

# THE SOBREMESA COOKBOOK

SPANISH HOME COOKING

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“Beautiful food, simply prepared and shared with friends and family,  
is one of the most basic and satisfying pleasures of life. All that’s needed is a warm heart,  
a keen eye for the best ingredients, and a willing sense of adventure to lead you  
to a good place at the table.”

Viana La Place and Evan Kleiman, *CUCINA FRESCA*, 1985

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## INTRODUCTION / ABOUT SOBREMESA

In late 2013, my family and I moved from Barcelona, Spain, to Berkeley, California. At the time, there was a big demand for Spanish cuisines, and not too many experts in the area, so happily, I found work pretty quickly. Very soon after that huge transition, my mission became clear to me: to translate key aspects of Spanish and Mediterranean cuisines to Americans; thus, *Sobremesa* was born. The term *sobremesa* has no English equivalent: it refers to the time we spend around the table after we've finished eating. In Mediterranean cultures, that's a long time, whenever possible. It's convivial time spent digesting, socializing, sharing, appreciating, and living in the moment. If I had to choose one word in English to best express this concept, it would be "lingering", though lingering sometimes carries a connotation of excess, which *sobremesa* absolutely does not: there can never be too much *sobremesa*.

In its early days, *Sobremesa* was focused exclusively on cooking classes and catering. A couple of years down the road, its activities expanded as I developed *Sobremesa Culinary Tours*, a series of curated culinary-themed guided tours for small groups. On our first tours we introduced our guests to two of my favorite Spanish cities: Barcelona (of course) and San Sebastian. Soon, we added a third tour, to Japan, a land I love with all my heart.

As a food lover, I can see no better gateway to enter a culture than through its food. As an educator, I firmly believe that food, travel, and culture are wonderful companions on the road to getting to know a place, its peoples, and their traditions. Furthermore, in traveling with our palates we also learn about a place; and when the Covid-19 pandemic hit in the early phases of writing this book, it turned out to be the only way we could safely indulge in travel for quite a while.

Mass tourism in the latter part of the twentieth century made travel accessible to many, but also took its toll on cities like Barcelona, which both benefitted and suffered from it. When I set out on my culinary tour adventures, my goal was to create experiences for people, to help them navigate the proliferating tourist traps, and introduce them to an authentic, traditional culture that still prevails. I hope my recipes can do the same.

In some of the recipes in this book, the headnotes are a bit long, because I have a story to tell: the story of my love affair with this country. The recipes come accompanied by stories, and behind the stories, there are people. And here lies the crux of the matter: food, stories, and people. These are the building blocks of conviviality.

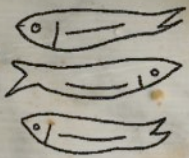
I moved to Spain in 1998, just out of college. I had recently met my now-husband of 22 years, and came here with one suitcase and lots of hope. My children were both born in Barcelona, though after having spent most of their childhoods in California, they are now just as much the cultural mix as I am. To have lived in several countries has its drawbacks: I am never quite the same as the locals anywhere. I

have come to terms with that, finally, as I now see that it has allowed me a sense of perspective, which I can use to my advantage as I mediate for others as a cultural and culinary translator.

I have never been interested in food for food's sake alone. When I first embarked on the culinary path, it had to do with health and nutrition. At the time, I was in an academic career; I have always been fascinated by the cultural traditions that surround the culinary ones, the significance of food and its practices. This does not mean that the recipes are incidental; far from it, they are the very body of this book. All of the recipes in the book are tried and tested; they are on regular rotation in my household and are the recipes I've been teaching in my culinary workshops for many years. Some are very traditional, and some have contemporary twists, but only in the sense of making them more accessible, not less so. If you are looking for the fancy techno-emotional cuisine Barcelona has become famous for thanks to chefs like Ferran Adrià and his many disciples, I'm sorry, but you will have to look elsewhere.

