



AIGUABLAVA

AND ITS PARADOR

THE LOWER EMPORDÀ: GENTLE PLAINS

*"Cap a la part del Pirineu
vora del mar i dels serrats
s'alça una plana riatllera
nés l'Empordà..."*

*"By the Pyrenees
Near the sea and the sierras
Rises a laughing plain
the Empordà..."*

When searching for Catalonia's genealogy and origins, the region's mountain ranges, its fertile valleys, and flowing rivers are recognized as their primary source. Indeed, Catalonia's first inhabitants descended hence towards the sea, thus settling the country progressively. Early on, therefore, Catalonia became the intermediary between the Iberian Peninsula and the rest of Europe.

The Via Augusta testifies to this, as it was the main route connecting Rome with the Via Tarraconensis and the Via Betica. Much earlier, however, it was the Greeks who, by means of a less obstinate way—the Mediterranean—had made their way and landed on the shores of Catalonia. The Greeks settled, in their typically shrewd fashion, on the only plains found in the whole principality.

Here, the Greeks, hailing from the river delta of Massalia, raised their columns. At first, they established their colony on the island they called Paleopolis, at the mouth of the Rivers Fluvia and Ter, only to move their settlement shortly after to the mainland. The land's geology provided granite sediments from the River Fluvia.

The island, once separated by the overflowing river delta, was at last definitely connected to the mainland. Emporion—such was the name of the city-state—would much later give birth to the county of Ampurias, protected by Charlemagne, territorial and cultural base of modern day Empordà.

Empuries, which in Greek means 'market' (*emporium* in Latin), was an influential and affluent commercial city already 6 centuries before Christ. Local inhabitants, foreign merchants, and those hailing from the inner plains all came to this city. Around this time began the ceramic tradition of La Bisbal. The ruins of that prodigious metropolis, after fifty years of archaeological excavations, are now under the care of the Archaeological Museum of Catalonia. Along with ceramics of all sorts, one may find mosaics, sculptures, jewels, and sarcophagi.

History decided that the Romans should come to Emporion two centuries later, right after Greece. The reason behind this takeover lies in a military strategy whereby to keep back Hannibal's elephants—almost at Rome's gates—they decided to try to have a backup defense system. And this is how a troop of Roman legionaries landed at Emporion conquering it, saved Rome, and began the Romanization of the Iberian Peninsula. After the Punic Wars, the Roman Empire, administered, legislated, developed infrastructures, culturally impregnating the whole territory. The majority of their ruins, founded on the older Greek ones, now look over the sandy beaches of the Gulf of Roses (Golfo de Rosas).



The Visigoths came into the scene extending Roman culture for a couple more centuries, till their defeat by the Arabs. It is Charlemagne who takes back the lands of Urgel, Cerdaña, Beselú, and Empordá, delimiting them within the boundaries of what was known as the Marca Hispánica. Actually, the country of Ampurias was known as a Marca Marítima, boasting its security and defense from Arab assaults.

If we lend our ear to the legends of the time, we realize that the Emperor's Marca was in fact larger. Today, it can still be appreciated in the landscape, where the waters of the Ter flow. It was Charlemagne himself who, with a quick slash, split the mountain chain, as an intimidating gesture meant to ward off the infidels.

It was around this time that Barcelona was destroyed, tyrannized, and once more regained. Souls are stirred until the 10th century, when Christianity has officially taken off. Among this time's most representative monuments—proof of the Church's strength and vocation to regulate—lies the monastery of Ripoll, around 1032 A.D., followed by the Montserrat, Sant Miguel de Cuixá, and Sant Pere de Rodes monasteries, located in the Upper Empordá.



