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Rice & Coriander

Sensorial re-creations of home through food: Ecuadorians in a northern Spanish city

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Abstract

Food is an important and specific kind of material culture. It is literally embodied and present in an everyday basis. Familiar food can play an important role in the migratory context; both at a public visible level and also, and overall, in the intimate domain of the domestic sphere and the mundane everyday. As migration involves discontinuity with the known human, cultural and material environment, food practices and preferences can be used as a strategy to, in a sensorial way, fight off the sense of fragmentation triggered by migration. This paper explores these issues in the specific context of Ecuadorian migrants in the northern Spanish city of Santander, based on interviews with 38 such migrants.

Introduction: researching food in the migrant experience

Several studies have shown the persistence of eating practices between migrant communities all over the world (for America see for instance Brown and Mussell, 1984; Diner, 2001 or Gabaccia, 1998; for the UK see Valentine, 1999; for Spain see Abu-Shams, 2006; Durán Monfort, 2004; Kaplan and Carrasco, 2002). According to Gabaccia

[...] food and language are the cultural traits humans learn first, and the ones that they change with the greatest reluctance. Humans cannot easily lose their accents when they learn new languages after the age of about twelve; similarly, the food they ate as children forever defines familiarity and comfort (1998: 6).

Eating patterns have been maintained in some cases even long after language acculturation has taken place (Valentine, 1999: 519). This is so, because 'in Homo sapiens food not only nourishes but also signifies' (Fischler, 1988: 276).

The study of food practices, meanings and preferences of non-transnational migrants can help us to raise – and hopefully answer – very interesting questions. What can we learn about processes of home formation or home re-creation through the food migrants choose to eat, or the foodstuffs they miss most, or the dishes whose smells and flavours most remind them of 'home'? And as a result, what can we learn about the notion itself of 'being-at-home'? And finally,

how is that all linked with issues of carnality and embodiment?

Why food?

Reason 1: Food is not only about health, it is also about meanings

Food has been studied from a variety of disciplines¹. Anthropologists such as Levy-Strauss or Douglas can be considered pioneers in their structuralist analysis of food consumption (Levy-Strauss, 1997; Douglas, 1997). There is a preference for researching food in relation with health concerns (Brown and Mussell, 1984; Hargreaves et al., 2002; Jonsson et al., 2002; Mellin-Olsen and Wandel, 2005). With the recent revival of interest (both academic and non-academic) in identity-related issues, food has been brought to the front due its power to perform and produce identity.

Food is central to our sense of identity. The way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization and [...] its oneness and the otherness of whoever eats differently (Fischler, 1988: 275).

Still, when linking food and migration, either the emphasis is placed on the actual physical movement of the foodstuffs themselves (Cook and Crang, 1996; Wu and Cheung, 2002) or in the health effects

¹ For illustrative purposes, see the following non-exhaustive list: Gabaccia, 1998 or Scholliers, 2001, for historic approaches; Fischler, 1988 or Lupton, 1994 for sociological ones; Corr, 2002; Mintz and Dubois, 2002, or Sutton, 2001 for anthropological; Bledin, 2003 for a psychology approach.

that migration brings to migrants through rapid changes in their diets (Brussaard et al., 2001; Edmonds, 2005; Hargreaves et al., 2002; Jonsson et al., 2002; Mellin-Olsen and Wandel, 2005).

However, the joint study of migration and – or through – food is still under-researched. The research described in this paper places itself within what can be considered a rather recent new approach. This trend is interested in identity and home formation processes read through material culture². Scholars within this approach, the joint study of migration and material culture, have clearly stated the close links between material culture and process of identity and home formation (Tolia-Kelly, 2004; Walsh, 2006).

Reason 2: We are in co

important role in processes of home re-creation? Can eating 'food from home' while away trigger specific emotions? Does eating meaningful food allow the re-creation of home, at least temporarily?

