How the Spanish learned to love anchovies

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Until about 100 years ago, Spain — with the exception of the sensible folk around Malaga — was almost unique in Western Europe in ignoring anchovies completely. It wasn't until after the Second World War that they really got into them in a big way. And it wasn't even Spaniards who built their anchovy industry.

Chris Beckman: A series of Italians ended up in northern Spain and basically created the modern anchovy industry in Spain.

The story goes that an Italian ambassador was touring northern Spain along the Cantabrian coast and along the Basque coastline, and he was talking to locals, and he'd heard about all these anchovies in the Bay of Biscay that they simply were not interested in. And in fact, they had mentioned that most of the anchovies they caught as bycatch they were using to fertilise fields because nobody was interested in them. Flash forward about a year later, he's back in Naples, Italy, and he's mentioning this story to one Angelo Bartolomeo, who's a big Italian seafood distributor. And he basically says there are all these anchovies in northern Spain for the taking. So Bartolomeo outfits a ship, sends it off on kind of a recce, a test run, and sure enough, they hit a gold mine. I mean, they filled the ship in three weeks. It returns back to Italy and that started the whole phenomenon.

Jeremy: So when you say he filled the ship with anchovies, these are salted anchovies?

Chris: Yes, that's correct. And they actually processed them right there on the deck of the sailing ship because they didn't have a factory at that time. There were Spanish-owned factories processing hake, bonito, sardines, but nobody was processing these anchovies, so they basically processed them in barrels with salt, packed them in, started the fermenting process, and then the anchovies fermented en route back to Italy, arriving in time to be sold on the Italian peninsula.

Jeremy: And presumably Bartolomeo made a packet with this venture and that kept him going back.

Chris: That's right. That's exactly. So what he did is he started sending out agents that worked for him. And initially it was just a number of them, maybe 4 or 5 in different towns. They set up basic little salting factories. And what's interesting is they were very much welcomed in both the Basque and Cantabrian coastline because they weren't a threat to the Spanish canneries, because they weren't trying to buy the fish the Spanish canneries were buying, and it opened up a new market for the Spanish and Basque fishermen. And there was even a bonus on top in that the Basque, Spanish, fishermen's, their wives and kids got to go work in the factory. So it was really kind of one of these win-win situations where they were welcomed and it increased the economics of the whole coast.

Jeremy: The Spanish, did they show any interest in anchovies at that point, the Spanish canning factories?

Chris: No. Not initially. And a decade or two later, the Spanish realised this was a real viable market. But it was a tricky thing because the Italian processors that were salting these anchovies, they basically had the market locked up. Because you have to remember, at this time in Spain, the Spanish weren't eating anchovies. Now that's mostly the Catholic North I'm talking about. There was, in the south, Malaga that was eating deep fried anchovies, but for the most part, most of the country absolutely did not eat anchovies. And what's interesting is that goes back historically several hundred years.

Jeremy: So the Spanish canneries ... Let me get this straight. The Spanish canneries are focusing on higher value fish, to them, and the anchovies are just trash. But for the Italians, the anchovies are a big deal. But they're still salt anchovies. And most people today, I think ... Well, very few people today are interested in salt anchovies. Mostly we buy them in tins. And that also happened in northern Spain.

Chris: That's right. And this is one of those wonderful stories. It's one of my favourite because ... So one of the agents Bartolomeo sends out is a guy named Giovanni Vella and he's from Trapani, Sicily. And he is ... Trapani was a big salting town, and he basically, Giovanni Vella worked in North Africa. He winds up on the wharves of Naples, where he somehow meets Bartolomeo. Bartolomeo backs him, sends him to northern Spain. And he sets up shop.

Jeremy: You say he's from Trapani? He works in North Africa. Is he a salter by profession?

Chris: That's right. He kind of grew up in this salting trade. Because Trapani is famous for its salt flats. And they salted a lot of fish that then got exported to the mainland of the Italian peninsula. So he had that background and he had honed his skills in North Africa because there wasn't enough work for everyone in Sicily. And that's how he ends up in the Cantabrian coast, where he meets Dolores Inestrellas, a lovely Spanish woman living in the town of Santoña, and they end up getting married. And this is where it's really delightful, because a couple of years after they get married, he builds his first fishing boat to go out and catch anchovies, and he names it Dolores. A couple of years after that, he builds a factory. He names his brand La Dolores. And sure enough, after that, when they have a daughter, Dolores.

Jeremy: But he's still doing salt fish at this point.

Chris: That's right. And because that was the big moneymaker back in Italy, that's what the Italians wanted. And the impetus — because Vella basically is who they attribute the invention of oil packed anchovies to — and the impetus was, he was trying to crack the Spanish market because his factories would go gangbusters for about two months of the year during peak anchovy the season, but they were basically sitting idle for most of the year, and he kept trying to figure out why wouldn't the Spanish eat anchovies? Because they just weren't interested in salted anchovies. There are a number of reasons for that. But he started experimenting. He hired a chemist from Barcelona who came up to the north coast, and initially they worked with butter, but they had real problems with the butter going rancid in the heat. But they finally got it to work. The formula with olive oil, packing the anchovy fillets in olive oil. Now, it didn't take off. It took a while.