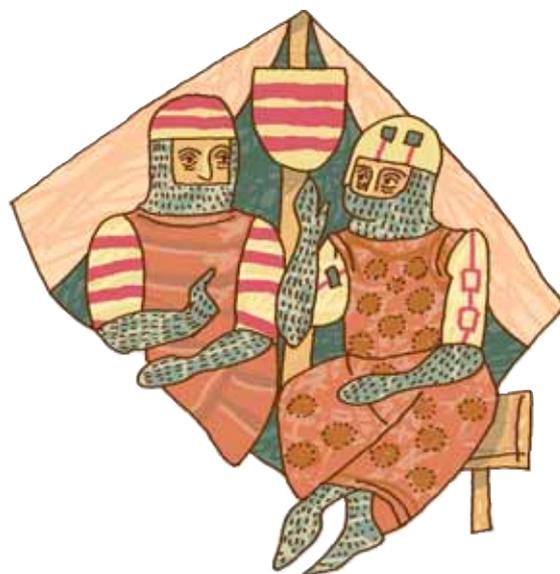
relationships amongst the ship owners of the crew who sailed the seas aboard merchant ships. A century later, Catalonia having already retired from the Mediterranean battlefield, The Sun King's (*Rey Sol*) fleet and the Marseillaise merchants, who were in a dispute over the sea, turn their ships into perverse floating prisons, the oars propelled by some of the worst galley slaves.

It is during this period, when territorial richness seems frozen, that Catalonia creates the Generalitat. A predecessor of the parliament in Europe, the Generalitat is created then to keep its territories under control and is founded during the reign of Peter III. Starting with the 15th century, it was a body within the Courts system (conceived by James I—featuring representatives from the nobility, the Church, and the people) that dealt with judicial and financial issues.

Economic slump, until now muffled by the loud sailing off and landing of ships, begins to now give signs of warning. Things get worse, the crisis sharpens, sweeping with it entire businesses to bankruptcy and reducing the countryside to starvation. The Empordá region becomes economically and socially tense; lords and farmers quarrel. Finally, in 1447, having merged into one big movement, the towns of the plains together promote an agrarian reform.

The Turks have taken Constantinople, and the Aragon-Catalan expansion is, by now, only a nostalgic memory of the good old days. The *Servant Farmers' War* (1462) embodies the situation. The Catholic King and Queen's marriage threatens the Aragon-Catalan alliance. To top it all with another misfortune, the sea, the primary means of communication and commerce, ceases to be the Mediterranean. A new sea; one that connects to America comes onto the scene. Transatlantic expeditions capture all the monarchs' attention, as well as a high percentage of budgetary benefits.

In Catalonia, the Generalitat continues to be in charge of the government of the Principality until the end of the 16th century. The absolutist Spanish government, however, sows the seed of unhappiness throughout the Principality, which finally lead to a war, known as the revolt of the '*Segadors*.' The Catalonian people receive the support of French troops. This will be the last time. Cerdaña and Rosellón at once become a part of France, as a result of a pact between the two bordering Nations.



CATALONIA ARISES

The winds get worse, the waves increase in volume, the ropes of the main mast get tenser, the sails are taut. The ships thrust out into the Mediterranean Sea, the sails swelling up with the favorable winds of the wedding between Patronila of Aragon and Berenguer IV, count of Barcelona. The border with France in those days is not quite defined. Still in the year 1250, same date as the Treaty of Corbeil, Rosellón and Cerdaña are part of the Kingdom of Catalonia. After the failed attempt on behalf of Alphonse II the Chaste and of his son and successor, Peter I the Catholic to really and successfully unite the Pyrenean people, at the dawn of the 13th century, and thanks to the drive of James I, the Conqueror, Catalonia soon gains powerful momentum. Its commercial routes extend from Africa to Italy, not forgetting the highly valued market of the Orient.

