



Galician shellfish: Sustenance in poverty and a delicacy in affluence

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ABSTRACT

The consumption of shellfish is currently perceived as a marker of class and elite status. At the same time, the Spanish region of Galicia has been acknowledged as paradigmatic of the “best shellfish” in the country. The intersection of these two premises provides the starting point for this article. We argue that an anthropological perspective can contribute to the scientific assessment of the shifts in dietary practices caused by the convergence of these two processes. Data obtained from comprehensive fieldwork and a review of documents spanning a whole century allow us to examine two key issues: 1) how attempts to emulate the habits of the rich can reveal shortcomings among the poor and 2) how the cultural classification of food items fluctuates over time.

‘My readers must have bread to eat, not only delicacies’

Martial, Epigrams

‘Do you think something that is not beautiful would necessarily be ugly?’

And would someone who is not wise be ignorant?’

Plato, The Symposium

1. Introduction

This study examines how shellfish has evolved to be considered a

defining gastronomic component of Galician identity and when this collective set of beliefs started to be constructed.¹ Beyond certain considerations regarding the labelling of shellfish as “Galician”, this article reflects on how this paradoxical situation might have been created – how could such an expensive food item become so representative of Galicia, despite the socio-economic profile of the region.² The analysis of transformations in Galician food practices and particularly the symbiosis between “mariscadas” (shellfish banquets) and “Galicia”, which seems widely accepted at present,³ raises interesting questions from an anthropological perspective: Is this association based on strictly endogenous, traditional dietary practices? To what extent has shellfish – in nutritional terms or because of its perceived qualities – been classified, in the recent past, among the top-ranking Galician food products?

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¹ The construction of identities around food practices in the Galician context has already been examined by Freire-Paz (2017) and Freire-Paz and Cabana Iglesia (2023). However, neither of these studies focused on the specific subject of shellfish consumption.

² Statistical data reveal that the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in the region is below the national average values. Source: Spanish Regional Accounts, 2000–2022 series, National Institute of Statistics. Available at https://www.ine.es/dyngs/INEbase/es/operacion.htm?c=Estadistica_C&cid=1254736167628&nu=ultiDatos&idp=1254735576581.

³ Recently, a parody sketch on the Camino de Santiago – a pilgrimage route at the centre of Galician cultural policy during the last thirty years – became popular in social media (available at: <https://www.facebook.com/pantomimafull/videos/417855150482812>). While mentions of food and drink are a constant during the sketch, its climax sees the pilgrims arriving in Santiago de Compostela with a dry comment – “I think we are due a mariscada”. As an example, we want to underline here the assumption that celebration feasts in Galicia are all based on shellfish consumption. The pervasiveness of this stereotype, clearly shared by the audience of this sketch, is what allows the use of a humorous and lightly mocking tone – it is not possible to produce satire and irony if the image being ridiculed is not widely known and understood.

Are the prevailing connotations of these products in the Galician's collective memory always positive? Is it possible to identify shellfish consumption in Galicia as a marker of class that fluctuates between poverty and affluence?

In other words, this paper aims to examine the changes in the social perception of shellfish and the cultural constructions that allowed this product – which a few decades ago was a food resource associated with scarcity, if not unfit for human consumption – to be transformed into a marker of class and ethnicity. It is important to clarify that these transformations have generated a specific terminology worth describing, as it is used throughout the paper – particularly the term “mariscada”, shellfish banquet, which is relevant for different reasons. Firstly, “mariscada” has become established as the major representative of Galician cuisine, and it automatically elicits an assumption of quantity (large) and quality (high) for the shellfish it contains. While the quality is assumed because of the place of consumption in generic terms – Galicia – or the assumed origin of the shellfish – Galician – in the case of the quantity there are two nuances: the number of items that make up the “mariscada” and the variety of species served.⁴ This gastronomic (re) creation has also extended to other elements of the culinary language, such as the way in which shellfish is served and the utensils used for it. In this sense, the use of the term “shellfish boat” is very revealing⁵ (see Fig. 1).

We are aware that it is not easy to address such broad issues, particularly within the space constraints of this article. For this reason, we have drawn a line of analysis within a particular field. The research limits are defined by a specific geographical boundary and thematic viewpoint – the anthropology of food and eating.

1.1. Where and why?

Regarding the geographical location, our research focused on the city of Lugo for two main reasons: with Ourense, it is the Galician capital city located further away from the coastline. Therefore, we can assume that seafood was not a resource immediately available in its local catchment area.⁶ In contrast to Pontevedra and A Coruña – Galician capitals located by the sea – the presence of shellfish in inland capitals cannot respond only to natural causes. Thus, this phenomenon requires a culturalist interpretation (see Fig. 2).

On the other hand, analyses of socio-economic profiles in the Galician region have usually established a clear distinction between coastal and inland areas.⁷ This differentiation is crucial to understand the dynamics underpinning population movements towards the Atlantic axis,



Fig. 1. Galician souvenir for children.

particularly in the last third of the 20th century. The largest urban centres are located along an imaginary straight line⁸ linking the westernmost territories of Galicia from north to south. These centres have acted as attracting poles within a low-level industrialisation process, acting as redistribution nodes that concentrate most infrastructures. As a result of this unbalanced territorial organisation, the city focus of our study remains doubly isolated: geographically distant from the coastline and geopolitically subordinated – even neglected. Interestingly, these circumstances make this city particularly attractive for research. Research conducted on areas classified as “emptied” or “hollowed-out” have revealed this label to be misleading – there are people living there. At the same time, these observational micro-units allow a closer examination of the constant transformations that help shape cultural values (see Fig. 3).

1.2. Shellfish vs. mariscada

Regarding the thematic limitations, this study is explicitly focused on shellfish consumption, although this can be associated with other products – bread as a complement, or meat as an opposite. First, however, the concept of “shellfish” itself requires some clarification. On the one hand, we need to establish what specific products we are referring to, since the word “shellfish” includes different forms of invertebrate, edible sea life.⁹ However, not all species falling into this description are part of the Galician diet, and among those included, there are clear differences in rank – the consumption of lobster is not comparable to that of sea limpets. For instance, it is significant that “mariscadas” only include five types of crustaceans – king prawns, langoustines, spider

⁴ A “mariscada” always includes at least five species – i.e., spider crab, brown crab, langoustine, king prawns, and velvet crabs.

⁵ The translation of this term into English requires an explanation – it is a platter used for serving shellfish whose shape is reminiscent of a wooden boat.

⁶ It is important to consider the importance of technological factors in shaping human dietary patterns (Contreras and Gracia, 2005). These affect different stages of the food system and, in this case, are crucial for a correct understanding of the presence of shellfish in the diets in Northwest Spain. For instance, gregarious crustaceans – prawns, king prawns, langoustines – living deep underwater, on the seafloor, only started to be caught with the development of trawling nets – introduced to the Iberian Peninsula by fishermen from Catalonia and Valencia from the 18th century. On the other hand, the consumption of bivalve molluscs – clams, cockles, mussels – experienced a vital advancement with the implementation of new purification methods associated with the treatment of typhus both in Europe and the United States from the late 19th century, as well as the introduction during the 20th century of new compulsory testing in both continents. This must be seen in the context of the hygienist discourse that elevated medical knowledge and consolidated the state control of bodies (Foucault, 1979). Finally, for any variety of shellfish, its short shelf life hindered its commercialisation until the widespread introduction of industrial refrigeration systems during the 20th century.

⁷ For instance, in López Iglesias and Ríos Rodríguez (2021).

⁸ The use of the word “line” as a synonym of “axis” is not casual and reveals a clear positioning among those that have pursued and encouraged a polarised development biased towards a band of land – not a line – parallel to the Atlantic Ocean that includes Santiago de Compostela – capital of the autonomous region and a city that not only maintains but has ostensibly increased its status as a universal bastion of the Catholic Church. This impossible – in cultural terms – physical rectitude also has symbolic projections, with the coastal area being identified as a region where it is possible to strive for advancement and a better future – in contrast to the backward inland regions, weighed down by the past and inexorably moving towards a stillness that seems a prelude to death.