Jeremy: Now the butter thing is interesting because in your book I read that Charles V, Holy Roman Emperor, retires to Spain, is very keen on fish, and he actually gets special shipments of potted anchovies, presumably potted in butter.

Chris: That's right. He has them shipped in and kind of one of the great ... I mentioned that story to a Spaniard, and he was a little confused, and he thought, Charles, that this was Spanish. He was like, well, why was this king eating anchovies? And I said, well, that actually explains it, because he was born in Belgium, and he'd had a history of

eating potted fish in northern Europe. So eating anchovies made a lot of sense to him. But at that time, the Spanish weren't basically eating any anchovies. And the best example of that, if you want to look at it in cookbooks, um, there's one cookbook in 1520, the Art of Cookery by De Nola. And that's basically the first mention of anchovies in a Spanish cookbook. There's not another mention for the next 225 years. And meanwhile, in England, France and Italy, they're filled with cookbooks with anchovy recipes. So that kind of lets you ... fills you in, in a way of at least elite cookery.

Jeremy: So the Spanish elite just simply regarded them as trash. Okay, back to Vella. He's got this technique now for packing them in oil. Are they going into Spain at this point, or is he shipping them back to Italy?

Chris: Well, he's actually trying to sell them anywhere. There's not much of a market in Italy for them. They really have a long tradition of salted ... That's a guaranteed product. Everybody's familiar with it. Because anchovies packed in oil in a tin at that time were more expensive. That was actually a costlier way to do it. But very slowly it gets embraced by ... And there's no one exact way that brought these oil packed anchovies to popularity. But one of the the contributing factors was French, because French hotels, posh French hotels, started serving them in things like a salad, because now you had a very attractive fillet glistening with olive oil, kind of draped on a salad. And then they would do things like anchovy toast. So it became kind of a posh thing. And then they were getting exported to America. And there there was a market.

Jeremy: Was all the investment in this, was this coming originally from the profits of salted anchovies?

Chris: Yes. That's right. Exactly. So Vella was ploughing his profits from salted anchovies into these oil packed anchovies, trying to create another market. Because really, what he wanted to do was to figure out how to tap the Spanish market. And he wanted his factory to be working the other ten months of the year, where it's just right now sitting idle.

Jeremy: But I don't quite understand this. Why, if the anchovy fishing peak happens for two months of the year, how can the factory work the rest of the year just because they're putting them in oil rather than in salt.

Chris: Well, that's a good question. Basically what you could do is the salt packing anchovies in oil, what you have to do is you first pack them in salt as you would traditionally. They go through a certain maturing process. Now some of that process often happened as the sailboat went back to Italy, and the warmer the weather — again, this is a fermenting product — so the warmer it is, the faster it's fermenting. So by doing the fermentation in a factory with a set temperature, he could control that. And then the packing. He then could clean those salted anchovies and then prep them and then place them in oil, tin them and then ship them out. And that puts him in control of a much larger part of the production line.

Jeremy: I see, I see. So it's a question of spreading it out and ... But on the voyage back did the salted anchovies, did they stay in good condition?

Chris: Well, that's a very good question. And it speaks to exactly why Vella was so anxious to develop new markets on his own, because actually, all the anchovies they shipped back to Italy were sold on consignment. So Vella only got paid when those anchovies were sold on the Italian peninsula. And that created problems for him, because often the shipments would get delayed in transit and the anchovies would over-ripen. You know, in these hot holds where it was, you know, 35, 40 Celsius and the anchovies are simply maturing too fast in the barrel. So that all played into the desire for all these independent salters to create new markets.

Jeremy: And how quickly was Vella copied? I mean, you know, like with the salt anchovies, did people see this and say, oh, I want part of that.

Chris: You know, interestingly enough, no. It took quite a while, and there's no exact consensus, but it took about a decade before it started to really take off, and it just wasn't embraced. And I think a lot of that has to do that there was a price factor. There was a jump up in cost. And I think people at that time, you know, for the most part, just couldn't afford it.

Jeremy: But you say the French were making it chic. Were elite Spaniards becoming interested in canned anchovies as a result of the French making it chic?

Chris: Yes, exactly. That's how they kind of were taking their culinary cues from France. And this had been going on, mind you, for about 200 years. You know, at the Spanish court their menus were written in French. Dishes were served in French cuisine and you know, indeed, not just in Spain, in Italy. And French cuisine was considered the dominant, sophisticated cuisine that every elite wanted to eat. And so when the French started including them, then the Spanish elites started following their cues and very soon started embracing them on their own.

Jeremy: Okay. So at present, the Spanish are the world's top anchovy eaters. They eat something ridiculous like 2. ... What have you got in your book? 2.69, 2.7, almost 3 kilograms per person per year. How did that happen?

Chris: This is an absolutely crazy story that you would never think would be how anchovies got popularised in Spain, because you have to remember again, they weren't eating anchovies. Nobody. Not the poor, not the middle class. Not elites. Nobody was eating anchovies. But a good place to start to untangle this is with Franco, interestingly enough.