LITTLE EMPORDÀ: LABORED LAND AND GRATEFUL SEA

Slowly —the initial shock of losing territory, seen as a really heavy usurpation, has been quite hard— Catalonia starts picking itself up, alone. Little industries start to make way, renewing the economy. Once again, the Empordà plains' participation is crucial. Grapevines replace wheat. It is at this moment when the wheat trade is sacrificed in favor of producing and exporting great shipments of wine and liquor to Holland, England, and Germany. Thus, the future foundations for Catalonian economy are laid. Politically, the Catalonian Nation must wait until 1705 to proclaim the Archduke Charles of Austria as the new King of Catalonia, a candidate to the Spanish Crown flaunted by Philip V. The subsequent war, in which the two monarchies face each other, known as the War of Succession, end up recognizing Philip V, who enjoyed the support of the support of the French, and the defeat of the Austro-Dutch which Catalonia had sided with. Catalonia's war ended, once more, without other allies other than its desire for independence. Barcelona, the last bastion of the battle, manages to reject the attack despite it being numerically inferior. Defeat, nevertheless, is inevitable. In September of 1714, the Duke of Berwick takes the city. The 'New Plant' of the absolutist Spanish monarchy, come into effect two years later, abolishing the Generalitat, the Courts, and the councils which granted Catalonia its sovereignty. Having neither a judicial, political, nor moral existence, the Catalonian territory becomes the object of, later on, the cultural assault imposed by the Castilian language in both municipal and judicial fields.



Napoleon's invasion delays the industrial revolution, which had already begun to sprout its factories and slightly improved agriculture. Towards the mid-1800s, however, the Catalonian nation makes its way to becoming the leading textile industry in Spain. What is its secret weapon? It is the steam engine, not only in trains, but also used and applied to industry. The population and the cities keep growing; the bourgeoisie lives its moment of euphoria. Modern Catalonia represents a model of future development compared to the rest of Spain—anchored in history, too rigid in its old structures to adapt to progress. Industry, at the same time, raises a new social order, the proletariat. In Catalonia, it is an especially spirited class that leads to a trade unionism bordering extremism in the 20th century.

Catalonia declares independence from Spain on March 8th, 1873 hoping for a federal model. In 1914, the Mancomunidad (Group of Communities) of Catalonia is created, firmly intent on promoting and defending Catalan culture and language; Primo de Rivera's Spanish dictatorship brings its right back under its rule. The brief recognition of the Generalitat of Catalonia during the Republic is followed by Franco's dictatorship strictly employed submission, until the rise of democracy in 1975. From that point on, Catalonia acquires the recognition of its culture and keeps fighting as well as gaining ground in its search for self-determination.

blivious to political, linguistic, and cultural labels, the natural territory which a guest at Aiguablava Parador gets to know, includes the regions of La Selva, the Upper and Lower Empordà, the French seaboard of Rosellón, and, going up the coast, the beaches of Racó. This is a really inspiring landscape, variable, with both abrupt and sweetly disarming areas. Its tourism history is rather recent, partly driven by the concept of a lucky name. This of course, should we wish to trust in the power of words. We owe the universal name of this land to Sir Ferrán Agulló, a journalist, who, in the aftermath of a sober feast in Fornells, referred to the seaboard in question as "*La Costa Brava*".

The Costa Brava of the Lower Empordà has its peculiarities, which, without detracting from other stretches of the same coastline, makes it stand out as unique. It includes beaches, coves, capes, and inlets, coming down from Sant Feliu de Guíxols till Cabo Salinas below, from Platja d'Aro to Palamós, the coast is a smooth drawing, the rocks tied to the pine trees, to the sands, and the sands to the villages. The ascent towards Calella, one of the best preserved fishing towns of the Peninsula, is a botanical feast as you pass by La Fosca, Castell, and the Cap de Planes. The highest prestige of the entire coast, however, has been justly awarded to the place surrounding the traveler at that point: the Aiguablava and Fornells Coves, in the seaboard arch of Begur, due to the overwhelming natural setting they are cased in, overflowing with almond, carob, and olive trees...

BEAUTIFUL ABRUPT COAST

Here we are in Aiguablava, held up in a Tourist Parador that stresses comfort and landscape, that unfolds its windows to show us the sea, and that unfolds, from within itself, all those pathways to disinter the intimate pleasures that the Lower Empordà entails.

