.

Around Christmas 1491 they gave Columbus permission for his voyage and a contract was signed April 17, 1492 to fit three ships for an exploration of the West Indies. Columbus made Admiral of the Ocean Seas with the promise that he would be made viceroy of any lands he discovered and that he would be permitted to keep 10% of all treasures found. Columbus was then given three caravels, much more seaworthy for long voyages than any other then known ships ~ they could take very rough weather but were not too fast.



HIS VOYAGES AND DISCOVERY OF THE NEW WORLD

THE FIRST VOYAGE

Columbus sailed from Palos de la Frontera on 3 August, 1492. His flagship, the Santa Maria had 52 men aboard while his other two ships, the Nina and Pinta each held 18 men. The expedition made a stop at the Canary Islands and on 6 September 1492 sailed westward.

Let us look at the first voyage and the victuals embarked on the three vessels, the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria. The first problem was to obtain supplies of food, wine and water. At the Canary islands they picked up fresh water, wood and the famous Gomera goat cheese.

Columbus' first voyage had the best victuals (and enough to last a year), not the case in his other voyages.

The menu for Spanish seamen consisted of water, vinegar, wine, olive oil, molasses, cheese, honey, raisins, rice, garlic, almonds, sea biscuits (hardtack), dry legumes such as chickpeas, lentils, beans, salted and barreled sardines, anchovies, dry salt cod and pickled or salted meats (beef and pork), salted flour. The olive oil and perhaps olives were stored in earthenware jugs. All other provisions were stored in wooden casks which, according to some reports, were of cheap and faulty construction permitting the preserving brine to leak out of the meat casks and moisture to invade the casks of dry provisions. All were stored in the hold, the driest section of which was normally reserved for those casks carrying dry provisions. A cooper (barrel maker) was responsible for keeping the casks tight, an almost impossible challenge.

Food, mostly boiled, was served in a large communal wooden bowl. It consisted of poorly cooked meat with bones in it, the sailors attacking it with fervor, picking it with their fingers as they had no forks or spoons. The larger pieces of meat were cut with the knife each sailor carried.

At the time of Columbus, the only means of cooking was an open firebox called "Fogon." It was equipped with a back to screen it from the wind. Sand was spread on the floor of the box and a wood fire built on it. Of course, all this was obliterated in stormy weather. Later on, portable ovens were made available to set up ashore when the opportunity arose.

Fish was cheaper and more readily available than meat and was served more often. Meats were often prepared in some sort of stew with peas other legumes or rice and served with sea biscuits which were soaked in the soup or in water for edibility. Sea biscuits were purchased to last at least a year, providing they were kept in dry areas.

For drink the crew had wine and water. Both were stored in wooden barrels. The wine was red and high in alcohol ~ a preservative feature. It probably came from the hot, dry, undulating treeless chalky plains of Xeres (Jerez) near Cadiz, where the vines were first planted by the Phoenicians, tended by the Greeks after them and then the Romans and much later the Moors. The wines while rich in character were not fortified at that time. Fortification came much later.

During the days of calm at sea, the sailors would fish and then cook their catch.

The weather during the journey was pleasant, no major storms. By 10 October, after 34 days at sea, the sailors became hysterical and were ready to mutiny, many of them feeling that since the world was flat, at any moment they would fall off.

Columbus convinced the mutineers to wait 3 more days. They very next day they saw tree branches in the water and realized that land was close.

DISCOVERY OF NEW WORLD -

America, exploration of the Bahamas, north coasts of Cuba and Haiti.

After making landfall in the Bahamas at dawn on 12 October 1492, Columbus explored the coasts and named a large number of islands, including Cuba and La Espanola. When he went ashore he was puzzled because the "easterners" were not what footloose Marco Polo described them to be on his return to Europe in 1295 after spending 20 years in the Orient, nor did Columbus see any "pagodas" with golden roofs.

He did find lush vegetation and marveled at the variety of strange plants. In the "New World," maize (Indian corn) was the most widely cultivated crop to be found and was invariably grown in conjunction with beans, squashes and other food plants, combinations that provided a diet with a good balance of proteins and carbohydrates.



Maize was the predominant staple of the Indian communities of the eastern part of the present-day United States. Almost all other foods were mixed with corn gruel or baked in little corn cakes. In tropical America, manioc or cassava, became the major food crop. Manioc, a plant native to South America produces a starchy root that can be made in gruel or bread. the domestication of manioc was of enormous importance to tropical communities because the plant yields more food per acre than any other crop.