⁹ Shellfish includes crustaceans – caridean shrimp, prawns, king prawns, langoustines, spiny lobster, crabs or goose barnacles, among others – molluscs – oysters, mussels, clams, cockles, scallops, variegated scallops, baby squid, octopus – and other sea species such as some echinoderms – sea urchin – and urochordates – piure. All are edible and can be incorporated into human diets.

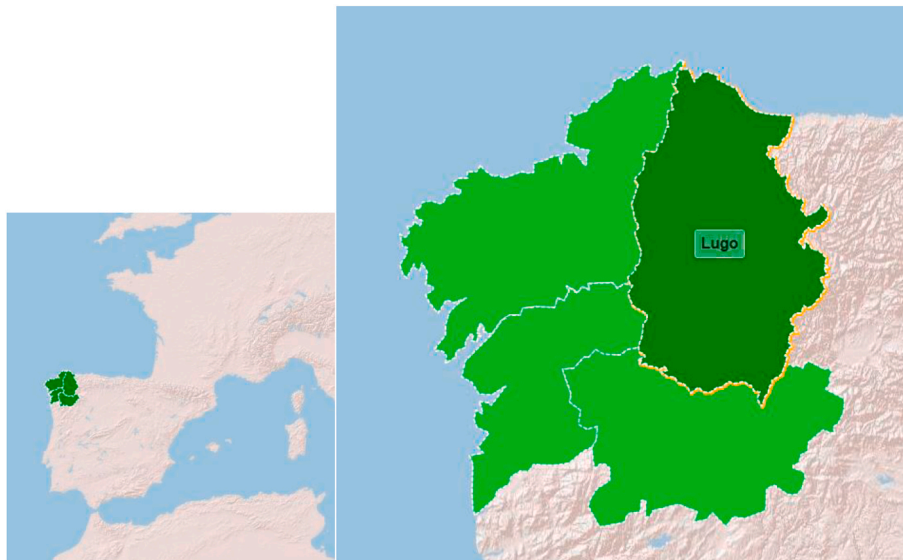


Fig. 2. Lugo (Galicia, Spain).

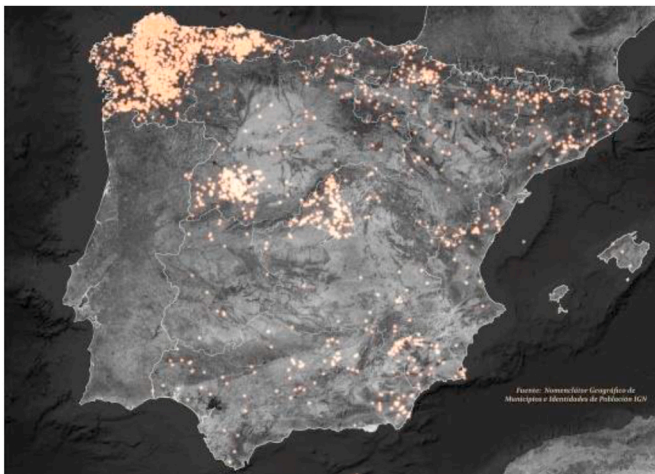


Fig. 3. Map of the 3720 abandoned villages in Spain. Author: Manuel Márquez. Source: <https://twitter.com/manelmarquez/status/1467039600703066113>.

crab, brown crab, and velvet crab – excluding all molluscs and all other varieties of crustaceans and invertebrates. At play within this classification system are several cultural factors – based on symbolic aspects and not their nutritional value – that allow us to examine the social life of food. Among the marks of social status attached to shellfish, size is important. Thus, the most sought-after species for crustaceans are spiny lobster, clawed lobster, spider crab, and brown crab, rather than velvet crab, langoustines, king prawns, prawns, or caridean shrimp. An important distinction is that the former is consumed individually, while the latter retain the same cumulative character in consumption that they present in nature – meaning that they are usually consumed as a group.

However, to understand all the complexities of the classification system, other factors need to be considered, e.g., the presentation of the product. For instance, in the case of spider crab, it can be plated after simply boiling it – thus suitable for presentation and consumption as a group. However, its preparation could also follow further steps, adding other ingredients – usually white wine. In this case, it will be presented individually. The size factor could also misleadingly suggest that larger crustaceans are considered superior – when, in truth, velvet crab takes precedence over brown crab. The argument used by consumers and professionals is that its meat is “finer”, which adds greater complexity to

the analysis – it is difficult to fit a food product described in those terms within a quantitative ranking that prizes quantity or size.

Moreover, a product whose consumption is the most prestigious in social terms – with its subsequent higher price tag – might be excluded in certain contexts where there is a component of public display or exposure. A paradigmatic example of this situation is goose barnacles, whose dominance among shellfish is currently indisputable. However, their presence in “mariscadas” or wedding banquets is very limited, almost anecdotal. In the case of “mariscadas”, probably because of their cost, which favours individualised consumption – in terms of quantities, but also as in “eating without the interference of others”. As for weddings, in the last two decades, context seems to have prevailed over text – the food itself. As a result, performative forms of presentation are shaping the scenario in which the more material rituals of the wedding take place. This also affects the food served and how it is presented. The case of goose barnacles illustrates this shift in values, but it also helps introduce an additional variable. One of the values attributed to shellfish is based on its provenance; in this case, a Galician origin is a source of added value. Additionally, not all barnacle-producing regions of Galicia receive the same classification, despite sharing estuarine circulation, influence of oceanic currents, or the cycle of nutrient salts – which should contribute to developing similar organoleptic properties, such as those appreciable in the following description: “[eating] goose barnacles are like taking a mouthful of the ocean, just like that. You close your eyes, and, in the ocean, there is everything – seaweed, fish, lobster, dolphins, air ... Goose barnacles taste of all that. It is a hundred per cent like swallowing the ocean.”¹⁰ (Suso Lista, *percebeiro* [barnacle picker] in Corme. Available at <https://www.caminodosfaros.com/percebe-do-roncudo/>.) In the case of goose barnacles, their defining value is based on the narrative created around how and where they are collected.

The knowledge of the extreme danger involved in the job of

¹⁰ It is important to connect the prevailing narratives among shellfish collectors with those of the most popular high-end local chefs, creating a unique rhetoric. In the Spanish context, the best-known example is the chef Ángel León, from the restaurant Aponiente, considered a seafood connoisseur due to his well-known culinary research into plankton and “marine cereal” (eelgrass seeds grown and harvested in an estuary in the Bay of Cádiz). He has noted: “This idea that I always have is to feed the sea.” (*Interview with chef Ángel León: “Ser cocinero en Galicia es un lujo” [To be a chef in Galicia is a luxury]*. Available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Fc9hTTfqTg&ab_channel=Atl%C3%A1ntico).

“percebeiros” – an industry in which males clearly dominate over female shellfish pickers or “mariscadoras” – in significant areas, such as the rugged and forbidding *Costa da Morte* [Death Coast] in the province of A Coruña, is a factor that adds notably to their value.¹¹ The Galician origin of the product, thus, is an additional variable in their cultural classification. However, how is this provenance established? In 2008 the regional government, whose devolved competences include control overfishing activities, created, and started to manage an identifying certificate – *Pesca De Rías*. The implementation of this certification and associated traceability controls was the first mechanism ever established to identify “Galician” shellfish. However, certified products are only a limited percentage of the total volume of shellfish consumed in Galicia. There is a high level of “cross-contamination” due to proximity in terms of geography and identity. As a result, all the shellfish consumed in Galicia is classified as “Galician product” when this is not the case.¹²

Finally, it is important to draw attention to the dates mentioned above. Only fourteen years have elapsed since the devolved administration started to label Galician fish and shellfish in a distinctive manner. How is it possible to reconcile this delay in the official recognition of a product whose consumption was supposedly rooted in tradition – particularly a product perceived as a marker of distinction (Bourdieu, 1979) among the higher classes? The different gastronomic festivals exalting popular products celebrated along the Galician coastline reveal the widespread importance of seafood consumption. However, this reinforces the hypothesis on which this study is based – that a food product currently perceived as a marker of high social status has been, until recent years, a staple in the diets of the poorest folk in some coastal regions.¹³

2. Materials and methods

This study follows an ethnographic qualitative approach, without neglecting quantitative data collection within the limits allowed by the temporal framework, funding available, and the number of people involved in the research (Russell Bernard, 1995). Being aware of the

¹¹ The most important location for goose barnacle collection is around the cliffs of Cape Roncudo where the product, celebrated in an annual festival since 1992, is picked up near the base of the Christian crosses erected in the cliff-face to commemorate those who drowned at sea. The place-name (Roncudo) is a reference to the Galician verb “roncar”, implying something achieved at great cost. A comprehensive review of the shellfish-picking culture can be found in Jiménez-Esquinas (2021).