Along this area in the province of Girona, on the Costa Brava, makes us admire the abrupt landscape of the indomitable seaboard, between two worlds, perhaps on the juncture of the two. And, really, the Mediterranean and the Costa Rabiosa enact an endless show of their relationship. Here, indeed, the traveler discovers its great treasure: its enchanting coves, where alone, with a partner or family, one can hide out and relax. These are places where one can kick back and enjoy, unlike the endless sandy beaches of the lower Levant, where one must walk carefully so as not to step on the sunbathing crowds. An intimate, free spirit, enjoyable even on cooler days, fills this area, when the northern winds blows and things go bare. We invite the traveler now to leave this sea, although it is almost a sin to turn your back to it; yes, indeed, but not without first having a drink. Rowing in circles through the main regions of this land we end up on the coast, only after having appreciated the wines and the farmers who live in their country houses.

This route takes us from **Aiguablava** to **Pals**, whence on the roads of **La Bisbal**, it goes down towards **Sant Feliu de Guíxols** and goes back up the coast to the Parador before visiting **Palafrugell**. After turning around **Cape Begur** lies **Pals**.

If the traveler has the chance, he or she should consider renting a boat, or ask a local to escort them along the coast. Some do it in a hot air balloon, but although it is not as clear an image, it is a thrill. Sailing on the Mediterranean, without losing the coast out of sight, the sky acquires an indescribable luminosity. Those few miles of water, whether the day be clear and crisp or foggy, it is a way of seeing the coast in a fresh and revitalizing new way. The following town, coming on roadway GI 653 from **Begur** is, at the same height of the Medes islands, **Pals**. The tower of Homage may be seen from all sides. It is born of rock and has been replacing the clocks' in people's homes forever—it does its job, telling time—using a battery from back in the day. A tower is for defense, but the Homage tower has been left alone, deprived of its castle.



One must leave the seaboard and venture into the town. There, approaching and strolling through its cobble stone streets, one may appreciate the effort made to restore its past, especially the Gothic section of the town. Any direction along this mall is the right one. Here and there, we may see oval pointed windows, half-point arches with a medieval touch. A little outside the old city, there is a country neighborhood known as **Els Masos de Pals**. These are secular farmhouses, made from deep, robust Catalan roots. Many famous travelers, aware of their surroundings, claim that the view from the **Pi tower** embodies Empordá's beauty at its best. At these heights, don't take your eyes off the lower Empordá, visible almost in its entirety.

It would be nice to stay longer in **Pals**, but, after such a delightful beginning, we must go on and tread the road before us. Just one thing: it would be a wonderful idea to stop by at the **Archaeological Museum of Pals** before heading off. Aside from those hidden treasures found under the seaweed, there is also in the Museum a really informative exhibit on wines and cavas, in all of the different varieties this land offers.

From Pals to **La Bisbal**. What about proceeding northward towards Torroella and then turning left at the first intersection? One can see the same by leaving Pals and going in the opposite direction, but should you follow this suggested route, aside from adding mystery to your excursion at the exit of **Palafrugell**, it allows for a stop at Torroella. This way, you may see more or get closer to **Figueres**.

Torroella, at the borders of which the Upper Empordá begins to unfold, shocks the traveler with its harshness, a stark frankness —almost merciless— along its coast, even more barren than Cape Creus. Without really touching the limits of the Little, or Lower, Empordá, Torroella boasts among its treasures, a **Palace**, a **Gothic church**, a panoramic view and plaza with porticos. **La Bisbal**, in turn, with its river, its large ten thousand population, its fair share of ceramics, deserves a stop to shop, especially for its antiques. In terms of monuments, the **Romanesque Castle-Palace**, transformed in the 18th century, is a must. The **church of Saint Mary** is in baroque style, and a must-see is the modernist residential area from the early 1900's in the historical neighborhood. Above all, one has to visit the ceramics museum, which explains this town's *raison d'être* for the last three centuries.



Sant Sadurn del Cava

A few kilometers away from the capital of Empordá, on the same GI 664 roadway, wine lovers are obliged to stop at **Sant Sadurn d'Anoia**, where 90% of the total cava of Catalonia is produced. The region's prosperity, founded on the soil, is one of those instances that characterize this land's craftsmanship culture. It is quite true that its landscape has been an advantage, since it is rich in water, but it was mankind who planted the grapevines. The city's 'prehistory'—so to speak—before its winemaking days, goes back to the end of the 11th century, as part of a territory belonging to the homonymous parish, while still belonging, administratively speaking, to the town of Subirats.