Like the great cookbook authors Patience Gray and Josep Pla, it's the peasant culinary traditions I'm most interested in. In the early 1980s, their books tried to capture a world that was all but disappearing. Four decades later, the resurgence of back-to-the-land and organic movements, as well as the rising awareness of the need to eat more sustainably, give this way of life renewed force. I like food that is unfussy, simple and prepared with the best ingredients. Flexibility is what I look for in recipes, both for my own benefit, and my readers', because this way you can cook with a template in mind, but don't need to be strict or precise to the point of utter dependency on a recipe. This is how I teach people to cook in my workshops and classes; I want to empower my students to be cooks in their own right, not just readers -though I also love to read cookbooks as if they were novels. Nowadays so many households deal with food allergies and intolerances, perhaps in part due to the sad state much of our food system finds itself in. When you work with recipes that are flexible, you can easily substitute or adapt, without the whole dish falling apart. When possible, I give ideas for substitutions due to things like common allergens or the availability of some of the more local Spanish ingredients mentioned here. The importance of high quality ingredients is something you will see repeated again and again throughout the book; because of how simple the dishes are, ingredient quality is fundamental, though ideally this should always be the case.

Robin Dunbar, Professor of Psychology at Oxford University, argues that people who eat communally are happier than those who don't. Eating together is key to human evolution; it is the natural continuation of grooming in primates. Merely cooking is not enough to make us human; the emergence of eating together developed shortly after the use of social language. Our bodies' endorphins are triggered by sharing food and drink together, just as primates' are by grooming. If eating alone releases endorphins, eating together does so even more efficiently. Having a dinner party is a socially more advanced form of primates grooming one another. Dunbar discovered that the more times you have people over to eat, the happier, and more satisfied with your life you feel; basically, you are high on your own endorphins and feel at one with your world. Eating together makes us human.



Top with a couple  
of top quality Ortiz  
anchovy fillets





# THE PRE-SOBREMESA: El aperitivo

*Aperitivo* is the pre-meal equivalent to *sobremesa*.

We gather both before and after the meal, no time constraints.

This can mean that a lunch lasts for the better part of a Sunday or holiday.

In Spain, *aperitivo* is sometimes called *la hora del vermut* or vermouth time; it's the beverage of choice during this time of the day -late morning, traditionally after mass and before lunch- and has extended to signify the very occasion of sipping our drink, accompanied by nibbles and small plates (more on this in the section on vermut), to ensure our stomachs can handle the alcohol without getting too drunk too quickly. It's all about stretching out the time, making the lingering moments shared with friends and family last as long as they possibly can.

If we can manage to eat some good food along with it, then we are combining many pleasures at once, creating peak experiences from the everyday, simple ones. I firmly believe Spain's long life expectancy -predicted to surpass Japan's any time soon- comes from this form of experiencing time and company, in which nothing is more important than what's present.

*Aperitivo* is mostly experienced on leisurely days, when you have time to linger before, during, and after a meal, i.e. weekends and holidays. Moreover, meeting up with someone for an *aperitivo* is also a way to be mindful of finances, as you can spend quality time out at a bar or terrace, without spending too much money, and then come home for the main meal. In this way, socializing can continue throughout times of hardship, and it's accessible to all. A glass of wine or vermouth is relatively inexpensive in Spain, and the small bites that go with it can be, as well.

Though it's more frequent to see people going out for *aperitivo*, you can certainly prepare one at home. Since lunch in Spain is such a late affair, inviting people over for *aperitivo* is a great way to get some food in earlier in the day, for those of us who don't like to wait that long. In this section, I offer some suggestions for things I like to serve with pre-meal drinks.

## FRIED POTATO SKINS WITH ROSEMARY ANCHOVY MAYO

The humble potato is a New World food, but where would Spanish cuisine be without it? Spaniards love their spuds, not least in the ubiquitous Spanish omelet, which is possibly the national dish of Spain if there is one (see recipe in the From the Land chapter). When we moved back to Barcelona from California, my son complained that the school cafeteria lunch included potatoes in some form or another on a daily basis.

When you make *tortilla de patatas* in Spanish households, there are many ways to do things. One of them is whether or not to peel the potatoes. In general, I like to leave the skin on potatoes, especially if they are organic, because you get some nutrients and fiber from the skin. My family prefers tortilla with peeled potatoes. Since that dish is on regular rotation in our household (I dare you not to love it), we end up with potato skins on hand. Since I hate wasting food, here is a way to put those leftover spud skins to excellent use. It's perfectly fine to save them in an airtight container in the fridge. That way, you can have your tortilla for dinner, and then an ingredient ready to accompany your *vermut* as an *aperitivo* before lunch the next day.

This recipe combines everything you want when drinking a sweet Spanish *vermut*: fatty, salty goodness, with a hint of freshness from the rosemary. It feels indulgent, and is perfect for a lazy Sunday.