¹² The opposite also happens elsewhere. For instance, Valencia in the Mediterranean coast celebrates an annual shellfish festival (MarisGalicia. Sabor a Galicia), and the Casa de Galicia in Alcorcón (a city and municipality in the Madrid region) organised in 2022 a festival of Galician shellfish with the economic and institutional support of the Xunta de Galicia campaign promoting the Holy Year “Xacobeo 2022”.

¹³ In the village of O Grove, in Pontevedra, a Shellfish Festival has been celebrated since 1963. A newspaper article covering this subject noted that “during the first editions [of the festival] the people of O Grove used to distribute among the cars small promotional bags containing shrimp and velvet crabs” (source: Diario do Salnés. Available at <https://www.diariodosalnes.es/articulo/o-grove/origenes-fiesta-marisco-remontan-1963/20221002125846004409.html>). This short sentence contains three clear hints about the popular nature of the festival. First, it turns the subject of the action described into an anonymous collective, “the people of O Grove” – the implication being that all the villagers participated in this action, that all of them were able to share the shellfish. Thus, shellfish loses its status as a marker of social distinction – a product only available to a privileged minority. The second suggestion comes from the description of the bags provided as “small”, which could be a fair description in quantitative terms, but also has qualitative implications as “insignificant” or “negligible”. Finally, the use of a bag as a receptacle reinforces an idea of itinerancy reinforced with the notion that they are distributed “among the cars” – suggestive of the image of people begging around cars in urban contexts.

importance of extensive fieldwork, we have combined participant observation with what can be described in epistemological terms as “observant participation”,¹⁴ a technique that allows a holistic recording of the subject of study.

As Garine (2016: 23) noted, “in modern, but also traditional societies, it is important to consider the historical perspective – independently of their peculiarities, all societies reveal their specific historicity. In other words, ethnology is a historical discipline, like all others focusing on the human animal and its social organisation” [author’s translation]. To examine these changes, we have collected wedding banquet menus offered in different venues in the city of Lugo specialising in wedding celebrations throughout the 20th century. This approach is based on the notion of “found materials” (Pauwels, 2011), which defines social scientists as researchers of “images and narratives” (Mannay, 2017: 21). We have also conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with study participants divided into three different levels. First, owners and managers in the hospitality business, especially those identified as wedding venues, selected through purposive sampling to identify significant actors – particularly those with a permanence in their roles that allows us to examine their narratives from a diachronic perspective. Second, people working in these venues – kitchen and waiting staff. Kitchen staff have provided crucial information on preparation methods, while waiting staff have allowed us to examine the guests’ responses to different products. The combination of their narratives allowed us to analyse tastes associated with shellfish consumption and how these have changed over the last six decades.

Finally, to complement this information, we have also recorded the life stories of a third group of people – those with memories of the “years of hunger” during the Franco dictatorship.¹⁵ For this purpose, we have contrasted information obtained from participants in the city of Lugo with that of participants in the coastal region of A Mariña.¹⁶

All interviews were recorded, with the participants providing informed consent to their involvement in the study, with the understanding that they could withdraw their participation at any time. We interviewed a total of 19 subjects – six females and thirteen males, with ages between 41 and 93 years – whose gender was determined by their professions and the temporal framework selected for the study.¹⁷ For instance, kitchen and waiting staff in venues used for wedding celebrations since the 1950s were mostly male.¹⁸

In addition to these formal tools, the research has also included informal conversations (Swain & Spire, 2020). Finally, to achieve greater methodological consistency, we have incorporated into the

¹⁴ A more detailed understanding of both research techniques can be found in Guber (2001).

¹⁵ From a historiographic perspective, this theme has been comprehensively examined by authors such as Miguel Ángel del Arco (2020). From an anthropological perspective, the so-called “years of hunger” have been studied by Conde Caballero (2021) and Conde Caballero and Mariano Juárez (2021).

¹⁶ Coastal region located to the north of the province of Lugo, on the Cantabrian Sea.

¹⁷ It is worth noting that no gender-based differences were noted regarding shellfish consumption – as is the case with other food products, such as meat and particularly game meat, favoured by male consumers, and fish, favoured by female consumers.

¹⁸ There is a clear distinction between the family-run venues that celebrated wedding banquets until the 1970s – very focused on the meal itself, and where all the cooking was in the hands of a single cook – and other, more professionalised venues – coexisting simultaneously with the former, or not – in which there was a clearer separation between the owners and the paid employees. In the latter, both kitchen and waiting staff were largely male employees. There are several possible explanations for this, ranging from physical causes – directly associated with the ways in which food is presented and served – to ideological ones – persistence of the roles associated to females within a heteropatriarchal society in which the Francoist ideal of women as “angels of the home” was still pervasive (Piérola Navarrete, 2019).

sources the personal life experiences of the author herself, as a native/resident within the observational group, in what could be considered an autoethnography (Blanco Sánchez, 2012). As Atkinson and Hammersley (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994:44) noted, “even haphazard encounters or personal experiences can provide motives and opportunities for research”.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Shellfish: a delicacy

Shellfish consumption is associated in Western European culture with the higher classes, a factor of social distinction that – via social emulation – has trickled down to the rest of the population as the socio-economic context has gradually become more affluent and the welfare state has been expanded to cover a significant part of the society. The perception of shellfish as a marker of elite status is still pervasive, sustained partly by its ever-increasing retail price, although this is not the only reason. Its social perception and subsequent classification are also based on cultural issues associated with methods of preparation and consumption practices – even with the amount of waste associated with its consumption, as opposed to what is eaten. All these aspects need to be considered when considering its value and its perception as a luxury product.

In the city of Lugo, the current consumption of shellfish has a very marked festive and occasional character, associated with specific celebrations both in the cycle of life – individual and familiar – or in the annual calendar of collective festivities – i.e., Christmas or Patron Saint feast days. Cross-referencing income data¹⁹ and consumer retail prices²⁰ in Lugo, shellfish cannot be afforded as part of day-to-day diets. On the contrary, the consumption of shellfish seems to be based on its economic and cultural association with elites – with those on the lower rungs of the social hierarchy seeking to emulate the behaviour and eating practices of the higher classes. However, how did this process take place? When was shellfish incorporated into diets, and in which ways?

Current shellfish consumption in Lugo occurs in one undisputed, predominant context – wedding banquets. This might be because “in the least sophisticated societies, celebratory feasts offer the main opportunity to consume food” (Gariné 2016: 61). In current Lugo society, the level of social differentiation associated with wedding celebrations – even if a wedding was not the couple’s first or might not be the last – is based on the number of shellfish dishes served, and a “proper” wedding cannot take place without this identifying parameter. On the other hand, there are two types of factors involved in the construction of the “Galician character”, manifested through shellfish consumption – internal and external. We will examine later the emic aspects that act as a mirror for native Galicians. However, the importance of the “Galician” label and shellfish as a continuum can be appreciated in our participants’ narratives: “The shellfish boat. The shellfish boat, be [the guests]

¹⁹ The two Galician cities with the lowest average income in 2020 were the capitals of the inland provinces: Ourense (13,036.53 euros) and Lugo (12,992.30 euros). Source: Faro de Vigo, 07/10/2022. Available at <https://www.farodevigo.es/galicia/2022/10/07/mapa-riqueza-galicia-tres-municipio-s-76971132.html>.