The wineries have to be counted by the tens, most of them accessible to visitors, although we recommend checking opening hour beforehand. The most interesting aspect of many of these wineries is their architecture. At any rate, there is a lot of available information for tourists. When the traveler will have already gone through the alchemy of this special wine, he or she will have already seen a couple of interesting buildings, noble houses, well-furnished modernist buildings —the works of Puig y Cadafalch, towers, country houses, hospitals, and of course Romanesque ashlar upon which lies the **church of Sant Benet**.

Now let us, however, get to cava and its history. The embryo of this gigantic industry began to grow stronger thanks to the demand of the market from the Americas, towards the mid 1800s. The terrible philoxera plague that attacked the first French vine—to the benefit of the Empordà market, but only for a while—attacked the Penedès, knocking it down, some time later, into a deep crisis, seemingly without a way out. Getting through this heavy economic blow eventually won over the inimical insects. The vines that had been vulnerable to the plague are grafted with American vine at the foot of the plant, thus immunizing them. Furthermore, the champanoise method is adopted, inaugurating thus the substantial industrial revolution that gave birth to the world cava capital of today.

Another pillar of Catalan identity is deeply rooted in Sant Sadurn: the **Sardana**. The magic of this dance, practiced in these places, its cathartic release, and the invisible synchronicity that emanates from the dancers, cannot be described with words. The traveler should not miss the dances organized under the auspices of the Foment Sardinista, or the organization devoted to the survival of this tradition.

The journey continues, without leaving behind other sites, especially those on the road to the mountain areas of **Les Gavarres**, until reaching the spiritual and intellectual center of the Little Empordà and Palafrugell: the **Cassà de la Selva**, with its monumental past, extremely rich and which goes back to the Iberian era. Here lies **Castell d'Aro**, a balanced tourism center, with the historical charm surrounding the ruins of its homonymous castle; or **Sant Feliu de Guíxols**, right along the Costa Brava and its cliffs, coves, and Mediterranean woods, which was once a colossal Benedictine monastery. But the prosperity of this true jewel of urban planning comes about in the 19th century, when its urban development begins, and is now the praise of all passersby. The **Casiodels Nois**, **Patxon House**, and **Con Sibils** are only some of its most outstanding walks.

Let us slow down the rhythm and enjoy an interlude between these two peaks—monuments and industries. Let us find refuge in the earth we step on. For here, the farmer still exists, man and his land. To meet the men of this farm country is perhaps the greatest satisfaction and the climax of our journey through these lands. **Calonge**, a town quite rich in its modesty, daring and yet friendly, is quite fitting to our purpose. Any wine bar, upon request, serves its own house wine, bottled from the town's own harvest. Among their clients we may encounter the men and women who work in the fields.



After this intimate and human encounter, once again strengthened by the Mediterranean sun, we go by **Palamos**, reaching **Palafrugell**. The importance of this town, without undermining its extended seaside neighborhood of **Calella**, with its museums, its theater, its plaza, its festival de Jazz, its botanical garden, its open beach, its cuisine. This place has seen the greatest mind of this land, Josep Pla the unsurpassable poet, come to life, grow up, and grow old within these walls. Pla is one of the largest torches of the Mediterranean that have ever existed, and in his hometown the perfume of his memory is terribly alive. The Foundation that bears its name is much more than the mere house-museum of the poet: in this place, soaking up the information from the tourism pamphlets and from his own testimony, the traveler will find the keys to the town's sensitivity, doubling his or her enjoyment through this land.

THE MIRACLE OF THE LOAVES AND THE FISH

The *bon appétit*-conscious traveler will forgive us, after this excursion of smothering with affection the interior lands. Let us focus the gastronomy on shellfish. Before casting our nets, nevertheless, it seems right to at least mention some of the most universal dishes of the area: **Duck with Turnips (Pato con Nabos)** and the so-called **Sea and Mountains (Mar i Montanya)**, master mixture of crayfish and chicken, or lobster and rabbit. We should also speak at length of the **Vegetables, Breads**, and **Rice** dishes, or of the popular **Escudella i Carn d'Olla (Meat Casserole)**, but the boats are already landing on the shores, the beach appears like a carmine frenzy: the lights of the fish market have been lit. In one hour, all the fish will have been sold.

