

Table of  
CONTENTS

ASTURIAS  
— 000 —

BASQUE COUNTRY  
— 000 —

GALICIA  
— 000 —

BARCELONA  
— 000 —

SALAMANCA  
— 000 —

MADRID  
— 000 —

VALENCIA  
— 000 —

GRANADA  
— 000 —

CADIZ  
— 000 —

BARCELONA  
SALAMANCA  
VALENCIA  
BASQUE COUNTRY  
CADIZ  
ASTURIAS  
GALICIA  
MADRID  
GRANADA

- 000 In Correspondence with Bourdain  
—  
000 Plus: Know Before You Go, Eat Like a Spaniard, *Pan con Tomate*  
—  
000 Plus: Ibérico Pig, The Cured Meats, Drink Like a Spaniard  
—  
000 Plus: The Rice Matrix, One Night with the Spanish Youth, Churros Con Chocolate  
—  
000 Plus: Temples of Smoke and Fire, *Angulas*  
—  
000 Plus: Bluefin Tuna, People of Spain, *Salmorejo*  
000 Plus: The Big Cheese, Amazing Shit in the Middle of Nowhere, *Fabada*  
—  
000 Plus: Canned Seafood, People of Spain, *Pulpo a la Gallega*  
—  
000 Plus: Tapas Taxonomy, One Night at a Three-Star Restaurant, Gin Tonic  
000



*Chapter One*

# BARCELONA

On Saturday, April 17, 1999, at 11:58 p.m. in Café Ramirez on the bottom floor of the Maremagnum Plaza in the port of Barcelona, I fell in love with Spain for the first time. I was eighteen years old, traveling around with twenty-eight other students from the Cary High School Spanish program. Our fearless leader, señora B.A., had studied abroad in Barcelona, and she hoped to show her students a piece of the culture that transformed her life so many years earlier. Her heart was in the right place, but she was simply outmatched by a group of hormonal teenagers four thousand miles removed from classrooms, homework, parental authority.

We arrived at Maremagnum thirty minutes earlier, a thick pack of teenagers looking to soak up the legendary club scene of Spain. Except that, when we got off the elevator, the dance floor was empty—not a soul besides the bouncer and the bartenders. I grabbed my two closest friends and retreated down into the commercial complex below in search of alcohol. This wasn't just my first time drinking in Spain; it was my first time sitting at a bar, first time speaking Spanish outside of the classroom. I dug deep: *Un whiskey cola, por favor.* The bartender gave a little grin, put two cubes of ice and four fingers of J&B in a tube-shaped glass and topped it off with Coke.

Success! Spanish in action.

For the next two hours, we put three years of Spanish class into extraordinary practice. The bar technically closed at midnight, but the owner and the group of thirtysomething Catalans were so amused by this rogue crew of Spanglish-speaking Americans that they locked the door with us inside and kept the drinks flowing. With every sip, the Spanish slipped past my lips with greater ease. I started to dig out words I didn't know I knew, combined in ways that kept the conversation marching forward: Not just where are you from, but what do you do, what do you think, what do you believe. When we finally climbed down off our stools, a few sips past the stroke of two, my entire body was on fire. We made a pact right then, before riding the elevator back up to a by-then-packed disco: We would spend the next ten days putting it all on the line—drinking absinthe off La Rambla, eating tapas in the backstreets of Toledo, dancing until sunrise in Madrid—but we would do it all in Spanish.



On Tuesday, March 27, 2002, at 11:47 a.m. at stall #570, the María Pujol Frutería two-thirds of the way back in the Mercat de la Boqueria in the Ciutat Vella of Barcelona, I fell in love with Spain for the second time. I arrived in the city six weeks earlier and settled in for my semester abroad in the Catalan capital.

My only request was that whomever I lived with allow me to cook my own meals. College awakened in me an intense desire to experiment in the kitchen, and more than studying, I looked forward to raiding the Spanish markets for new ingredients to discover. Since most host families rely on cooking for their student guests for extra income, the study abroad program paired me with Teresa, a single Catalan woman in her late forties, who not only didn't cook anything, she didn't eat either. Instead, she drank two bottles of Bach Brut Nature cava a day on her little patio in the Gràcia neighborhood of the city. At first Teresa proved a fun hostess; in the window between when the first bottle woke her up and the second bottle put her down, she'd

engage me in intense conversations about the post-9/11 world America was shaping (like most Spaniards, she longed for the Clinton years). But as her drinking and depression grew in tandem during my first six weeks in Spain, I decided to seek out my own accommodations. Just so happened David Klinker, a friend from UCLA, had a room opening up in an apartment he was renting with a Catalan, an Italian, and a pair of Germans.

At that hour on a Tuesday, I should have been in my Catalan history class, learning about the heroics of Jaume I and Lluís Companys, but we had a big dinner party planned that evening and I needed a head start on the shopping. I had only recently discovered the Boqueria, the thirteenth-century market at the heart of the Barcelona food chain, and it quickly became my new classroom, a Technicolor collision of produce, protein, and human activity that provided the perfect backdrop to the two things that mattered most to me in 2002: cooking and speaking Spanish.