²⁰ Online providers of fresh food products, popularised in recent years, allow us to conduct automatic searches in multiple websites. As an example, we have selected Cetárea Burela (<https://cetareaburela.com/mariscos.html>) since it is based in the coastal study region of A Mariña. Although prices fluctuate throughout the year, reaching a peak in the run up to Christmas, a random check reveals that medium-sized goose barnacles’ costs 65 euros/kilo, clawed lobster is 50 euros/kilo, langoustines are 69 euros/kilo, spider crabs start at 24 euros/kilo, spiny lobster is 90 euros/kilo, and clams are 25–29 euros/kilo. Obviously, there are different prices based on the size of the product, and it is also important to consider that this is not always fresh – the website indicates that certain products might be frozen.

from Madrid or Barcelona [...], from Andalusia, from everywhere [in Spain] – it makes a big impact on outsiders when you bring it to the table. It never fails”.

However, going back 100 years, although shellfish consumption was already associated with elites, wedding banquets celebrated in the local venues offering this service never included such displays of crustaceans and molluscs. Indeed, an examination of the evidence suggests that, at that time, only a very limited number of weddings banquets were held outside of the family home.²¹ Moreover, those that did never included such a profusion of shellfish²². As a non-exhaustive example, we have selected two cases over a timespan of a hundred years showing several differences: (see Fig. 4)

We argue that wedding banquets were a primary tool for the introduction of shellfish into the diets of the people living in Galician inland cities – albeit only for a minority and only sporadically. The fieldwork we have conducted reveals that this process does not go further back than the 1980s. From a gastronomic point of view, wedding banquets had an exceptional character for a society where these celebrations usually only took place once in a lifetime. At the same time, these banquets reveal class distinctions that range from the venues selected for the celebration to the choice of menus and food to be served. In practice, these issues were interconnected – i.e., more sophisticated venues offered more complex culinary elaborations.

Their perceived superiority in terms of social status, and thus cultural taste, was extended to the food consumed. This can be appreciated in the printed menus provided individually to each guest as far back as the 1920s. These printed menus have allowed us to examine their contents and compare their evolution and provide information on the behaviours created around the subject of food. The distribution of a printed card with detailed information about what will be consumed reveals an additional web of meanings and understandings beyond the act of eating itself. The carefully curated accessories, the decoration, the tableware used – all these elements show an interest in setting the scene for a “performance” beyond the wedding ceremony.²⁴ This social change in the practices surrounding wedding banquets is still prevalent years later, as our participants reveal in their accounts: “Before, people came to eat – they wanted to eat properly, and the rest was accessory. Not now. Now, they almost seem to care more about whatever you put there rather than the actual food”. In practice, these changes reveal a shift in eating practices in a broader sense, beyond the simple act of consuming food.

²¹ This can be appreciated in the different studies that have examined from an anthropological viewpoint the beliefs and behaviours associated with the cycle of life based on data provided by the survey conducted by the Athenaeum of Madrid at the beginning of the 20th century. Tomé Martín (2004) has examined data from the province of Salamanca, Fernández de Mata has examined the case of Palencia, and Luisa Abad et al. (2011) have examined Cuenca. In the case of Galicia, Xosé Manuel González Reboredo (1990, 1999, 2013, 2014) has published a few studies based on the data on Galicia contained in the 1901 survey.

²² We are not implying that shellfish was never present, because it might have been – but always in a much more limited way. This circumstance was not limited to wedding banquets. It also included those that were perceived as celebrations associated with an elite with distinct eating behaviours – compared with the rest of the Galician population, largely rural peasants. Evidence that shellfish was part of the celebratory practices of the higher classes can be found in society chronicles published by the press at the time. For instance, a notice on the celebration of a “University Day” in the local newspaper *El Compostelano* on the 28th of July 1930 included a detailed description of the menu served at the Faculty of Medicine in Santiago de Compostela, with the presence of the chancellor – including spiny lobster with different sauces.

²⁴ Pedro Tomé has considered both stages of the wedding – the legally binding ceremony and the banquet – in his suggestion that “It is not that the latter is more important than the former since without it, it would not exist. However, the proof that both moments have equal importance is that in the central liminal phase the marrying couple [...] are more concerned about who is attending the lunch or dinner than who will be present at the church or register office” (Tomé Martín, 2004: 92).

From the late 1940s to the 1950s, new venues opened in Lugo, emulating the type of banquets associated with the higher classes. Their dominance as venues for wedding celebrations was consolidated during the 1960s–1970s. Despite the social and economic elite seeking to preserve their own spaces and traditions – e.g., putting up barriers to the acceptance of new members – the new, modern socio-economic context emerging in those decades led to an increase in the number of celebrations taking place outside of the intimate atmosphere of the family home. Eventually, their massive popularisation led to the creation of a specific market: “Once during the month of August, I remember, we did thirty weddings. People came to eat and afterwards left – but they came to eat properly. We had the people getting married in parish churches nearby, in Lugo too, but most came from outside [the city] to eat properly” (see Fig. 5).

Interestingly, data collected on wedding celebrations during the 1940s and 1950s in the city of Lugo show that they did not usually include a meal. Instead, the married couple and their close family (always a small group) went to a cake shop after the ceremony (always religious) to eat some pastries. The tradition at the time was to bring the pastries to the table of the celebrating family – always more than people attending, so they could eat what they wanted. Once they finished eating, they paid for what had been consumed, with the remaining pastries being returned to their display cabinets for other customers. Pastries, accompanied by thick drinking chocolate, were a popular intermediate choice for those who wanted to celebrate a wedding but could not afford a banquet. We believe that the context of Franco’s dictatorship was also a determining factor. In November 1940, a general ban on banquets was decreed. However, two exceptions were made, one of which concerned wedding banquets (see Fig. 6).

However, from the late 1950s–1960s more venues flourished, offering what we have described as wedding meals. The small family groups²⁵ celebrating their weddings in these venues enjoyed menus dominated by other foods rather than shellfish. The traditional menu started with appetisers that always included cured ham – a product embodying quality and exceptionalism – and other cured meats and products considered exotic and modern, such as mortadella or sliced cheese.²⁶ Among the ingredients considered exquisite were also olives – especially the anchovies-stuffed variety, when they started to be commercialised. A potato salad invariably followed this – the so-called Russian salad, sometimes referred to as “National salad”²⁷ – made with ingredients perceived as delicacies such as preserved tuna, mayonnaise, and, again, olives. Then followed a fish course – usually hake although, in exceptional circumstances, it could be substituted with a cheaper white fish.²⁸ The fish course always followed three requisites: the preparation method was boiling (Galician-style); it was

²⁵ Family models at that time corresponded to extended families, or small families with many descendants. Therefore, the mention of a “small family group” refers to the degree of closeness in family ties, rather than a quantitative assessment of the number of people present. Usually, the number of wedding guests was around a maximum of 40–60 people.

²⁶ Our participants specifically mention that “Back then, cheese had to be sliced – I remember when sliced cheese was introduced, it was much liked, there were no starters that did not include it”.

²⁷ This is the formal name that appears in the printed menus we have examined during our research.