Should the traveler take a walk through Bergur, Pals and the surrounding areas, he or she will immediately notice the position that high cuisine guards, its new vanguard vision which does not need to 'deconstruct' dishes, while still innovating, adding zest, making it subtler, and mixes it well. The leadership of this high professional cuisine elite, located often in historical buildings, is based upon a few simple spins on the traditional guidelines, with a focus on the natural elements (for this is the 21st century's demand).

No worthy diner passing through these lands fails to try some of its rockfish, which are particularly varied and tasty here. **Barda Fish, Guilthead Bream, the Oblada, the Sargo, or the Salapa** are only some of them. Their common bond is their love for rocks. This is due to, as we imagine, their feeding habits, whereby they prefer to feed off the reefs and rocks near the surface. The pure and lively waters are what give the fish their flavorful texture. If, in turn, these fish, or their next of kin, chose to feed on the muddy bottom surface, their flesh would taste foul, having fed on second or third hand food crumbs.

Red Mullet is a separate case: a ruby of light. When the water is still and clear, it is possible to see it quietly swimming for a long time till sunset, impelled to swim off into the sinking sunlight. The red mullet from the Black Island (*Isla Negra*) is a true prodigy and only needs a pinch of salt along with some pine tree charcoal.

Other fish, such as the **Hake**, fished using the palangre method, is very scarce, almost a rarity. Good **Sole Fish** comes from the Atlantic, while **Sardines**, big and juicy in the spring, surpasses all prescribed gastronomical delight, and turns into a brotherly act, upfront and natural. The sardine is a feast that gathers.

Crayfish, Lobster, and Spider Crab are, of course, prime raw ingredients, best when feisty and colorful, providing they be well cooked or as a flavor enhancer to rice dishes. Cooked along with vegetables, they are quite enjoyable to be eaten. There are home stoves around here whose seafood delicacies call creatively elaborated: **Sea Snails with Cheese, Creamy Rice with Crayfish and Mushrooms, Cockles with Carrots, or Sardines with Apples.**

Wines are so numerous in kind, that their aroma eludes any written description. Reds, whites, *rosé*, *cavas*, dry wines —the traveler has proved it, he or she has tasted them in the wineries, and has learned about them in the museums. We will not tire him or her anymore, then. Since we're talking about it, however, we would like to mention enthusiastically the **Vinillo de l'Escala** variety, for its light happiness, both its white and *rosé* versions, made respectively from the "Macabeu" and "Carinyanes" grape varieties.

SECRET RECIPE

"IN-SEASON SEA BASS"

Often, enjoyment at and away from the dinner table, the more it is intense, the more it is simple. The following recipe, dug out of the deepest tradition of the coastal villages, suggests eating slowly for greater pleasure.

Ingredients: A couple of medium-sized sea bass, one lemon, 3 wild tomatoes, one laurel leaf, salt, olive oil, and a glass of *rosé* wine.

Preparation: While the oven heats up, in a mortar, crush the previously peeled tomato, after which we will add the lemon juice, and the glass of wine. Atop a bed of salt we will lay the sea bass on a well-oiled oven pan. Sprinkle the fish with the sauce, and place in the oven on medium heat. The dish is accentuated in flavor when it is accompanied by sautéed lima beans. On colder days, the local people usually add a nice spoonful of ali-oli sauce (garlic, egg, oil), as it stokes up one's thirst, invigorating the body as well.

An excellent way of ending such a night is the coffee-liquor mix ever-present in these landscapes. The locals, used to working out in the open, mix it in a "Roquill", in other words, a communal sharing bottle, in which equal measures of coffee and cognac are poured, adding a teaspoon of lemon juice and sugar according to taste.



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