"Back for more, eh?" *Wait, is he talking to*

*me?* I scanned the crowd, saw myself surrounded by a sea of Catalan grandmas with their little produce carts. Just a few words, but words of immeasurable value; words that meant some part of me belonged to this distant landscape.

After these elaborate dinner parties, we would invariably pile onto the metro and make our way to the Raval, to L'Ovella Negra, a loud, dark, cavernous drinking hole known for its density of international revelers. I spent most of my time at the foosball tables watching El Viejo, the old man rumored to be the greatest *futbolín* player in all of Spain. He wore a jacket with medals pinned on his right breast like a decorated general, and sat there sober, stone-faced, chewing on the butt of a cigar, waiting for his prey to come to him. El Viejo was doling out one of his typical thrashings to a team of stunned Germans one night when David spotted a beautiful Catalan girl across the room. We grabbed a pitcher of sangria, made our way over, challenged her and her friend to doubles. After a few rounds, we all went out dancing. Two years

later, David married Marta on Coronado Island in Southern California.

I lived in Santa Cruz at the time and drove down the coast to the wedding in a one-hundred-dollar used Peugeot I bought with money from my first writing gig. By that point, Barcelona was almost an abstraction—a surreal six months transformed into a warm, sunny island in the recesses of my memory. The place destined to live on as an ellipsis in my life.



On Friday, September 23, 2010, at 6:07 p.m. on the terrace of La Paciencia at the base of La Rambla del Raval, I fell in love with Spain for the third time. I was late, but I needed to buy a cheap cell phone, just in case. Laura was there at one of the metal tables, sipping a *caña* of Estrella Damm.

I arrived in Barcelona four days earlier roughed up from the life I left behind. I had spent the previous five years living between Manhattan and Allentown, Pennsylvania, working as the food editor at *Men's Health*, writing with my former boss a series of nutrition books called *Eat This*,

*Not That!* It wasn't supposed to be a series, but after the first book sold a million copies in its first year, the project took on a momentum of its own. Eighteen books in five years, combined with a day job and the intensity of life in Manhattan had pushed me to the breaking point. I grew up treating the word no as an allergy, believing that few good things come from those two letters, and the buffet of life that is New York in your twenties preyed upon my weakness. My body showed signs of cracking, my head not far behind. I needed a change. I broke up with my girlfriend of four years, said good-bye to my friends, packed a single bag, and left my apartment in the East Village. My plan was as simple as it was unoriginal: Move to Italy, write a novel, fall in love with an Italian, and spend a life eating pappardelle and drinking afternoon *amari*.

Barcelona was a pit stop on my way to paradise, a chance to see some old friends and revisit some of my favorite haunts before pushing on to bigger things in Italy. Before leaving, I e-mailed David and

Marta, happily ensconced in their Southern Californian existence, and asked if they had any friends in the city who might want to grab a beer or a cup of coffee while I was in town.

"My sister-in-law, Laura, lives there," David wrote. "Be careful with this one. She's a bit shy. No guarantee she'll respond." I sent her an e-mail, but David was right: no response.

Counting down my days to Italy, I traveled up to Girona for a dinner at El Celler de Can Roca, destined to be crowned the best restaurant in the world in the years to follow. The dinner showcased everything I had been reading about in the years since I left Spain—a mixture of technical innovation, whimsy, and concentrations of outrageous flavor and texture that moved me deeply over twenty-two courses and four hours. A single giant shrimp broken down into seven different aquatic expressions; an earth-shattering beef tartare covered in crunchy *pommes* soufflé and tiny pellets of mustard ice cream; a dessert served in a halved soccer ball presented as "*un gol de*

Messi." As dinner wound down, I sat with the Roca brothers—Joan the chef, Josep the sommelier, Jordi the pastry chef—and listened to them say very smart things about food and life in Spain.

Afterward, I sat alone on the steps of the church perched above old Girona and looked out across Catalunya. Did I just have the best meal of my life by myself? Were those tears of joy or fear or desperation I fought off during dinner? What the fuck am I doing here?

Back at the hotel, I opened up my inbox and found an e-mail from Laura in Spanish. "I'm sorry for not responding earlier. I just found your e-mail in my spam folder. I'd love to have a beer before you leave for Italy. How about tomorrow at 6:00 p.m.? You choose the place."

Little did she know that I had already mapped out a plan as soon as I sent that first e-mail, a little bar crawl that would allow me to feign a backstreet Barcelona knowledge in a casual, seemingly spontaneous romp through the Raval. I didn't want to be another American passing through, even if



BARCELONA WAS  
A MISTRESS WE  
SHARED.  
EVERYTHING  
WE DID, WE DID  
TOGETHER.

---