Reason 4: Migrants cannot live by bread alone: re-creating home

A human being is by nature a social being, so their 'primary impetus is to belong' (Dalal, 1998: 40). Home is when one belongs. Home has usually been thought spatially⁵. To problematise that assumption, this research works on the idea that the decisive dimension of home (i.e. the sense of being at home) is time over space, and as such, food can have the ability to trigger that sense. We all need anchors in our lives, scaffoldings that help us to keep on building our lives. For non-migrants⁶ those moorings usually have a spatial nature, but for people in migrancy, do those moorings own a temporal nature? Is not the question when is home, instead of where is home?

This paper aims to highlight the food panorama of a small group of Ecuadorian migrants living in the Spanish northern coastal city of Santander. The ultimate goal is to obtain some theoretical connections between food and their

Otavalo migrants display a specific mobility pattern, and can be considered pioneers in Ecuadorian international migration. However, despite having lived outside Ecuador on average longer than those from other provinces, collected data do not show weaker levels of attachment to food from their region.

Finally, physical contact with their regions of origin is very weak, with almost half of those questioned never having gone back to Ecuador. Obviously there is a positive correlation between the fact of going back to Ecuador for holidays and the presence of close relatives – e.g. children and spouse – in Ecuador. Also, those who had only

ed and notes were

ve not been able to capture the diversity of Ecuadorians living in Santander. She also provided me with

handed out at different locations and different times in the city of Santander. Although the number of Ecuadorian migrants that I expected to reach with the questionnaire would not be high enough to extrapolate any conclusions, they would be high enough to illustrate the mundane and not-so-mundane everyday food panorama of this small and recent community¹¹. Thus the questionnaire was designed to state facts and reveal meanings, a hybrid between the 'traditional' quantitative survey and the in-depth interviews. It was designed to be able to accommodate further information likely to turn up during its handing-out, as readings about reflexivity in qualitative and quantitative methodology have previously warned me about (Gill and Maclean, 2002; Martín Pérez, 2006; Ryan and Golden, 2006). This likeliness was mainly due, and also encouraged, by the kind of information the research was looking for; half of it quantitative data to contextualise and the other half 'pure' qualitative data. That drove the design of the questions in the questionnaire. Some of them were deliberately ambiguous, and

minance of open questions. In this sense this questionnaire can be considered a hybrid between a questionnaire and a semi-structured, more-in-depth interview, a rare specimen of qualitative and quantitative technique.

The kitchen: Santander

Santander is a small city in the north of Spain (around 183,000 inhabitants), the capital of the agricultural province of Cantabria. This province has no immigration¹² and in comparison with the rest of the country, few migrants have chosen to

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¹¹ This decision can be criticised, as any extended ethnographic research would have revealed far more subtle and hidden details and meanings. However 00re was a high time constraint to the research that should be taken into consideration. It is important to realistically

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overshadowed the province of Cantabria, traditionally an agricultural and tourist one. While the numbers of (im)migrants in the latter have been growing (although still far from close to those in the capital, Madrid, and Barcelona, the second biggest city in Spain), its 'poor' contiguous province has not managed to attract a large number of migrants (OPI, 2007).

The presence of migrants in general, and Ecuadorians in particular, is quite small in Cantabria. In Santander there are very few so-called 'Latin' shops and restaurants, and a small but growing number of locutorios (places where to phone internationally cheaper, usually with internet access too and selling a few 'ethnic' products). No public gatherings in parks, as in other parts of Spain (the park of La Florida in L'Hospitalet, an adjacent working class town to Barcelona, or El Retiro park in Madrid, are two well known places where these gatherings periodically attract hundreds of Ecuadorian migrants living in those areas), no crowded multicultural festivals, no dance exhibitions, no fashionable ethnic restaurants or gastronomic fairs with stalls selling Ecuadorian typical products. Nothing.

In my interest to know how migrants cope with the loss, re-creation and/or encounter of home, and to do this through a focus on everyday food, the absence of a well-established transnational net, which can easily act as a 'already-present home from home', was an important pre-requirement. The Ecuadorian community in the capital of Cantabria, Santander, fulfils most of my research needs. This group provides a wonderful opportunity to research into the everyday practices of eating and homing of a migrant population in a non-transnational context. With the appearance of transnational migration into the academic agenda, a lot has been researched into this 'new' kind of migration (for the foundational study on the transnational paradigm see Basch et al., 1992); this has been to the detriment of studies about the lives of those unable to involve themselves in transnational livelihoods. Not everyone can

live transnationally, as in the case of Ecuadorian migrants in Santander.