And General Franco and the Civil War, he instituted a policy of self-sufficiency and it went terribly awry and basically led to huge food shortages, disastrous food shortages. And this period of Spanish history is kind of known as the misery, because over half the country was basically starving. And so what you found is, for the first time, they're shipping fresh anchovies from the coast into Madrid because people are starving. Now again, 30, 40, 50 years ago, they wouldn't eat those. If they wanted fish, they could buy bacalao, right? Dried cod for not much more money and they got a big piece of fish. But now they're starving for anything they can get. So they're starting to eat fresh anchovies. They're starting to eat salted anchovies, and they're starting to eat oil packed if they have the money.

Jeremy: And that's because transport has improved. So you can actually get fresh fish on ice by truck or by railway into the centre of the country.

Chris: That's right. That's exactly right. And then another factor that plays into this is times were so tough, everyone was so poor. And post-World War Two, you know, Italy got jumpstarted by being part of the Marshall Plan, which injected ... was a huge cash infusion that

stimulated, helped to stimulate the economy. Spain was ruled out of the Marshall Plan because of Franco was still in power, and it just simply languished. So many Spaniards worked two jobs. It was very common that people worked two jobs. And so what they started doing is, after they would finish one shift, en route to their second shift, they would stop in a taberna and get a quick bite to eat. And suddenly tapas became the perfect solution to this problem because it was a salty, wet ,,, Taberna owners loved them because it made people want to drink more. Right? When you have a salty potato chip or a peanut or an anchovy, you're going to drink more. And it gave a little sustenance. And tapas are a funny thing. They're they're ... It's a way of eating. It's not a meal. It's not an ingredient. It's kind of a funny Spanish way of eating, where it's you're having these almost snack like things between meals, and anchovies just fit the bill to a T.

Jeremy: And the same is true for pintxos in the Basque Country, that it's the same principle there. Yes. So what are inventive chefs doing? Or maybe they're not chefs. Maybe they're just taverna owners. But what are they doing with anchovies that makes them so attractive that the Spanish are eating almost three kilos a year of them.

Chris: You know, Jeremy, I wish I had a good answer to that question. It's one of these mysteries. It just seems to be the right kind of way of eating for the right people at the right time, where they're just tapas mad. I don't have a good explanation for that.

Jeremy: But it's incredibly strange that for, I don't know, nine-tenths of their history, they wouldn't eat an anchovy if you paid them to. And then suddenly they go anchovy mad. And do they, do modern Spaniards realise this aspect of their culinary history?

Chris: You know, it's interesting. I'll tell you a quick little story. When I was writing the book, I went to northern Spain, actually, Santoña. I was doing research, and one day, I'd been in the museum. That evening, I went to a bar, and I was having a bite to eat, some anchovies and a glass of wine, and a gentleman saw me, and he was very pleased, the Spanish gentleman, to see me eating anchovies. And he said, you know, that's really wonderful. You know, I love anchovies. It's great to see you eating them. You know, anchovies are in our blood. My family's been eating them for 500 years. And, you know, I was a guest. I didn't really want to contradict him. But actually, I wanted to say. Well, not really. A hundred years ago, your relatives were using them on your fields. So

it's an absolutely fascinating phenomena how the pendulum has swung in Spain with anchovies.

Jeremy: Did you disabuse him of his what I call invented tradition?

Chris: I did not, I have a special place in my heart for invented traditions, because I think we all carry them around. And as an American, I'm particularly prone to invented traditions because I notice a lot of Americans have ... They don't, we don't have a strong idea of our background the way some Europeans do. So we're filled with invented traditions. So I let him relish that one.

Spain is just one of the countries that Chris covers in meticulous detail. Ancient Rome, France, Britain and Italy all get a look in alongside Spain. He even devotes some time to anchovies in America and a history of Caesar's salad. All of which made me wonder what inspired him to write the book.

Chris: You know, it started when I was in my 20s and I was flat broke, and I was living in Los Angeles, and I noticed this ... I mean, I always ate a lot of different foods. Anchovies were simply one of many different foods. But I noticed if I had friends over and I made a very simple pasta, I mean, literally some pasta, maybe a little garlic, a little olive oil, and a can of crushed tomatoes. If I just simply added a little anchovy to that, it was transformative. And when I would serve that, everyone liked it. But if I mentioned at the end of the meal, did you notice? You know what? What did you think? There were anchovies. I could see in a friend a little, kind of a little ... Their expression would change. And if I mentioned before dinner there was an anchovy in it, often somebody wouldn't even try it. So there was something about anchovies that people have this love hate relationship to.

Jeremy: Yeah, but ending up writing a whole book about anchovies, that's taking it a bit far.

Chris: You know, I tried to let anchovies go, but I just couldn't. And so later on, when I got into archaeology, I kept gravitating back to food. Looking at why people ate foods the way they did at certain times in history. And I was always consistently bothered over the years about

what is it with anchovies that is so divisive? And basically, eventually I just had to sit down and buckle up and write the book to try and get to the bottom of it.

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