The popular image of peasant life

on a Mediterranean island is one of a simple but plentiful existence, fresh fruit and fish on hand at any time of year. The picture of a well-stocked larder seems to belong to a different scenario, one of long, snowbound northern winters.

But throughout their history, the Balearic islanders have had to be self-sufficient, when pirates or rough seas made it difficult to depend upon the outside world, or even upon fishing, for food; the lack of surface water in much of the islands made farming dependent upon the rainfall. Famines were frequent, so techniques for preserving food were all important... as was, of course, a good rebost or larder.

Anyone who has spent a miserable wet November or a stifling humid August in Majorca knows that few places can feel colder in winter or hotter in summer. A traditional larder in a Majorcan stone house is designed to maintain a fairly constant temperature and humidity, oscillating only some five degrees throughout the year. Compare this with a kitchen cupboard in a modern apartment, which may vary ten degrees in a day. What affects food most isn't so much the heat itself as the fluctuations in temperature and humidity.

The most important feature in a well-designed rebost is the ventilation at two points: one opening to the outside of the house, ideally onto a patio or back yard and facing north, the other usually interior, at right angles to the first to allow the air to circulate correctly. If one vent is higher than the other, the warm air can escape. They can be in the form of a gelosia (a decorative grille made of clay or cut sandstone) set in the wall, or a screen in the larder door. Good ventilation avoids the taste of one food being absorbed by another, as often happens in a refrigerator.

Although most Majorcan houses are built of stone, the non-structural walls, such as those of the larder, tend to use marès, a local sandstone, which also regulates the ambient temperature and humidity,

and is whitewashed with slaked lime. Unlike paint, lime is not only a disinfectant but also "breathes", avoiding condensation. Sunlight can also harm preserves, so Majorcan larders are set under the stairs or in a semi-basement, but always within reach of the kitchen.

To discover which foods are newcomers to the Mediterranean diet, try the following experiment. Open the fridge and remove anything that can be kept in the larder: fruit, vegetables, wine, cheese, pickles, dried fish, eggs, cured meats. Whatever's left – butter, margarine, milk, soft drinks, beer – is probably a recent import from the colder climates and loaded with calories or cholesterol; or, in the case of fresh meat and fish, the type of food which was consumed immediately when caught or bought. Today, of course, a refrigerator is inevitable, and in a Majorcan home the most logical place to put it is in a corner of the rebost, right? Wrong. The heat it generates annuls the effectiveness of the larder itself.

What would one find in a traditional rebost? Apart from the staple cereals and pulses – rice from the marshlands around Alcudia, dried fava beans, chick peas and lentils, flour – there would be jars of pickled olives, rock samphire and capers in vinegar; olive oil in glass or earthenware pitchers, bunches of garlic and onions, strings of hanging tomatoes – a primitive, autochthonous variety which, picked in summer, will last until the following spring. Pear tomatoes would be bottled for sauce. Hanging from the beams there would also be cured meat products: red sobrassades, black botifarrons made of pig's blood with aniseed. There would be also be dried cod, and golden salted herrings on a round wooden tray. A two-kilo loaf of Majorcan farmhouse bread – unsalted, naturally – leavened and baked in a wood oven – would hang in a cotton bag, where it could last a week without spoiling. There would also be a supply of galetes d'oli, a popular local variant on the classic ship's biscuit, which keep for months.

A fresquera or cheese-cage (a wooden frame covered with wire mesh) will protect an open cheese or sausage from insects. Sweet things? Honey, fig-bread made with aniseed, dried apricots and raisins, almonds and pine kernels, apricot jam, quince preserve and "angel hair", a stringy pumpkin preserve used for filling sweet pastries. A large keeping-melon is suspended in a mesh net, picked in September to be eaten at Christmas. In January, oranges are wrapped in newspaper and packed in crates. Lemons are never stored; with two crops a year, there are always some on the tree.