One of the most important food plants developed in pre-Columbian America was the potato - first cultivated in the highlands of South America. Though the potato did not grow well in the tropics, the sweet potato thrived in both temperate and tropical zones. Other crops included the peanut, tomato, papaya, pineapple, avocado, chile pepper, cotton and cocoa. The Mayas and Aztecs valued cocoa highly as a beverage and even used cocoa beans as a medium of exchange.

Within a half a century of the first voyage of Columbus, Spain had conquered the Aztec, Maya and Inca civilizations and established an enormous colonial empire. The Spanish conquest did not completely destroy the pre-Columbian agrarian system. Instead, it introduced Old World plants, animals, tools and methods that coexisted with the Indian system. Eventually, each system borrowed elements from the other, irrevocably changing the agriculture of both the Old and New World.

Europeans introduced sugarcane, rice, olives, bananas, wheat, barley and European broadbeans.

On Christmas Eve 1492 the Santa Maria ran into a coral reef off the coast of Haiti and, with the help of the local Indians, Columbus removed supplies, dismantled the ships timbers and established La Navidad, a colony around two houses donated by the local "cacique" or chief.

He left behind 39 crewmen, including a carpenter, caulker, physician, gunner, tailor and cooper. He also left water casks and oils jars to collect gold. The men were told to trade with the Indians and collect as much gold as possible and hold it for his return. Columbus then instructed them to build a fort with a moat to impress the Indians and to use in case of danger. The crewmen did not follow these instructions as the Indians seemed friendly.

RETURN TO SPAIN

In early 1493 Columbus returned to Spain on the Nina. The Pinta followed. The return trip was quite rough, most of the crew were sick and 4 of the 6 Indians he brought with him, died. Columbus and his small band arrived in Palos de la Frontera on 15 March after stopping in Lisbon for repairs.

Banquets and celebrations were held in his honor. The crown appointed a special committee to acquire provisions and organize men for additional expeditions. Sailors were often cheated by ships' chandlers - they were given weak barrels, poor wine that quickly turned to vinegar and old maps instead of good.

SECOND VOYAGE

Discovered the windward and leeward Islands that bound the eastern Caribbean, explored Puerto Rico, the southern coast of Cuba and Jamaica and circumnavigated Hispaniola Columbus left Spain in September 1493 this time with 17 ships and 1,200 men, all eager to find wealth and immense riches. On October 13, 1493 they stopped at Madeira and Canaries for water, wood and goiter cheese and then in the Cape Verde Islands for goat which he then had slaughtered and salted.

We know that barreled wine from Jerez was used as ballast during Columbus' second voyage to the New World

While there are no complaints of carelessness or ship chandler's dishonesty reported on the first voyage, this was not the case on the second voyage. The people entrusted with supplying 17 vessels carrying 1200 men believed in spending the least money possible. As a result, wine and water barrels leaked, the wine quickly turned to vinegar, the food was beginning to spoil at the time of purchase, and old nags instead of Andalusian horses were loaded along with livestock.

Salting methods were very good and properly meat would keep as long as 40 years provided the casks - which contained about 30 gallons - were kept in good order and their contents were not allowed to become dry. Most of the meat was of such poor quality that it was beginning to go bad at the time of preservation.

In days of calm sea the men fished and were able to enjoy fresh fish.

On land, humidity and heat played havoc with food supplies - sea biscuits turned into soft masses of pulsating weevils, meat and dry fish turned into malodorous masses but the men endured the trials and tribulations.



When sea biscuits became too spoiled, a flour made of cassava roots of the manioc or yucca plant, leached out of their poison (hydrocyanic acid - the Indians dipped their arrow tips into this poison), was used to make into thin pancakes. At first the Spaniards did not like it, but they soon had to accept it as it was superior to the moldy hardtack they had available. They also learned to eat iguanas in Cuba (at first thought disgusting) even "barkless" dogs (thought to taste as good as "kid from Seville").

When he reached Haiti (11 months after leaving) he found La Navidad burned and all his men dead.

Of the twelve hundred crew, staff and passengers on this second voyage, three hundred died of disease in the new settlement of La Isabella during 1494, despite the heroic efforts of Dr. Chanca. The weather was also hostile. A hurricane in 1495 destroyed all the ships in the harbor including those that Columbus' financial backer Berardi had leased and loaded with merchandise. Columbus was able to return to Spain only by patching together two ships from the wreckage.