²⁸ One of the study participants recalled how for his grandmother, ham, and hake – ever-present in wedding banquets – were reminiscent of what she called “sick people’s food”. This denoted foods that were only bought and consumed in situations of illness when nourishment was perceived as necessary for the survival of the sick person. Only those extreme and exceptional circumstances could justify the extra effort required to buy certain foods that were not consumed otherwise. The association between ham and illness is also present in the memories of Manuel Pillado, who noted that “I was not the only one who went for the ham [...] I did it because us children never got any unless we were ill” (Pillado and Martínez, 2002: 38).

presented whole at the table so that the individual portions could be separated and served with tongs to the guests, and it was always served with mayonnaise – again – or a vinaigrette sauce. This was then followed by the “main” meat course. It always included two types of meat, beef, and chicken, presented to guests simultaneously, with a side dish containing potatoes. Once wedding banquets became a popular custom, this celebration started to include a wedding cake. Upon this new element was constructed a first public ritual to be shared by the wedding couple – slicing and serving the cake to their guests. Finally, to round up this meal, pastries, coffee, and liqueurs were offered.²⁹

In the city of Lugo, the incorporation of shellfish into wedding menus only started in the 1970s. The ways in which this product was first introduced would merit a specific analysis. However, for the purposes of this study, we will only note that shellfish initially appeared among the starters when the traditional *hors d’oeuvre* were transformed into two categories – cold and hot starters. The first mentions of shellfish are sparse, and usually limited to oysters³⁰ and either king prawns or langoustines, served cold after being boiled.

It is precisely the methods of preparation that will determine the classification of shellfish into different categories and its consideration as a culinary product of superior qualities. For instance, the possibilities of a particular variety of shellfish being considered as a main course would depend on whether the original product could be prepared as part of long and elaborated recipes, with the inclusion of additional ingredients. An example of this would be dishes like scallop gratin or *Marinera*-style clams – whose main attraction is their sauce, particularly since it can be enjoyed with bread. Indeed, our participants indicate an increase in the amount of bread eaten by each guest when the menu included *Marinera*-style clams. “Bread must be doubled, for sure. Compared with banquets that do not include that dish, if there are *Marinera*-style clams, you had to consider an extra portion of bread for each guest. It would be a rare one who does not have seconds”. In this case, we find another class-differentiating factor – related to how food is consumed and whether cutlery is used or not. In practice, this issue is also present in the consumption of certain varieties of shellfish – i.e., king prawns, cockles, or clams – as opposed to others – i.e., spider crabs, spiny lobster, clawed lobster, or brown crab – that require special tools (crab crackers, picks) and, of course, the optional use of hands. Snubbing or accepting the use of hands to eat shellfish is not only a marker of social class, but also depends on the context of consumption. Thus, in formal contexts – and a wedding banquet would be included in this category – the direct use of hands would be frowned upon according to certain rules of etiquette created to eliminate any hint of animality at the table. However, during informal meals, it is acceptable to dispense with using cutlery; indeed, the use of hands can be perceived as a positive sign of familiarity with the products consumed.³¹ In any case, when shellfish is served in very formal settings, it does not contribute to levelling up class differences. On the contrary, it can reveal marked social distinctions. In addition to hurdles such as the economic cost and engaging

²⁹ Tobacco, although not strictly a food item, was also used to round off wedding banquets until the 21st century. Indeed, the association of tobacco and food consumption goes back in time – it was also included in the rationing cards issued during the Franco dictatorship.

³⁰ Perhaps due to their perception as an aphrodisiac, which would be considered a fitting reference in contexts of marital union.

³¹ It is interesting to examine differences in the use of hands to eat shellfish in the case of mussels, although these, with exceptions – such as those with a specific provenance, e.g., mussels from *Lorbé* – are not usually included in wedding menus. While normal rules on the use of hands to eat shellfish perceive this practice as vulgar, in the case of mussels the ability to eat them holding both shells as cutlery – with the fingers never touching the flesh of the mussels – is seen as a marker of class distinction. Another marker would be the way in which the empty shells are arranged on the plate afterwards, which in this case replicates the codes used to indicate that a guest is finished eating a plate by placing the cutlery on it.

professionals to prepare the banquet, a further class distinction is revealed during the consumption stage – guests have to demonstrate their table manners and eating skills and perform these skills in public.

It was only from the 1980s that shellfish consumption started to take place in the wedding banquets that had by then become the norm. However, at that time, its consumption in other spheres was still minimal – it was not part of the typical diet, even on other marked occasions such as Christmas.³² Wedding menus during this decade started to include shellfish among the starters, whose preparation also showed an increased degree of complexity.³³ After the starters, other courses followed, displaying different varieties of shellfish – including, at the very least, king prawns, langoustines, scallops, and *Marinera*-style clams. On some occasions, shellfish consumption was further boosted by including a “*mariscada*” followed by scallops and clams. The fish course also experienced transformations both in the product used and the methods of preparation and presentation. Simply boiled hake with two sauces lost its predominance, substituted with monkfish – with popular recipes such as *Santurce*-style monkfish.³⁴ For the meat course, chicken was abandoned in favour of lamb and goat kid, along with beef³⁵. As for desserts, increasingly elaborate wedding cakes replaced other types of sweets (see Fig. 7).

The increasing dominance of shellfish in all sections of the menu soon turned into a key aspect that not only added distinction to the wedding menu – it also meant, for many people, their first taste of these products and their preparation methods. As mentioned before, for many Lugo residents up to this point, shellfish was neither part of their traditions nor their day-to-day diets. Wedding professionals underline this shift when they note: “Most people would not eat – in *mariscadas* – they would not eat velvet crabs or spider crabs, and they would not eat brown crab either; this is the reality. Because you can eat a langoustine or a king prawn, it is easier, you do not get ... In fact, it is as if velvet crabs were spawning in the dining room. Sometimes we say: ‘Looks like we have more velvet crabs coming back than we sent out’ ... Perhaps because, although some shellfish varieties are served already open, velvet crabs are served closed, and you need to know how to open them”. Indeed, one of the problems posed by the consumption of crustaceans – as opposed to

bivalves – is not only knowing how to manipulate them; once opened, you need to know which parts are edible and which are not. An added difficulty is that edible and non-edible parts are very close together, so ignorance might lead to mistakes being made – i.e., eating the crab’s excrement. In the face of this risk, most guests do not even attempt to eat them. An additional problem is that some crustaceans’ physical characteristics make their consumption challenging. Only added (social) values and habits, which not all guests might possess, might justify their selection: “The velvet crab ... It might take 20 min for a person to eat a velvet crab properly, and you see that someone next to you ate ten or twelve langoustines, and you are just fiddling, to eat half as much (one velvet crab)”. In this case, envy could be considered as a component of social behaviour. However, in both cases, we could also note the principle established by Brillat-Savarin (2010): “Man eats, but only the sophisticated man knows how to eat”.

All these difficulties, however, might be diluted within what is, without any doubt, the guiding principle of most wedding banquets: absolute abundance. As Lorenzo Mariano has noted, “the older generations make judgements based on quantity, on overflowing plates, on ‘hearty’ foods. The *nouvelle cuisine*, with its preference for aesthetics, for large plates with very little food, reminds them of a scenario of scarcity, of absence” (Mariano Juárez, 2022: 39). This practice, noticeable in all the Spanish regions including Galicia, breaks a traditional cliché regarding Galician eating practices – the assertion that in this region people eat a lot, referring to quantities. This cliché seems to respond to a generational bias rather than being a territorial marker. However, as a cliché it was still pervasive in the 1980s, and its transference to wedding banquets explains to a large extent the incorporation of shellfish into the menus.³⁷

Therefore, the popularisation of shellfish within wedding banquets since the 1980s acted as an element of economic ostentation – in terms of cost but also quantity. However, its perception as a marker of social status worked in two different ways: there were forms of consumption associated with the elites, and preparation and consumption methods associated with the popular classes. The following example, from an interview with a participant from the coastal region of the province of Lugo, suggests that it is not an accident that the distinguishing factor between consumption in inland capitals and coastal regions is how shellfish is served and consumed: “We always eat shellfish hot, and the rest of the country [Galicia], cold”. This particularity is suggested as a marker of status that defines, although obliquely, the lower classes as upstarts in their eating practices – identifying those who are not used to eating shellfish.