For the potato skins, I find that a vegetable peeler leaves them super thin; if you want a thicker skin, use a paring knife to peel your potatoes, the way it's done in most Spanish households.

Many years ago, one summer, my husband and I spent a week in Andalusia, the cradle of tapas. I remember a wonderful bar in Ronda, where I first saw tapas being served in oval-shaped seafood tins. We were delighted and thought this was such a beautiful, original form of presentation, one that made sense for an *aperitivo* or *vermut*. Since then, it's become more popular to see this in Spanish bars. I love this idea, so remember, next time you eat tinned seafood, the kind that comes in the oval-shaped tins, make sure to save the tin, wash it well, and use it to present the potato skins and/or the mayo for this recipe.



YIELD: 4 servings

#### INGREDIENTS

1/4 cup mayo, homemade or store bought (recipe follows)

5-6 anchovy fillets

1 sprig fresh rosemary

Potato skins, left over from 4 potatoes used in another recipe

Oil for frying

Flaky salt and black pepper, to taste

#### INSTRUCTIONS

Mix the mayo with the mashed anchovies and the rosemary, either by blending or mashing the anchovies first in a mortar and pestle, and then whisking them into the mayo with the chopped rosemary with a whisk or a fork.

Heat enough oil in a pan; we are shallow frying, not deep frying, so the oil doesn't need to come up more than 1/4 to 1/2 an inch or so. Fry the potato skins until golden. Remove with a slotted spoon onto a platter or plate lined with paper towels to absorb the excess oil. Season with a flaky salt like Maldon.

Serve with the mayo dip on the side, and garnish with a bit of rosemary and freshly ground black pepper.

YIELD: 4 servings

INGREDIENTS

2 cups sweet Spanish *vermut*

4 orange wedges, sliced thinly

4 Manzanilla or other pitted green olives

4-8 large ice cubes

4 toothpicks

Soda water, preferably from a siphon, optional, to top

INSTRUCTIONS

Though the ingredients are very few, make sure they go in in this order, so that the *vermut* gets infused correctly before adding in the ice cubes.

Make sure your orange wedges are quite thin. Spear one half moon of orange and one olive onto a toothpick and place one toothpick in each glass. Add in about 1/2 cup of *vermut*, or about half-way up the glass. Add in a large ice cube. Top with a spritz of soda water, or drink as is. Make sure there are food and friends to go with.





## CAMILA LOEW

Camila Loew is the founder of *Sobremesa*, which began in California in 2014 as a way to teach Americans about Spanish culture and food traditions. A couple of years later, she went on to create *Sobremesa Culinary Tours*, to guide her guests through the regions of Spain and other parts of the world.

Camila has lived in three countries, and is a third-generation immigrant: her grandparents fled Nazi Europe, and her parents moved from Argentina to the U.S. during the military dictatorship. Wanderlust was ingrained in her.

Camila holds a Ph.D. in Humanities, and is trained as a natural chef and a certified nutrition consultant. Overall, she considers herself an educator. Camila published *The Memory of Pain* in 2011. *The Sobremesa Cookbook* is her first book of recipes.

In addition to everything related to food and cooking, Camila adores picnics, tea, travel, Japanese *onsen*, hiking, and connecting with people. She founded and directs the Food Studies & Gastronomy study abroad program at the University of Barcelona. She has been teaching Americans abroad in Barcelona for close to two decades.

Though she has returned to live in Barcelona, Spain, Camila remains a faithful, committed guest instructor at 18 Reasons and The Civic Kitchen culinary schools in San Francisco. If you plan to visit Spain (or Japan), look her up at [www.sobremesa.life](http://www.sobremesa.life) for guidance.

# THE SOBREMESA COOKBOOK

*The Sobremesa Cookbook* portrays a way of cooking, but also a way of life, and it is an homage to Spain, the country that has been the home of its author since 1998. The Mediterranean tradition of *sobremesa* -lingering around the table- remains strong to this day despite having to battle against the pace of the modern world. Long Sunday lunches are especially sacred.

The book features 45 traditional and modern recipes, inspired by the regions of Spain and the Spanish way of life and eating, which have enchanted Camila Loew for over two decades. The recipes in the book showcase fresh, seasonal products from land and sea. The dishes' Spanish roots are unmistakable, but their simple, no-fuss cooking style makes them easy to reproduce around the world.