Getting the ingredients

I have named 'ingredients' the foodscape features of the Ecuadorians living in Santander, as revealed by the fieldwork. This section has mainly a descriptive purpose.

Current eating patterns: Ecuadorian and Spanish food

All the informants (except for one, but later answers contradict this data) reported to have eaten food they considered to be Ecuadorian since living in Spain. The reported frequencies of eating Ecuadorian food indicate that one third of respondents eat it every day and another 20% once or twice a week. Thus, a surprisingly high percentage of Ecuadorians (54%) eat Ecuadorian food every day or every week, as an attempt to be kept sensorially connected with their past in Ecuador. Eating known food 'occasion[s] a habitual, corporeal experience of continuity. [Food] provide[s] a means by which "original" home place and "new" home place are linked: via the continuing life of the habitual body that has and continues to experience home objects' (Warin and Dennis, 2005: 168). A third of my respondents eat Ecuadorian food once or twice a month. As will be explained later, empirical data seem to establish a division between the unconsciousness of eating Ecuadorian food every day (what makes that kind of food standard, not special), and the attempt to consciously engage in practices of remembering Ecuador through cooking and consuming Ecuadorian food on 'special' occasions, against the standard rule of eating Spanish dishes in their 'mundane' everyday. The reasons, as it will be seen, for eating Ecuadorian and/or Spanish food are multiple and complex.

Predictably, 95% of the sample recounted having eaten food they considered Spanish or Cantabrian while living in Spain. What is far more surprising is the detailed knowledge of Spanish and Cantabrian gastronomy shown by some participants. Several of them (mainly women) reported to

be able to properly cook highly elaborated dishes of the Spanish gastronomy. This fact is easily explainable by some of the features of the Ecuadorian migration towards Santander. This migration was primarily led by women, who initially worked as live-in maids for the upper class families of the city and for the booming tourist sector of the province. As a requirement, they were expected to learn how to properly cook Spanish/ Cantabria food for the families they were working for, or the restaurants and hotels they were working in (García Santiago and Zubieta Irún, 2003: 127). In order to match supply and demand, several NGOs offer short training courses aimed to migrants, and 'Spanish cooking skills' is one of the most repeated ones¹⁵.

Last meal: the importance of rice

As a control question and in order to gather more information, the question 'what was your last lunch or dinner?' revealed the importance of rice¹⁶. Sixteen respondents (i.e. nearly half of the sample) mentioned a dish which had rice as one of its ingredients. Of course rice is a normal ingredient in the Spaniards' diet, but it can hardly be considered a staple, such as bread or some kinds of legumes. Part of the explanation for this prevalence of rice in the everyday diet of Ecuadorians living in Santander could rest on the fact that rice is easier to obtain and cheaper to buy in Spain than other staples of Ecuadorian cuisine, such as corn or plantain.

The over-use of rice can be considered a simple mechanism of 'bricolage alimentaire' (Durán Monfort, 2004: 9). Its use makes up for the absence of more expensive or difficult-to-find ingredients, such as shellfish or exotic fruits.

¹⁵ See for instance those provided by the NGO 'Cantabria Acoge' [Cantabria welcomes] – to whom I am grateful for helping me to get in contact with Ecuadorians living in Santander –

(<http://www.cantabriaacoge.org/integracionlaboral.htm>)

or those provided by the Catholic organisation, *Cáritas*. Those two organisations can be considered, if not the only ones, the most important ones working with migrants in Cantabria.

¹⁶ I find very 'tasty' the parallelism between the migration of people and the migration of their cuisines and ingredients. The history of rice is revealing in this sense. It is believed that rice was domesticated in the South of Asia. Nowadays, rice is present worldwide and has become the main grain for an important share of the world population. Similarly, the migratory history of coriander, originally a Mediterranean herb, which funnily, is widely used in many Latin American cuisines (the Ecuadorian one included), shows that it is completely absent in Spanish cuisine.

research to perform that role of 'totem substances'¹⁷.

