A theme park of gastronomy: How Spaniards cultivate fresh and healthy eating

By Isabelle Bruty

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Among the many aspects that students miss while studying abroad, one common theme stands out. Around week three or four of the program, several students begin to reminisce about home—their families, friends, routine lifestyles, the comfort and the familiarity of life in the States. Yet surprisingly, when talking to a large majority of students, you will hear how much they miss classic American food—a reality that my roommates experienced merely one week into our stay in Valencia.

Rather than fully immersing themselves in authentic Spanish cuisine, my roommates seemed more eager to purchase and indulge in the “Spanish version” of one of America’s beloved junk food staples, Takis. After they excitedly opened the bag, though, their expectations were met with a rather bland reality.

“They taste like carrots,” my roommate Ellie said.

In the days following this unexpected taste test, I began to research what could have caused such a stark difference in flavor, only to find that Spanish Takis are a much healthier and more sustainable alternative to those sold in the States. My curiosity led me to a discovery that lies at the heart of Valencia’s culinary essence: the true quality of Spanish cuisine, stemming all the way to its very ingredients.

At the core of Valencia lies the Mercado Central, a spectacular historical structure turned food market in 1839. What once was home to travelling markets has become a sort of cultural necessity to the Valencian people and neighboring citizens. This architectural masterpiece epitomizes fresh and healthy eating in Valencian culture.

“In the meat market, I saw [vendors] cutting the prosciutto right off the leg of the pig!” said Allie Pramberger, a student of Florida State University’s Study Abroad program.

[Quote from another student, TBD]

Throughout the city, smaller chain grocery stores like Carrefour Express stand out for their commitment to sustainability, offering alternatives that differ from typical commercial outlets. For instance, instead of selling processed, pre-packaged orange juice, Carrefour provides customers with the option to freshly squeeze their own juice using dedicated machines.

But what is the key motivation behind this healthy living? Why do Valencians, and Spaniards in general, seem to prioritize nutritious whole foods? The answer lies deeply rooted in Spanish culture; they attribute an inherent value to fresh, pure foods. Their commitment is truly apparent nationwide.

According to the European Commission, Spanish agriculture is a primary sector of the country, “accounting for 2.9% of the country’s economy (total GVA).” This statistic drastically compares to the United States, sitting at, “about 0.7 percent of U.S. GDP,” as calculated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

The devotedness does not just stop there. The Mercado Central’s website describes its vendors as, “professors of the fresh products [that] receive and transmit the wisdom of the most substantial thing, our food.” Such passion for fresh cuisine is evident throughout the market, where vendors take pride in offering the best quality produce, meats, and seafood.

[Quote here from 1-2 market vendors about the freshness and quality of their product.]

Local Valencian Rus Arenas, a member of FSU Valencia’s staff, capitalizes on all that vendors do to provide a ‘farm-to-market’ experience.

“Here at the port area, [vendors] wake up around 2 a.m. to be there at 4 a.m. and get the fresh fish straight from the sea. It’s all super fresh. Not from the day before, maybe from a couple hours ago. We are lucky that we are just next to the Mediterranean Sea,” she says.

The high standard for food quality in Valencia and in Spain, and the commitment to utilizing fresh, local, and seasonal ingredients, is more popularly described as the “Mediterranean diet.”

“I think that when [someone is] coming to this part of Europe [they think] of the food. Like, you get here and you're not looking for McDonald's. You're looking for a paella. Or, I don't know, for some tapas or some bread with tomato and olive oil and maybe ham. It’s like gastronomical tourism,” says Arenas.