RETURN TO SPAIN - 1496

In 1496 he sailed back home. This time he did not receive a hero's welcome. His men were bitter that they did not find the wealth they were seeking, they found no cities, no money economy, no metal tools, manufactures or ores.

Columbus' report to the monarch when he arrived in Seville only confirmed the rumors they had already heard from resupply ships that had crossed the ocean during 1494 and 1495. Ferdinand and Isabel gave the Admiral a distracted if not cool reception.

By the time the monarchs once again summoned Columbus to court in 1497, relations were decidedly cool. Furthermore, the royal treasury was once again empty. Though they approved financing for a third voyage funding moved a glacially slow pace. No westbound sailing ships left in 1497.

THIRD VOYAGE

Discovered Trinidad and the South American continent and explored the coast of Venezuela

In 1498 Columbus left on this 3rd voyage. This time he was given only 6 ships, few volunteers and a bunch of convicts for colonists. Still looking for a passage to India, he discovered the mainland of South America.

The only good news for Columbus came from La Espanola where the Spaniards had found gold nuggets. He now had good reason to believe he would realize profit on his "Asian" venture.

Nevertheless, he and his brothers were arrested by a royal judge and returned to Spain in 1500, accused of mismanaging their responsibilities as royal governors of the Spanish colonies. The king and queen released Columbus immediately but they took the complaints of the colonists very seriously and initiated some reforms, stripping Columbus and his brothers of their governing authority.

FOURTH VOYAGE AND FINAL RETURN TO SPAIN

Discovered Central America and explored the costs of Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama.

The monarchs permitted Columbus to make a final voyage in 1502, this time as a private venture without their partnership. They continued to address him as Admiral, but they forbade him to exercise any governing powers on the islands he had brought under their sovereignty.

In 1502 with only 4 ships he left on his last voyage. He coasted along the shores of South America still hoping to find the treasures of India. This voyage was disastrous. Columbus returned to Spain, a beaten man ~ as distrusted foreigner of faded glory and tarnished reputation.

DEATH

Columbus died in 1506, crippled by gout and arthritis, still with the illusion of having found India. We can see him sitting by the window of his monastic room, dipping a weevil-free sea biscuit in a bowl of Caldo de Perro Gaditano, the Cadiz style fish broth prepared for him by his Franciscan friends, gazing into the line of the horizon, seeing perhaps the distant gold roofs of China.



LEGACY

The cuisines of today's world are typically post-Columbian. What would many of the Mediterranean's gastronomic delights be without the tomato or her rich desserts without chocolate, Ireland's shepherds' pie or England's fish and "chips" without potatoes, Hungary with without paprika, France's Nicoise without Haricot verts, Italy's polenta without corn, India's curries, Thai or China's Sichuan dishes with the ubiquitous chile, an American hamburger without onions or Mexican carnitas without beef or pork...

The Spanish and other Europeans who followed them to the "New World" attempted to recreate the Old World agricultural system with which they were familiar. They introduced cattle, horses, donkeys, pigs, goats, sheep and chickens to their colonies. Desiring familiar foods, these immigrants brought with them a full complement of Old World crops including sugarcane, rice and bananas which thrived in the warm and humid lowlands and wheat, barley and European broadbeans, coffee and winegrapes which instead were usually grown on mountain slopes.

Nevertheless, they gradually learned to eat maize, manioc, potatoes, sweet potatoes, peanuts and other native American foods.

The importation of ox, horse and donkey was momentous. It revolutionized transport and travel and encouraged long-distance trade. Livestock thrived on the vast plains and generated an important source of food for the New Worlds.

Indians recognized the superiority of European iron and steel axes, knives, hoes and other tools and before long stone was virtually eliminated as a material for toolmaking.

The post-Columbian exchange of plants, animals, tools and methods of production between the Old World and New vastly altered the agricultural patterns of both hemispheres and benefitted all mankind.

Columbus' accomplishments ~ he made the western voyage, claimed many islands in the Ocean Sea and explored a "New World" whose existence no European had ever imagined ~ gave Spain a rich legacy. As a result of his monumental exploits, Spain enjoyed a "golden age" until the end of the 17th century when England, France and the Netherlands successfully challenged her power.

His discoveries redefined traditions and changed the course of history. While Columbus did not find extraordinary cities of gold and coffers lined with silks, precious stones and spices, certainly he and his followers succeeded in bringing vast gastronomic riches to both worlds.