Eating out: restaurants

As previously mentioned, Santander is a small city with rather few migrants, in relation to the rest of Spain. As a result (and this observation from my own work of city mapping is backed by the answers to the questionnaire and the interviews), there is a lack of restaurants where you can eat Ecuadorian food.

Other migrant communities with a similar background (i.e. considered by the native population as 'Latin' in general because of speaking Spanish and coming from Latin America) are far more visible in terms of shops, stores, bars and restaurants. It is not difficult to come across places where to buy or to eat Colombian and Peruvian products. Hence, can those premises, more available, where to eat 'Latin' dishes be a good enough substitute for those Ecuadorians who do not know premises where to eat Ecuadorian dishes? My data is clear in this point: no. Thus, even though they are perceived by the native population as a rather homogeneous group sharing a so-called Latin cuisine, for Ecuadorians living in Santander there is no substitution between Ecuadorian and Latin (mainly Peruvian and Colombian) food: Ecuadorians reported knowing Latin places but not visiting them.

Integration

The question, 'Have you ever invited anyone to have lunch/dinner in your house since you have lived in Santander?' was intended as a proxy for integration, i.e. close contact with native or other migrant groups. Letting someone into the domestic space and sharing food with her/him implies the existence of an intimate, close relationship that can be regarded as a measurement of integration¹⁸. Answers revealed that this

kind of close links were almost exclusively with other Ecuadorians. Specifically, the survey data revealed that 29 respondents had invited Ecuadorians to their place for a meal, 3 had invited other Latin Americans,

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¹⁷ This assertion is based on the section of the questionnaire dealing with the issue of smells and flavours that remind one of home. As will be seen later in this paper, those two herbs were considered by

intended as a proxy measurement for 'Ecuadorian community' in Santander. It could be worth introducing some kind of strength measurement of the variable 'community'. A woman reported to gather regularly with fellow Ecuadorian women but the gathering was not 'institutionalised'. It was triggered by the mere fact of running into other Ecuadorians in the streets. This can, of course, be considered some proxy for the presence of an Ecuadorian community (i.e. having the intimacy to gather after running into someone in the streets means some kind of mutual knowledge) but I would rather understand it in individual terms, as friendship, instead of considering it in collective terms. So, though being interested in knowing about the 'Ecuadorian community' in Santander, with the obtained data, I do not think I can conclude anything apart from stating that it is important to take into consideration strong personal differences to explain personal collective involvement. These differences refer to region of origin in Ecuador, family situation (if one is the only member of one family in Santander, or the house is shared with others from Ecuador, etc.), length of stay, knowledge of Ecuadorian organisations in the city, etc. As an exception, those coming from Imbabura with a Quechua background, seem to have more frequent and established gatherings (e.g. basketball matches every Saturday and Sunday).

Coming back to the broad picture, gatherings take place usually once or twice a month triggered by some kind of event. Based on the questionnaire responses, the events that most often trigger gatherings are, firstly, life-cycle events (birthdays, weddings, christenings, communions, etc.) – 42%; festivals commemorated from Ecuador (19%); sporting events (17%); weekend get-togethers (15%); plus much smaller frequencies allocated to political or other church events.

Often these events involve sharing food. The open qualitative question, Which kind of food do you usually share in those occasions? provided very rich descriptions of the kind of food shared in each event.

With no exception, all the described dishes can be considered Ecuadorian. As already mentioned, not all of those events involved food sharing. In the occasions that do involve it, the 'formality' or elaboration of the food consumed varies greatly. It ranges from the 'beer and toast corn' (tostado) usually consumed while watching sports matches, to far more elaborate dishes, such as 'guaguas de pan y colada morada', a kind of child-shaped bread and a thick violet drink, that is typically consumed in Ecuador, and reported to be eaten in Santander every 2nd November (All Souls' Day).

Now that all the shopping and chopping is already done, it is time to move on to the cooking stage: heating and stirring the

the case of Ecuadorians in Santander, someone coming from a rural area in Ecuador and who has migrated to Santander, an urban area in Spain, is more likely to miss 'food eaten back at home' than someone coming from urban Quito, because s/he must face, along with cross-national cultural differences, the impact of urbanisation.