Throughout the 1990s, shellfish started to be considered a defining aspect of the gastronomy and identity of Galicia as a whole – although, as we have pointed out, for people living in the inland capitals, these products were a novelty. Indeed, it was only in 1993 that Article 4, Chapter 1 of the Law 6/1993, of 11 May on fishing in Galicia established that “All action of exploitation of marine resources will be carried out in

³² Even today, in most homes, shellfish consumption during family celebrations is very limited – some varieties might be popular, but never to the extent of creating a whole menu based on the consumption of one dish after the other. Moreover, “*mariscadas*” are never part of ordinary celebrations. Families usually include “some” shellfish, but never anything like the gastronomic feast that has become associated with weddings.

³³ The separation between hot and cold starters could be seen as the first step in this process, since it implied preparing some dishes just before serving them, which increased the level of difficulty for both cooking and waiting staff – particularly since this coincided with an exponential increase in the number of guests invited to weddings, despite family models tending to reduce their size during the same period. Since then, transformations in wedding menus have followed the same direction, as our participants noted: “Longer starters, much more thematic diversity for the starters, and a shorter menu”.

³⁴ The preparation method involved in *Santurce*-style monkfish is a good example of attempts to mask ingredients, as mentioned above. Cured ham is an essential ingredient, and the fish is dipped in egg and flour and deep-fried before it is added to a sauce. During the 1980s, this dish was usually served in wedding venues around Lugo with mashed potatoes and carrots. However, during the 1990s monkfish started to be served on skewers – a new preparation method that meant the central bone had to be removed. Ten years later, new tastes saw the skewers being substituted by monkfish fillets. However, the most significant transformation is probably the increasing prevalence of monkfish over hake. This preference might be due to the former being almost bone-free, but a key factor is that, once cooked, it is very difficult to differentiate black-bellied monkfish from its cheaper, white-bellied variety – locally known as “*Juliana*”.

³⁵ A detailed analysis of meat categories is beyond the scope of this study. We will just note that, as with shellfish, there is a whole classification system based on prices, uses, and associated prestige.

³⁷ In fact, since the start of the 21st century the menus have experienced a noticeable slimming down: “If you look at recipe books from eleven years ago, weddings included four or five courses, while now it is three”. At the same time, in recent years there has been a growing trend towards sustainability. “They are starting to be aware of food being thrown away, unlike their parents, who were like: ‘No, no, there must be food! Enough for seconds and, if we must throw it away, that’s bad luck’, but now it is like: ‘What do you do with the food? With the leftovers?’ Or ‘Well, let’s see – enough for seconds, but-’, with more caution. That percentage did not exist, it’s only been for the last six or seven years”. There are two valuable ideas here for the analysis of the differences that help define the Galician context: 1) generational bias is essential to understand the focus on abundance for those who still have memories of the hunger experienced during the post-Spanish Civil War years, independently of the region, and 2) the consideration of new trends emerging in current society. This context seems to be built upon an exaggerated consumption, detached from the surrounding reality.

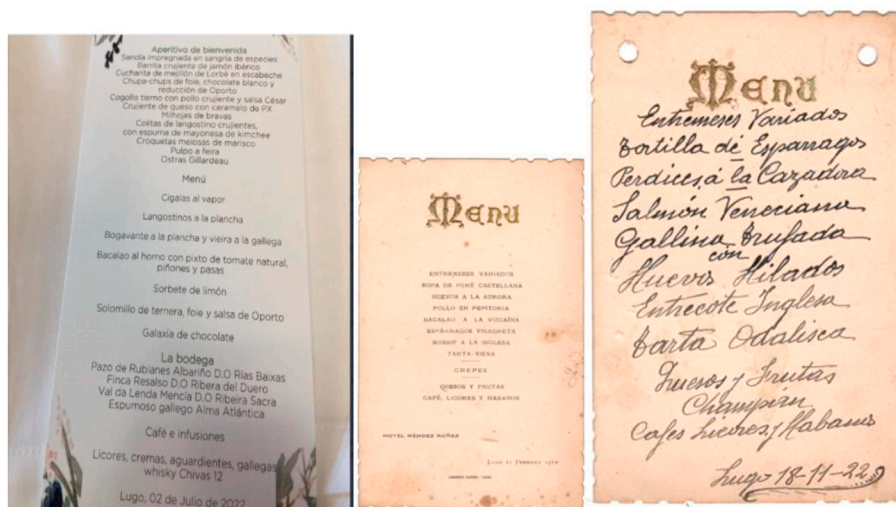


Fig. 4. Menu of banquets celebrated in Lugo in 2022 and 1922.²³¹ While the 2022 menu includes seven different shellfish dishes, the 1922 one had none.

a controlled manner and, therefore, under no circumstances would any activity that is not correctly authorised be allowed". In practical terms, this made illegal a frequent practice among coastal communities – the “rebusca” or scavenging for shellfish in sandbanks and rock pools for self-consumption. If shellfish had been a product whose consumption had a “luxury” tag attached, regional authorities would have moved to regulate this practice within a legal framework many years earlier (see Fig. 8).

3.2. Shellfish? I wouldn't want any if it were free!

The previous section described how shellfish was first introduced and how its perception shifted over the last four decades, until its current consideration as a delicacy and a marker of social status. However, its presence in human diets, without those associated values of exquisiteness, has been recorded in different cultures and places.

In his study on marine and river fishing in Medieval Galicia, Francisco Carrillo Boutureira examined abundant monastic documents from the 9–13th centuries. He recorded specific references to spiny lobster, oysters, and scallops – a product associated with the Jacobean pilgrimage route and the “concheiro” trade– as well as the generic “shellfish”.³⁸ In addition to the valuable task of revising Medieval documents and tracing associated name-places, the main interest of this study is the reproduction of a diptych made by Monteagudo García in 1959. This contains a laudatory text on shellfish from the Hispano-Roman poet Marcus Valerius Martial's *Gallaecia*³⁹ accompanied by its corresponding Spanish translation⁴⁰ and no less than 48 notes on the philology, history, and biology of shellfish, with the same number of illustrations, and including the original Latin epigram in its first page.

In his study on eating practices in Galicia, Castro (2010) offers

³⁸ The author examines the Spanish etymology of this word, “marisco”, derived from “the Latin *maris-* and the suffix *-iscum* to denote something that ‘comes from the sea or is relative to the sea’”. The name is probably a Late Latin substantivised noun used in Spanish and Galician-Portuguese to name different species of edible crustaceans and marine molluscs (Carrillo Boutureira, 1999: 120).

³⁹ Although the first edition of Martial's Book X was published in AD 95, “the poet corrected it and added to it in AD 98” (Guillén 2003: 25), which is the version used by Monteagudo.

⁴⁰ A. Veiga Arias, *Martial. Epigramas*, introduction by D. Estefanía, Vigo-Santiago de Compostela (Galaxia-Junta de Galicia), 1999, 2 vol (Text and Galician translation).

precise historical data⁴¹ that substantiates our hypothesis that, before the 1980s, shellfish consumption in Galicia was limited to two social groups: a majority who disliked these products but relied on them only in case of nutritional need, and a minority with high social status –interestingly, almost always of foreign origin– whose consumption was limited to a few selected varieties, among which spiny lobster was perceived as the one fulfilling the highest standards of excellence.