What are the advantages of a good larder? A piece of cheese taken out of the fridge will have no taste; you have to wait a couple of hours for the room temperature to bring out its full flavour. Nor will a larder dry out food. It is, however, a feature of a disappearing way of

life, and is incompatible with a contemporary urban dwelling; it takes up a lot of room and besides, few people go to the trouble of making jams or preserves, let alone bottling fruit and vegetables or curing meat and cheese.

It's not only the consumer that seems to be conspiring to turn the larder into a thing of the past. 'It's sad when you realise that today you can't keep a proper rebost', says a cook from the centre of the island, 'and that's mainly because the climate has changed, but so has the way of preserving food. A loaf doesn't keep as long as it used to, nor do today's sobrassades keep half as long as those of my grandparents day, and that's in spite of all the preservatives which the meat packers pour into their products. It isn't one single factor, it's a confluence of many things: the climate, the ingredients, pollution. A cow's diet not only affects the taste of the cheese but also its keeping qualities.'

One of the strongest peasant traditions still extant in Majorca are the matances, the ritual slaughter of the family pig at Martinmas, in which the whole family joins in for a day of stuffing sausages, salting bones and cooking offal; in the old days, the products of this porker would have had to last from then until the following spring. They are cured by the fresh winter air in the open attic of the house, from whence they are be brought down to the larder when the warm weather arrives. (Our winters are neither cold nor dry enough for curing salted hams.) However, apart from pork and occasional game or poultry, the Majorcan peasant diet was basically vegetarian.

Organically grown fruit and vegetables do keep longer than agribusiness produce. It may not seem so at first sight because chemically treated or radiated apples or carrots maintain their good looks even while rotting inside. An organic product is honest in that it looks its age. However, in Spain most organic farms export their produce up north, although commercial farmers avoid chemicals in their own kitchen-gardens.

Modern irrigation systems allow the dry-farming areas of the island's plain to produce more quantity, to the detriment of the true quality of the fruit and vegetables. An unirrigated apricot or fig tree, like a melon or hanging-tomato vine, will produce fewer and smaller fruits but they will be up to four times richer in minerals and natural sugars, and will keep proportionately longer.

But how can you have a nice cold glass of white wine or slice of melon without a refrigerator? You may be one of the lucky few whose larder is air-conditioned by a cold draught from an underground cave –the island's limestone bedrock is like a swiss cheese, and some houses and hermitages have tapped into these air shafts. But nearly every Majorcan house has a cistern or well which is several degrees

colder than the rebost and it is customary in summer to lower fruit or wine in a basket to within a hand's-breadth of the water for it cool down. Ice used to be produced in the mountains by stamping snow into blocks and keeping it in snow-houses, but its use was mainly medicinal; only the rich could afford water-ices.

The Majorcans eat their main meal at midday; supper – even among the urban families – is usually based around that typical Mediterranean stand-by, bread and olive oil. Here it is known as pa amb oli, and nearly all its ingredients are drawn from the rebost. Large slices of farmhouse bread are toasted, rubbed with garlic, dribbled with oil, scrubbed with half a hanging-tomato and sprinkled with salt, although not necessarily in that order.

The plate is then garnished with things to nibble on: whole (or crushed) green olives in brine with fennel and lemon leaves; black olives in brine and vinegar with bay leaves; pickled samphire or caper-buds... and of course some fresh raw vegetable; in our benign climate there's always some in season: giant radish, sweet onion, lettuce heart or green capsicum.

For protein, a slice of cured Minorcan or fresh local cheese, or perhaps an omelette, is laid on top of the pa amb oli; or maybe a sliver of jamón serrano from the mainland or of the local black sausage called camaiot. Perhaps tonight you feel like some home-marinated anchovies or flakes of dried herring; all this accompanied by some robust red Binissalem wine to clean the palate. In some parts of the island, pa amb oli is eaten with a slice of orange or some firm black cherries; in others, with dried apricots or fig-bread. All in all, it is an easy and healthy way to end the day, and whatever the company, it is still, despite all the dietary changes which have been introduced by the arrival of tourism, the foundation-stone of the Majorcan diet. All you need is plenty of imagination and a well-stocked larder.

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