

Anchovies: A Work of Art in a Can

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Anchovies can be very divisive; some people, though not me, absolutely cannot stand them. At the Dublin Gastronomy Symposium this past summer, I was delighted to hear a talk about anchovies as an artisanal gourmet food and to learn one, crucial way to improve any tin of anchovies: keep it in the fridge until you're ready to use it.

Marcela Garcés: They are refrigerated at the factory. In Spain, it's common knowledge that they're refrigerated. So this is also something that I didn't know until I started spending time here, right, being married to a Basque man — he's from Bilbao — my husband Yuri. And so I thought, huh. This is different. That made me say: in the US, let me see, how are they packed here? How are they, not packed, how are they displayed. Right? So they're on shelves.

What they emphasise here in Spain is that they're a semi-preserved food. And I think that sometimes the question can be, well, if it's in a can, why isn't it on the shelf? Anchovies can also come in glass bottles. And those are also typically in the United States, where I live, on the shelf. But in Spain, when you walk into any grocery store and even, you know, small, for example, *panaderias*, right, where they sell bread and they sell a few gourmet products. They'll have a small refrigerator there with things like chorizo or jamon, and also anchovies in the refrigerator. And what it does is it protects their freshness.

So they don't undergo heat sterilisation like other tin products do, like, you know, things like tuna, sardines. And so it's a way to keep them fresh because what they've seen is, you know, — and you can actually see this by looking at anchovies, for example, in the United States — when you look at the anchovies on the shelf, the colour is kind of a brownish colour. And when you see them here in Spain, whether they're in a tin, right, and you open them up after you take them out of the refrigerator, they look pink here. So even though it's a semi-preserved food, it has a freshness; that basically what they say is that it has a life of 10 to 18 months after being packaged. And

so that also, if you look at the expiration date makes a difference, right. When you're looking at a can of tuna or a can of sardines, those have a longer expiration date because they undergo this process.

Jeremy: But the thing is that with a product in a can or in a jar, who looks at the expiration date? The assumption is that these are preserved foods, fully preserved foods. So let's go back. What ... how do you cure an anchovy?

Marcela: So they're caught ... So the Cantabrian Sea is where we're looking at where they're caught

Jeremy: Which is where?

Marcela: So it's in the Bay of Biscay. So north, if you go to the northern coast of Spain. Right. That sea right above. And so the Cantabrian Sea has colder water and that's great water for anchovies. So they come in and they're fished typically between March or April through June. And the reason why they're fished then is because the anchovies actually get closer to the coast to spawn. And so that means that they're, you know, in prime quality. They're caught in nets and they are taken to town. And then people purchase ... All these different factories that are dotted along the coasts of the Cantabrian Sea.

So in this case, the Basque Country, right, has a number of tin fish factories. That's where I've been to the most. And Bermeo is a small town there on the coast. So they're brought in and then in factories, women process them. And so what they do is, they're put into a salt cure and depending on the factory, sometimes that salt cure can last 4 to 5 months, sometimes up to 12 months. Their heads are removed before they go into the salt cure and then they stay in the salt. And that's how they're, you know, ... part of their preservation purpose happens. Then after that time, they take the anchovies out and the women clean them.

And this actually, for me, was the most fascinating thing when I first saw this happen, because what I didn't know is how artisanal this process is. Because you have women taking each anchovy by hand, you know? They're wearing these gloves and they're cleaning each one, right? So it really is an artisanal product because you have people working there with their hands, and you can imagine working on all these fish for numerous hours a day. It's a long process. And what they

do is they remove a lot of that salt, the residual salt. They also remove the tiny little bones, which is difficult because they're so thin, right?

Jeremy: So that's interesting that women are so intimately involved and that it's all done by hand. Because when you think of a canning factory, I mean, you think of big machines and, and, and ... Yeah. Tell me more about the women.

Marcela: Sure. Yeah. So one of the things that we like to tell people at our culinary studio is how there's a real reverence for the women who work in these tinned-fish factories. And in recent years they've been given even more recognition. And I argue that they should be given even more. I love certain poetry about this. There's a Galician poet named Luisa Castro, and her work has been translated into English. And she has a poem that's called My Mother Works in a Canning Factory. And one of my favourite verses it says: One day my mother said to me, love is a work of art in a can. And I think that's a beautiful way to think about the work of people who prepare things behind the scenes, because we often don't give credit to that when we're consuming anything, right? Whether it's food or even things like fashion, there are hands behind that that help us to have a product.

Jeremy: The work of the women is obviously fundamental to the production of anchovies. But is this something young women are going into? Are they are they taking over from their mothers and older sisters? Are the factories finding enough labourers to to do the work?

Marcela: Yes they are. Yes, there definitely are younger people who are working in the factories. I don't know exact statistics about this, but there are certainly many people employed in this, because if you go to, for example, a town like Bermeo on the Basque coast, there are numerous different factories. And so you're talking about, you know, many of the people in that town are employed by these factories.

Jeremy: Do the factories realise that these women are so important to the product?