There are multiple instances of our participants corroborating this: “Another man told me that around 1918 his father had a ‘chalano’ [a small, flat-bottomed boat]⁴² that he used to catch lobsters, and the traps were made of cotton fibres. Apparently, when it was pulled up and it had spider crabs attached to it, they were bashed against the ‘carel’ [gunwale] and the ‘tolete’ [tholes or metal frames that hold the oars in place] and thrown back into the sea. He told me that back then, the French came in sailboats to fish for spiny lobsters, which they took back to France”. “A hundred years ago or more they used to catch lobsters. The old seamen used to say that when they pulled up the traps, they always came full of spider and velvet crabs, and they bashed them up to avoid breaking the nets because it was very difficult to extract them. Otherwise, they would have to spend a long time getting them out, because there were lots of them. Apparently, they used mallets or wooden sticks. They bashed the crabs over the gunwale [...] That way, the shellfish did not fall all over the deck”. “At home, when I was a boy, back in the 1950s–1960s, we used to pick mussels, goose barnacles, razor clams, pod razors, ‘lámparos’ ... There was much more respect for tides and fishing breaks than these days because this was not for economic gain. It was for the families, to eat, not to sell”. “My mother used to pick ‘lámparos’ and sea urchins to eat at home. Lámparos were used in stews or lambe-lambe style (boiled with bay leaf and a bit of oil if there was any). Then we used to throw the shells over the lemon trees, at the foot of the trees”. “My aunt still remembers that in the early 1950s her father

⁴¹ Castro notes that “a barrel of pickled oysters was not excessively overpriced; in the late 18th century it cost 4 ‘reales’ and a half, plus transport costs” (Castro Pérez, 2010: 71). Although the shellfish mentioned is pickled, not fresh, it is important to bear in mind that, at the time, some processing was necessary to preserve these highly perishable products. In comparative terms, Castro mentions in the same study that a piece of conger eel cost 36 “reales”.

⁴² Pork meat represents the Galician gastronomic ideal – the maximum expression of pleasure associated with the consumption of animal protein. Despite its close links with healthcare issues such as cholesterol and obesity, its dominance within Galician tastes can be appreciated in the use of the Galician expression “marisco de cortello” to refer to it.

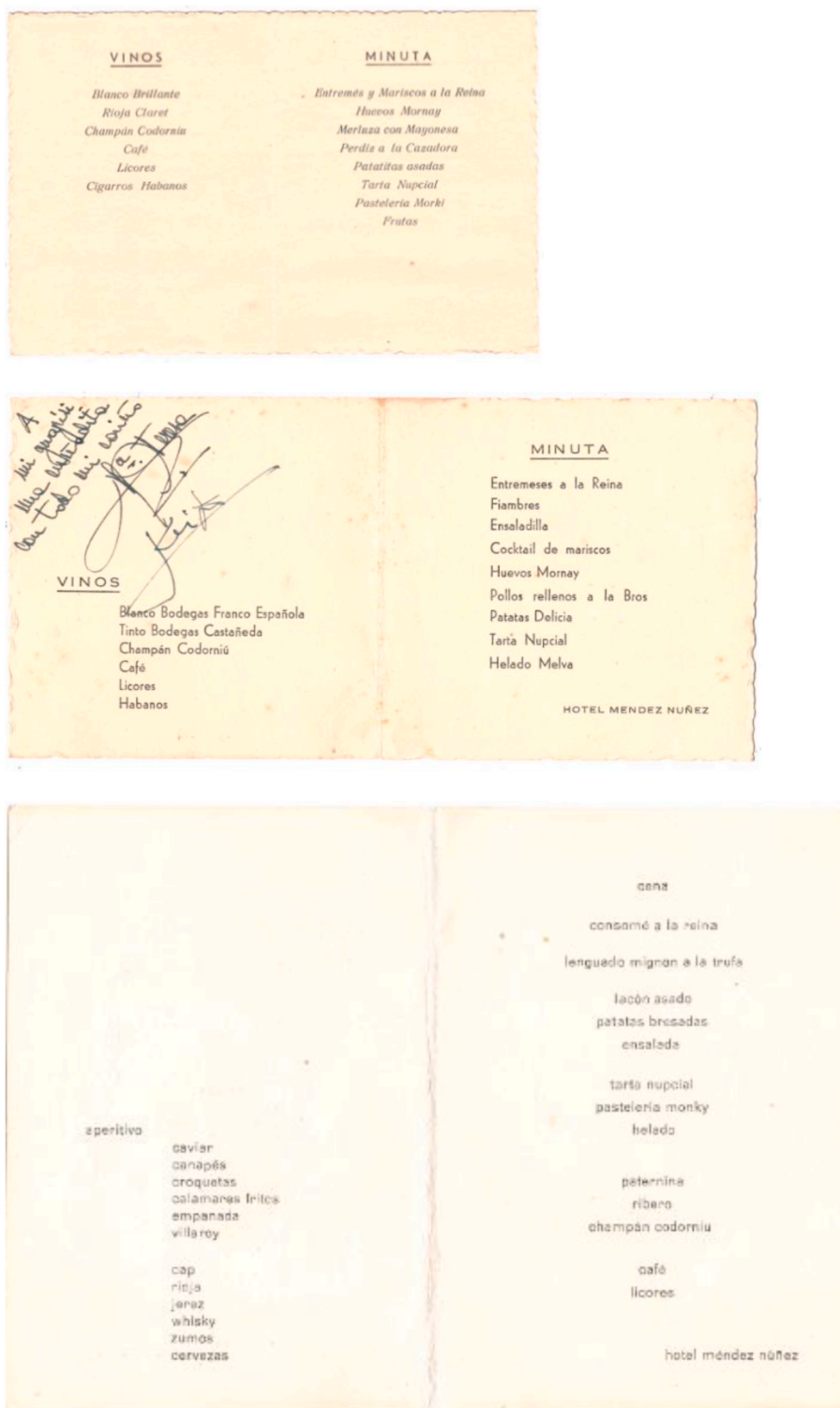


Fig. 5. Menus from October 26, 1947, July 28 1960, and November 27 1971. The presence of shellfish in the first two menus is limited to a single dish in each one, without specifying what kind it is. Indeed, the wording (“Shellfish Queen style” and “Shellfish Cocktail”) seems designed to obscure or minimise its presence and identity. The last menu, from 1971, does not include any shellfish at all.

used to go to the beach and the banks of the river to pick ‘lámparos’, ‘minchas’ and sea urchins. Apparently, he used to bring back sacksful to

eat at home”.

Similar accounts, within the context of post-Spanish Civil War scarcity, are also included in the book *Sobrevivir en los años del hambre en Vigo* [Surviving the years of hunger in Vigo]: “In that area that we now call Beiramar, clams, shrimps, ‘croques’, clam razors, velvet crabs, and rock mussels were common and plentiful [...] back then, the sea pounded against the rocks, and anyone could come and pick up shellfish, even

²³ We would like to express our gratitude to the family owners of the Hotel Méndez Nuñez, custodians of their historical documents, for their generous collaboration and all the help offered during our research.



Fig. 6. Official Provincial Bulletin of Lugo, 7 November 1940. Available at: <https://biblioteca.galiciana.gal>.

with a handkerchief" (Giráldez, 2002: 182). "[...] in Cesantes I was told that in those years people went to 'matar a fame ó mar' ["kill hunger at the sea"] and that was something looked down on – therefore, while humble folk went day and night to pick shellfish, when the tide was low, those from the hard-up middle classes, concerned about what others would say, only came at night" (Ibid.).

Among coastal communities, the regular addition of shellfish (or certain types of shellfish) to complement the range of food available – a practice that increased during periods of scarcity and hunger – remains alive in the collective memory of a part of the population. Indeed, it has revealed fascinating narratives in which the most frequent destination of shellfish was feeding pigs.⁴³ However, over a very short period, shellfish stopped being perceived as "a seasonal resource to alleviate the scarcity suffered by producers in other sectors" (Figueras 1979: 278). At this time, a new label was generated – adding the adjective "Galician" as a mark of quality. The shift in the narratives surrounding shellfish is symptomatic of the process of "upward social mobility" experienced by some products traditionally associated with deprivation or even hunger.

⁴³ The preamble of this law includes an explicit reference to the existing "gap between supply and demand, which has led to overexploitation of natural resources, at risk of being depleted". The study participants mention that in the early 1960s some species were particularly valued in certain spheres: "My father (who comes from Cervo) told me that when he was a boy he broke his leg, and in the year 1964 his mother wanted to thank the traumatologist [...] they say that, back then, they went to Lugo with a pair of spider crabs covered with seaweed to keep them fresh and after that the doctor was very grateful for the gift".