Secondly, throughout all the answers aimed to unravel the reasons to eat Ecuadorian (or Spanish/Cantabrian food), stronger reactions were noted by women than by men. Women were more likely to 'strongly agree' or 'disagree', while men tended to be milder in their answers. This pattern suggests the presence of closer links with food by women than by men²¹.

The next two sections highlight the main results of the questions targeted to unravel the reasons to eat or not to eat Ecuadorian and Spanish food respectively. These questions used a Likert scale: those questioned were asked about the level of agreement or disagreement in relation with several statements. They were also provided with the option 'I have not thought of it'.

Disentangling reasons. 'I eat Ecuadorian food because ...

... I am proud of it'

Almost everyone strongly agreed or agreed with this assertion²². It is by far the most strongly supported reason. Ecuadorian food was then regarded as something valuable. Only one person disagreed with this statement.

Intriguingly, in the migrant stories included in the already-mentioned 2003 Report about migrants in Cantabria, one 28 year-old Colombian woman made a comparison between the tidiness of the Spanish meal pattern (a first course, second course and

dessert) and the untidiness of her homeland cuisines:

'[...] there we mix up everything, there we put together rice with lentils with potatoes, everything together' (García Santiago and Zubieta Irún, 2003: 218).

In my research I have not come across any of those kinds of reactions. Hopefully, this type of 'interiorised colonialism' concerning eating issues (i.e. disregard of the cuisine of the homeland, because of differences with the cuisine of the place of destination, implying the superiority of the latter) is currently receding.

... I want it to become known'

This was also another commonly-expressed

²¹ Other studies have also acknowledged this pattern (see for instance, Beoku-Betts, 1995; Edmonds, 2005; Hargreaves et al, 2002; Kneafsey and Cox, 2002; Law, 2001).

²² Twenty-four out of 35 people who answered this question strongly agreed with this statement, 8 people agreed and only 2 people reported not having thought about it.

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because it makes me feel from here). A rather surprising 43.8% answered that 'they have not thought about it'. It is without doubt, the highest percentage of 'haven't thought' responses among all the questions asked. On the contrary, the statement about Ecuadorian food was backed by an important percentage (two-thirds) but also a not inconsiderable 29% disagreed with it. When doing a cross analysis that takes into consideration the influence of the variable gender, it is easily noticeable that women have stronger reactions (either strongly agreeing or disagreeing) than men. Women do care about this question, as not even one woman reported not having thought of it.

Table 2: Feelings of belonging and integration triggered by food consumption

Level of agreement with the statement	Eating Ecuadorian food makes me feel as if I am in Ecuador (remembrance)	Eating Spanish food makes me feel from here (integration)
Strongly agree	31.4%	15.6 %
Agree	34.3 %	28.1 %
Disagree	28.6 %	12.5 %
I have not thought of it	5.7 %	43.8 %

These two questions lead us to the very interesting issue of embodiment. Familiar food (with all its attributes, i.e. flavour, smell, texture) has a strong power to trigger already experienced feelings and sensations, as it can be the feeling of belonging. The notion of 'body memories' is very useful here to introduce the issue of embodiment and the senses:

[...] memory 'manifests itself physically and within a gendered framework', to create 'body memories', a term that denotes traces of the past embedded in the physical senses (Warin and Dennis, 2005: 165).

In other words, those 'body memories' (or the memory of the body) is the knowledge

stored in our bodies without us even being aware of this²⁴. A Ecuadorian woman whom I interviewed woman put it in this way: 'I know I am not in Ecuador when I eat Ecuadorian food, but it feels as if I am'

She was well aware she was in Santander when she ate Ecuadorian food, but simultaneously she somehow felt herself back in Ecuador while eating that food. This was one of the motivations for this

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tastiness as one of the reasons to eat Ecuadorian food.