Marcela: Yes. In fact, several factories have actually done something that I think is a really nice way to recognise the women's labour, which is to add a small little tiny square that says the name of the person who packed the anchovies. So you open up a tin and you'll see the name Belén, for example, in the tin that you're eating. So you

know, okay, this is the person who hand packed these anchovies for me.

Jeremy: When you first encountered these factories with the women processing the anchovies, did you know anything about anchovy production at that time?

Marcela: So when I first went to the factories, I did not know about the production. And the reason why we started visiting these factories was actually because in 2017, my husband and I made a documentary about Basque cuisine. And so when he moved to the United States — we got married in 2012 and then he came in 2013 — and right away he started noticing in the US that people were familiar with, you know, Madrid, Barcelona, but they hadn't been to or didn't know anything about Bilbao or the Basque Country. So he immediately thought, okay — he's a communications consultant — and he thought, how can I teach people about my culture so that they understand it more. So he actually worked and produced and directed a documentary called The Txoko Experience, and I was a scriptwriter for the film. So it was this wonderful crash course, even though I had been coming to the Basque Country for a number of years, by then. And a lot of food producers, we went to four different Michelin star restaurants and interviewed them, and then to these places called txokos, which are gastronomic societies. And so you see the anchovy present in Basque cuisine in many different places.

And you can see it in what are called pintxos. Right. So pintxo means to puncture in Spanish. So usually they're served on a stick. So oftentimes there's an anchovy there. So I had certainly eaten them but I didn't have an appreciation for them until visiting these factories. And so when we visited the factories we got to see the whole process. And also we interviewed different people, like a guy whose name is Kevin Patricio. He's a chef and he's from the United States, but is based in San Sebastian. And what he said when we interviewed him was the king is the anchovy. And we've always thought that that was a really wonderful way to describe it, because he described it as one of the most important elements in Basque cuisine, but specifically in pintxos, because it has an umami flavour.

Jeremy: Yeah, but but a lot of your fellow country people, and mine, for that matter, detest anchovies. They, you know, they'll take them

out of things and push them to one side. So what do you think accounts for that?

Marcela: So this is another thing that really interests me. And, you know, coming from the United States, I grew up with popular culture examples of negative connotations of anchovies. So there are movies in which people order pizzas and they get, you know, anchovies on the pizzas and they say, oh, no, I don't like these. Even for the work that I'm doing and the article that I wrote about this, one website said that they're stinky little fish that come in tin cans. Right. So, you know, I totally agree with you. And this is why I've actually started this work, which I call briefly in defense of the anchovy, because the anchovy needs defending, because it has a bad reputation in certain places. So I think part of it is popular culture.

Part of it is also the problem with the food storage, because if we're taking a product from its place that it's made in Spain, then bringing it to the United States, then putting it on a shelf, and oftentimes in the stores that I visited that sell gourmet Basque anchovies, they're very expensive as well. But what they're doing is degrading the product, because it's sitting on the shelf and it's becoming darker and it's becoming maybe what you could call more funky. So a lot of people, what I think is that they've had bad experiences with anchovies. So maybe they've had anchovies that are, you know, expired or past their shelf life because there isn't this awareness of the need to consume them within a certain period of time.

But also, I think that those ... when you have an experience like that with food, it's hard to change that. And so what we do ... My husband and I own, as a complement to our respective careers — so I'm a professor and he is a communications consultant, like I mentioned — we do on the weekends. We own a culinary studio, and it's called La Centralita, which means the switchboard. And so I totally ... I can get what you're saying and I partly want to talk about this because I myself have kind of become a convert. I didn't grow up eating anchovies. I didn't really know when they were used. Sometimes people have eaten them and they don't know because they're eaten in a Caesar salad dressing. Lots of Italian-American and Italian cuisine are made with, the sauces are made with anchovies. So I think too that people just haven't seen the cured, you know, the tinned fish form and they're afraid of it for good reason. But then once people try it at our studio, they try it and they change their minds. So we

actually call it a game changer, because when they try an anchovy that's been properly taken care of, they end up really liking it.

Jeremy: Yeah, but you can do — I don't know — maybe you can do ten, twenty people a weekend. That's not going to convert any country into a nation of anchovy lovers. But are retail establishments taking any notice of this? Have you had any success, even locally, with persuading these gourmet stores to put in a little fridge?

Marcela: So I would say that there are a few stores that do this. I have seen one store in New Haven, Connecticut, which happened to be a butcher shop, and it was interesting to see them there because butcher shops in Spain, or *carnicerias*, also sometimes sell anchovies, and they had them in their refrigerator. And I thought, wow, that's one of the first times I've seen this. And otherwise that's my next step, because I think that this is something that could help everybody, right? You know, the people who are selling them because, part of the thing is, I think, when you're not turning over a product fast enough, then it's going to get closer to expiration date. You know, maybe you have to sell it quickly or you sell something that's not quite at its prime. Right? But I'm not the only one who's working on this, so to speak.

So, a couple of cookbooks have come out in recent years, and one that I want to highlight. It's called *Tin to Table* by a woman named Anna Hezel, and it just came out in 2023. So she actually said something that really struck me. She talks about how if you've ever had brown or mushy anchovies, it's not your fault. Or the anchovies', right? And she talks about ... She said grocery stores don't keep them cold enough. So she's telling people in her book and her cookbook to put them in the refrigerator until you're ready to use them.