Thus, in the late 20th century, the contextual variables changed completely. As has been noted, "the product 'Galician shellfish' [...] has experienced in the last 25 years a notable growth in demand [...] for fresh consumption, which has led to changes regarding prices, periods of increased demand, quantities, etc." (García Negro 1997: 112). A 1969 law on shellfish regulation and the 1970 decree setting the Shellfish Exploitation Plan in Galicia paved the way for a new slew of irreversible changes regarding what had been, until then, a natural resource exploited by local communities.⁴⁴ The compulsory nature of these laws meant controlling access to extractive activities under a regime of concession, aiming to turning it into a capitalist venture⁴⁵. The 1993 law on fishing in Galicia, mentioned before, culminated this process with its ban on the local practice of the "rebusca". At the same time, shellfish was introduced into the arenas of consumption of vast sections of the population, associated with the idea of "gastronomic exceptionalism" but also with an increasingly ubiquitous presence in wedding banquets.

4. Conclusions

This study, based on an exhaustive ethnography of wedding

⁴⁴ "The capitalist economic model encountered greater difficulties than expected for its full establishment and, in addition, the capital had its hands on another guide to extract profit from the sector: the control of markets, since the shellfish pickers – lacking communal marketing structures – were inevitably subjected to a marketing system based on a 'putting-out' or domestic system [...] by which they did not sell their labour to the employer but the product obtained (Labarta, 1979: 62).

banquets, has drawn a generational cartography revealing constant transformations in eating practices. Based on the evidence analysed, we have established that the most valued food product, in social and economic terms, in the late 20th century was not present in diets before the 1980s – shellfish consumption was certainly not among the habits of most of the population, and it did not have the attached aspirational value in social terms that we can find later. Therefore, the label “Galician shellfish” hides the ambivalence of a food product that might represent both a basic source of sustenance in contexts of poverty and an exquisite delicacy within the context of affluence.

In fact, the changes have been manifold and overlapping. Thus, while shellfish has established itself as the flagship product of Galician

gastronomy, within the Galician territory there has been a parallel process – the introduction of these products into the diets of people in inland regions, where its consumption used to be scarce. Among the reasons for the absence of shellfish in the diets of most of the Galician population until the last third of the 20th century are environmental factors combined with technological difficulties that hindered transport and distribution (considering the highly perishable nature of these products). However, there are other aspects underpinning food practices in which the cultural element prevails – for instance, the perception of shellfish as something that could not be afforded during hard times or the lack of knowledge about its preparation and consumption.

The final triumph of a product described with a singular word – “the shellfish”, “a mariscada” – seems paradoxical but also revealing. This is, in fact, a double *trompe l’oeil*: “shellfish” refers to a wide variety of crustaceans and bivalves that have never been valued in their entirety or in a uniform way; at the same time, “mariscada” has been presented as the star of Galician gastronomy, without considering the geographical and historical factors operating within the local and regional food systems.

While it is interesting to trace how shellfish is introduced into the diets of the inhabitants of the city of Lugo through wedding banquets emulating the behaviour of local and foreign elites, it is also interesting to look at issues related to the processes of preparation and presentation of shellfish. In this sense, haute cuisine operates with preparation formulas that need to be precisely timed, and this control is key for enhancing textures and flavours. In our opinion, the technical mastery underpinning the gastronomic excellence narrative has also impacted shellfish’s shift from poor people’s food to gourmetisation. The constructions that allow the incorporation of humble foods into the culinary universe of the elite are also evident in the perception of Galician cuisine as having excellent raw materials. The exceptionality of these products reinforces the idea that their preparation should avoid excessive manipulation. Again, there is a contrast or paradox in the rhetoric of a highly elaborated gastronomic trend that incorporates a certain spirit of poverty or austerity associated with or representing the tastes of the wealthy.

In this complex web of representations, the words of one of our participants summarise this dichotomy most efficiently: “We did not know about shellfish. Even though here, in the market, goose barnacles were given away – expensive as they are! Nobody knew how to eat them! Where we used to get the fish, it was always: ‘Here, beautiful, take a handful of barnacles’. Giving them away, I am telling you, they could not sell them – no, no. And look at their price!”.

Implications

The research presented here has crucial implications for the field of food studies in at least two main themes. On the one hand, it examines the culinary applications of a food product – shellfish – that includes very diverse species and can be prepared in different ways, all of which might be markers of class. Mapping the consumption practices and the social and cultural mobility experienced by Galician shellfish allows us to identify different uses and ways of preparing it to depend on contexts associated with the ritual aspects of wedding banquets, different generational groups, and the constant creation/re-creation of an identity that functions as a mirror for insiders and a label for outsiders.

On the other hand, the scientific testing of our initial hypothesis allowed us to establish several conclusions regarding the transformation of culinary practices based on shellfish in a city in inland Galicia over the last century. The analysis of culinary processes during a specific time frame within a limited location has also allowed us to widen the interpretative frame to include different cultural behaviours – i.e., economic constrictions, collective identity, and formulas of emulation versus segregation among classes.

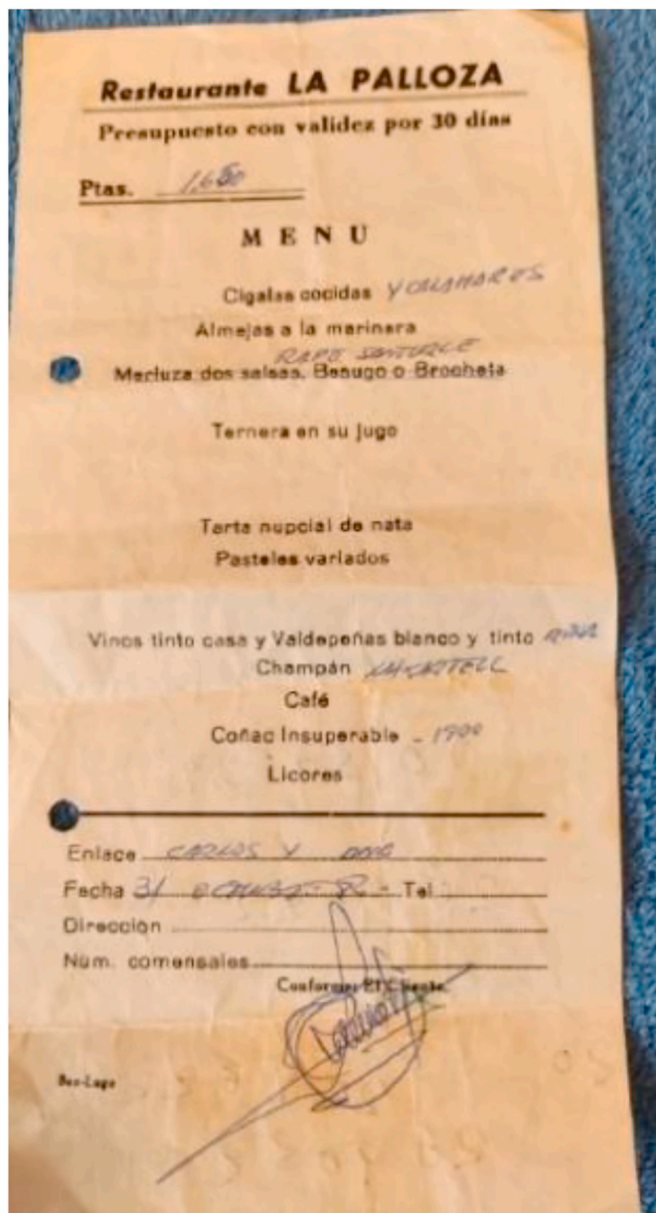


Fig. 7. Wedding menu. Restaurant La Palloza, Lugo, 31 October 1982.³⁶

³⁶ We would like to thank brothers Carlos and Antonio Rielo Álvarez for this image. From the menu we can appreciate that langoustines were served boiled, not grilled. Also, it is interesting to note that Santurce-style monkfish is suggested as a substitute for cod. Finally, the presence of shellfish is limited to langoustines and clams.



Fig. 8. The illustrative cover of Soto Riobó's book, published in 1990.

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Declaration of competing interest

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Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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