Several studies have also mentioned the same contrasting opposition. Kneafsey and Cox (2002) acknowledge this point in their study of Irish people living in the British city of Coventry. For those coming from rural Ireland, the comparison between the freshness of usually homemade or home-produced stuff and the 'plastic' appearance and flavour of English food, was a clear indicator that 'food at home tasted better' (2002: 11, italics in the original). Petridou (2001) also finds the same contrast in her study of Greek students in London, who opposed the freshness and tastiness of Greek products with those found in English supermarkets. Smells were present back in the grocery stores of Greece, but they were lacking in the United Kingdom. Plastic does not allow smells to hover around. In comparison with the tastiness of home, living in migrancy is rather tasteless and odourless.

Reasons to eat Spanish food: a matter of practicalities

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However, our dish from home is not completely cooked yet. It still needs that delicate final touch that only the subtlety of herbs and spices can add.

Herbing: the delicate smell of home

This section tries to add the final touches to the dish, the subtlety, the delicacy of aromas and flavours. It will present the last findings of the fieldwork and will deal with two topics that have been rambling around all the previous analysis: the issue of 'being-at-home' and the sense of fragmentation in relation with the sensorial effects of food.

The sense of being-at-home

While reviewing literature about 'home' I was struck by the number of times that the binary pair fragmentation-wholeness appeared, either explicitly or implicitly (Al-Ali and Koser, 2002: 7; Duruz, 2004: 57; Holtzman, 2006: 367; Jackson, 1995: 6; Sutton, 2000: 121; Warin and Dennis, 2005: 167). Living in migrancy or exile is living in between, fragmented in time and space. One is fragmented from well-known friends and relatives, and from an imagined past²⁷. As stated by Law in her study of Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong 'the absence of familiar material culture, and its subtle evocations of home, is surely one of the most profound dislocations [fragmentations] of transnational migration' (2001: 277).

If living in migrancy involves living mosaic-like lives, being at home, on the other hand, can be described as a sense of wholeness, when the self can regard her/himself as forming part of the whole²⁸. There is not

fragmentation, the self experiences a sense of sameness or continuity across time and space (Rouse, 1995: 357). The fact of migrating introduces a fissure into that continuity and the migrant must learn to live with it. Nonetheless, this is not a pessimistic conceptualisation of migration, as something intrinsically bad that fragments the self and condemns migrants to live suspended lives, irremediably feeling a sense of in-betweenness. As shown by some transnational groups, this fragmentation can also become the raw material for the construction of rich, elaborated, complex lives, in a sort of coloured patchworked existence²⁹.

Fighting off fragmentation: remembering Ecuador and re-membering far away from Ecuador

Human beings instinctively search for familiarity. Known human, cultural and material environments ease human lives and trigger physical and emotional comfort. When one migrates, those known milieus, with their easiness and comfort, are left behind and the migrant must learn to cope (in practical terms but also in emotional and sensorial ones) with new environments. Migration introduces fragmentation into migrants' lives and these use different strategies to fight off that sense³⁰.

As seen in this research, two of the most obvious ways of fighting off the sense of fragmentation are through the consumption of food. The first strategy is based on the remembering of past experiences through the intimate act of cooking and eating food

consciously chosen these more dynamic notions of home as one of the initial drivers of this research.

²⁹ In my own limited 'transnational' experience, to live transnationally means sometimes that in a celebratory way the multiplicity of homes makes me happy (I am from here *and* from there). Contrary, some other times, it makes me feel displaced (*neither* from here nor from there) with an unsettling feeling of in-betweenness, or suspended life. Due to the temporal succession of both, I do not consider as very realistic the theoretical separation usually made between celebratory and gloomier visions of transnationalism.

³⁰ That is not to state that the sense of fragmentation is exclusive to migrants or that all migrants encounter that sense. The case of queer migrations represents a good counter-example: the fragmentation of their lives is the

²⁷ This is the paradox of the return. Migrants longing for return when they actually come back must face a second migrancy, as the past they remembered and longed for is not there anymore; in this sense, '*you can never go home again*'.

²⁸ Note here the use of the adverb 'when', instead of 'where', to refer to notions of home. In the line of the most recent theoretical developments in this field, which opt for privileging the temporal and continually under-construction nature of 'home' – and that have solidified in the use of expressions such as *homing* or *sense-of-home* (Ahmed, 2003; Fortier, 2003; Walsh, 2006) – I have

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