Jeremy: I mean, certainly I think at the start of Covid, there was this big kind of influencer thing and a hashtag of tinned fish. And I suppose that some of these cookbooks are a response to that, but I still feel that somehow anchovies are different. Nobody makes a meal of anchovies. You make a meal of tinned mackerel, tinned tuna, whatever. But anchovies are more of an ingredient than a thing you eat, and they're very often hidden. People don't know about it. I mean, anchovies are in Worcester sauce. They're in many, many pasta sauces, as you mentioned. So is it worth getting people to appreciate anchovies for themselves?

Marcela: Yes, it is, because — and I think that that's where you see the difference in what you're talking about — is in the Basque Country with pintxos, because when you go out for pintxos, you may go, you know, you go to different bars and they have pintxos on display. So you walk into a bar and the bar is full of maybe, you know, ten, twenty, thirty different kinds. So what's really neat about consuming pintxos is that you can see them right when you walk in, different from when you look at a menu and you say, okay, I'm in a different country, what do I order? Pintxos you eat them first with your eyes. So what happens is, you see that many of these pintxos have a cured anchovy. They may have *boquerones* on them, which are anchovies in vinegar. People also eat anchovies fresh here; so they're called *bocartos* when they're fresh. And so the anchovy here really is a primary thing because, yeah — you may not, you know, eat anchovies for a meal in Italy, in the US, but in Spain you might eat three, four, five different pintxos. They may all have an anchovy.

Jeremy: Just just to clarify, what's the difference between pintxos and tapas?

Marcela: Yes. So this is another big kind of a debate, right? So pintxos are, they're heavier.

Jeremy: Do they have to have a toothpick in them?

Marcela: They don't, but they often do. So sometimes they have a toothpick through them, which, you know, hence their name. But then they're oftentimes on top of a piece of bread. They're more elaborate than tapas. And also tapas in some places in Spain are given when you order a drink, right? So that's kind of, if you go to the south of Spain, for example, and you order a beer, maybe they give you some olives, right? But a pintxo you always pay for. And they're also something that are really important in the Basque culture. So sometimes, you know, Basques may be offended if you say we're going to get some tapas. They say, no, pintxos; because they call them *cocina en miniatura*. So like miniature cuisine. And they're very ... Sometimes they have three or four or five different elements. They can be salty, sweet, they have that umami with the anchovy. And they're really a lot of fun to eat.

Jeremy: Coming back to the anchovy itself, I've read that harvests are not that great at the moment. The catch is going down. People don't quite know why. Have you have you come across that in Spain

when you've been visiting, that the factories might be worried about where the fish are coming from?

Marcela: Yeah. I mean, there have even been ... There was a period of time a few years ago, so 2005 to 2010, where they actually had to cease fishing for a while to be able to ... the European Union was involved to say, okay, we need to get this back to where, to the levels where it's safe to fish. And so they definitely have that. And also, you know, with warming temperatures, that certainly is an issue because anchovies thrive in cold water. So I do think that there is an issue with when we look at things like climate change and fishing that we have to be careful about if we want to continue to enjoy these delicacies.

The way that they treat anchovies here is with a lot of care, and they're very proud of the anchovies as well. And so they treat it as a gourmet thing all throughout the process. And so you can see that too, in the prices. Right? And even now they're doing things like, when you when you go to the store, some of the packages are actually transparent so that you can see the size of the fish and how wide or long and how pink it is even after being preserved.

Jeremy: That's something else I wanted to ask you about. We're used to the idea that anchovies are quite tiny really. What happens when they grow bigger? Is that treated differently? Are big ones treated differently to small ones?

Marcela: Yes. And actually there is even a difference in price because you can go to different factories and you can purchase smaller ... They're called *octavillos*. So they're like a little rectangular tin that's kind of the typical one that you would see. But you'll also see anchovies packaged in round tins. And those round tins tend to have bigger anchovies in them, and they're fleshier and a little bit longer.

Jeremy: The first thing I did when I came home was to put my anchovies in the fridge, you'll be glad to know. Is that the single best piece of advice you would give to people who maybe already like anchovies, but want to up their anchovy game?

Marcela: Yes. I mean, we do at La Centralita, we actually tell people that if you have anchovies that you purchased, put them right in the fridge, because what you're doing is, you're slowing down the aging process. So you are ... by putting them in the fridge, you're making

their life last longer. And then when you open them up, the other thing you can do, you can take them out of the refrigerator, let them sit, let the olive oil kind of melt, and then you can take them out. And if you don't eat all the anchovies, which sometimes is impossible because it's easy to eat a whole tin at once, but you can actually keep the olive oil from the tin, pour it into a glass container, and then cover the remaining anchovies with the olive oil, and you want to eat those within 2 to 3 days. So they really are a product that you don't want, once you've opened them, you don't want them to be in your refrigerator for too long.

And also look for quality with anchovies, because if you try really high quality, you'll notice the difference. And even the colour. Everything. If you're visiting Spain, check them out. Right? Go to different stores or ask people what their favourite brands are.

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