



## A BAROQUE MEAL

THE FRIED FISH, THE STUFFED AUBERGINES, THE GLEAMING SALAD, EVERYTHING INCLUDED IN THE SET MEAL IS DELICIOUS.

IGNASI MORA AUTHOR

**I**f one summer day (or even spring or autumn), a traveller... lost in this coastal region of Valencia, La Safor, happened to ask me what he should eat in order to do justice to the region, I would suggest that he visit one of the establishments that call themselves *marisqueries*, seafood specialists. Of course, I would not recommend the typical *mariscada*, so touristy and artificial. I was referring to eating a more or less standard set meal which is available in some of the restaurants of the region and which has its origin in the culinary intuition of the famous Pepet el Tort, former owner of the "As de Oros" in Gandia. About thirty or forty years ago, this imaginative character had the clever idea of offering his clients a cuisine based on the things he found every day at the market. In other words, he was a pioneer of what later became so well-known and which we call home-cooking. The most dazzling produce in the markets of La Safor was and is, without doubt, the seafood, fish and vegetables, since Gandia has a fishing port and La Safor is a leading producer of early crops, and of late crops... The raw materials are of high quality and, perhaps for this very reason, Pepet el Tort gave them only a light touch in the kitchen, they underwent few changes in the cooking, the seafood was only lightly boiled and, if possible, in seawater itself. The result was spectacular, fantastic, and at the same time, strange in

a country where catering seems to be totally divorced from its immediate reality. After the meal, happy and contented, someone remarked on the excellence of the mixture; because if the uric acid of the seafood caused alarm, the freshness and tenderness of the vegetables was a pleasant contrast. All the same, the economic prestige connected with seafood obviously had a lot to do with that sudden success. And this is even truer if we remember that among Valencians, the species that most remotely resembles the bourgeoisie of other countries is made up of a sort of *nouveau riche* who loves to show off his grandiose superficiality. Also, however, one can add that these terrifying monsters, which, when all is said and done, is what seafood is, when exposed to the light here, are practically transformed; with very little effort of the imagination, they become entertaining and tasty fantasies of nature.

Anyway, this discovery, this wholesome and successful combination, caught on. It caught on so strongly that now there is a large number of restaurants that, with variations on the original theme, owe their fame to that picturesque inventor from Gandia, and attract enormous crowds to their dining-rooms, at least at the best times of year which, in La Safor, means the seasons mentioned at the beginning of this article.

The real heir of that clever cook, Pepet el

Tort, was the "Gamba" restaurant, run by a huge family, big enough to attend to the clients and take care of the kitchen. Set in a light and airy chalet, it offers seafood which is always fresh—rare in an area as commercialised and spoilt as this. The fried fish, the stuffed aubergines, the gleaming salad, everything included in the set meal is delicious. And furthermore, the rice they serve on the side to accompany the meal is far less subject to the inclemencies of the cook's mood and haste than in other places. A sweet prepared by the famous Gandia pastrycook, Tano, rounds off the meal satisfactorily. Or perhaps not, since the proprietors of Gamba, carrying on Pepet el Tort's tradition, go on to offer *mistela*, a drink made from brandy, water, sugar and cinnamon, and dates, which compensate the saltiness of most of the rest of the meal.

However, if our hypothetical traveller accepts our suggestion, he will also have to accept that the afternoon is a time suitable only for digesting one's lunch. Because what we are suggesting is nothing other than the Valencian version of a Gargantuan meal. "How they exaggerate, how baroque the Valencians are", he might think. And he would not be far out, even though his palate would have reached the outer limits of true enjoyment. ●

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