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## Cross-Cultural Analysis of Food Systems

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Senior Project – Study Abroad Blog Posts

**Blog #1: Week 1**

This week, I arrived in Barcelona, Spain, where I will be living for the next six weeks. Within this first week I have already noticed the numerous differences that make the food system in Spain so different from that of the United States. This week I was introduced to Spanish cuisine by eating a variety of foods, but mainly tapas. Spanish tapas are small appetizer plates of food often served before the main meal or shared as a meal. Even being a pescatarian, I found several great dishes to enjoy. These include patatas bravas (potato dish), gambas al ajillo (shrimp with garlic), tortilla Española (omelet with potatoes), aceitunas (olives) and pan con tomate (bread with tomato).

Another comparison that I can draw on is the difference in breakfast when it comes to Spain vs. The United States. In Spain, breakfast is usually a very small meal such as coffee or juice with a pastry like a croissant. When my friends and I would walk to class this week, we would stop by a panadería, or bakery, on the way to class to pick up something quick to eat. In the United States, it is more custom to have a large breakfast with foods such as eggs, toast, and some type of meat like bacon or sausage. Spain really de-emphasizes the consumption of meat and focuses on more fresh fruits, vegetables, and grains, especially for breakfast.

A component of health that goes hand in hand with eating is exercise. In Spain it is very common to walk almost everywhere. We learned quickly that we would be walking to school, walking to go out to eat, and sometimes even walking to the beach despite it being about a 30-minute walk. In Europe, and especially in Spain, this is very normal. Constantly walking throughout the day made me feel like I better digested my food. Contrastingly, in the U.S. walking everywhere is not normalized unless you are in a big city. Even then, it is still very popular to take public transportation. When people do workout in the U.S., it is usually at a gym, which are found in Spain, but not as popular. It seems that in Europe, the activity and exercise component is more worked into the daily life as opposed to forcing it in which is often done in the U.S.

During the weekend, we were given the opportunity to go on a field trip with our program to Sant Sadurní d'Anoia in the Penedes wine region. The Penedes wine region is known for producing a product known as cava which is a Spanish sparkling wine. We visited the Cava Codorníu vineyard to learn about the production of cava and to have a tasting. This was a unique experience that gave me a lot of history about a traditional Spanish beverage. Throughout the rest of the trip, we made sure to always order this beverage if we saw it on a menu as it complemented Spanish meals great. This week taught me a lot about the culture of Spanish eating and how they incorporate exercise into their everyday lives without even noticing.

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## **Blog #2: Week 2**

During this week, we visited the famous outdoor food market in Barcelona known as La Boquería. What stood out to me the most in this market was the amount of readily available fresh foods and produce available. Food stalls were filled with fresh fruits, vegetables, nuts, spices, seafood, and some meat. I noticed that fruit stands like these are common not only at large markets, but on several street corners throughout the city. This makes picking up inexpensive fresh fruit and vegetables on the daily very do-able. I noticed that not only tourists, but also many locals were picking up fresh food at the Boquería for their meals that they would eat later that day. I tried some of the fresh cut up fruits and juices and purchased some olive oil and spices to bring back home to the U.S.

I also went to the grocery store, or “supermercado,” this week to pick up a few things that I could cook in the community kitchen of my student residence. I purchased things like fresh bread, fruits, cheese, olive oil, pasta, and chocolate. There were not really any packaged snacks, candies, or frozen meals available which is a major difference compared to what is found on the shelves in the grocery stores in the U.S. Even though I couldn’t translate every single ingredient on the nutrition labels of foods in Spain, I did notice that there were overwhelmingly less ingredients in many of the foods I consumed compared to the U.S. One thing I noticed after purchasing bread at the supermarket was that it was stale within a few days of purchasing it. At first, I was upset, but then realized that this was likely due to less preservatives in the bread than in the U.S. as the bread there normally stays good for a few more days. This also has to do with

the fact that people in Spain typically purchase groceries that they are going to eat either that day or within the next couple days to avoid food going bad like this.

I found the cost of everyday groceries in Spain to be significantly less in Spain than the U.S. For example, I could purchase a fresh baguette in Spain for less than 1 Euro. However, typically in the United States, it is at least a few dollars. For reference, when I was in Europe, the exchange rate between the Euro and the dollar was equal.

I also discovered one of my favorite restaurants in Barcelona this week called Honest Greens. This restaurant has several locations in Spain and Portugal and focuses on organic and responsibly sourced food. I got a lot of vegan and vegetarian bowls here with clean ingredients that were so good. The food options are centered around vegetables, free-range seafood and meat, and whole grains and are all unprocessed. Seeing many Honest Greens locations around Spain proved how accessible healthy food like this was. My second week in Barcelona showed me how readily available healthy food was here compared to the United States.



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### **Blog #3: Week 3**

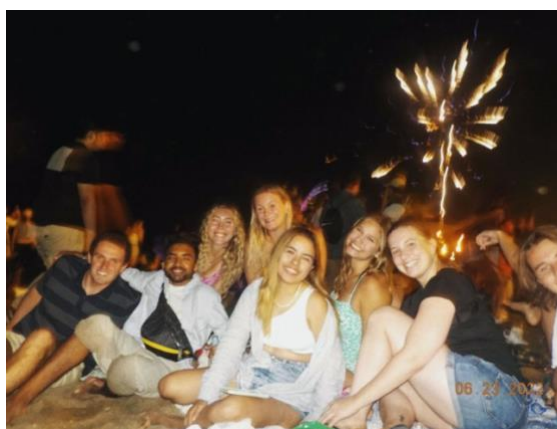
This week, on the night of June 23<sup>rd</sup>, we celebrated the holiday and festival of Sant Joan. This is a holiday celebrated mainly in the Catalonia region of Spain and celebrates both the summer solstice and the birthday of Saint John the Baptist. Traditionally, people gather with friends and family on this occasion and light bonfires and fireworks on the beach to celebrate. There are also traditional foods eaten on this day such as Coca de Sant Joan which is a cake like bread with dried fruit and nuts. This festival reminded me a lot of the Fourth of July in America. The holidays are very similar in the ways that they highlight getting together with friends and family and eating.

Over the weekend, my friends and I took a trip to Milan and Lake Como in Italy. I decided to include some of the aspects of the food system that I noticed here as well because it felt somewhat similar to Spain with the consumption of the Mediterranean diet. One major thing I also noticed in Italy was the small portion sizes. At a restaurant, I ordered ravioli and only got about seven individual raviolis on my plate. Despite the small serving of pasta, it was very filling. I found that when Europeans are eating foods like pasta, bread, cheese, and gelato, the portions are often very small. I really came to enjoy this aspect of the food culture because I felt like I could eat the foods that I loved and enjoy them without over-indulging. I feel that sometimes the portions of these foods in the U.S. are quite large and sometimes overeaten.

My favorite food I experienced in Italy and quite possibly on the entire trip abroad was Italian pizza. The differences between Italian pizza and American are quite astonishing. First



biting into the Italian pizza, I could immediately taste the quality of the fresh ingredients. The pizza here was made with fresh tomatoes and mozzarella di Bufala cheese, which is mozzarella cheese made from buffalo's milk. In the U.S., pizza is often made with canned tomatoes and grated cheese. The pizza in Italy was also not usually loaded with toppings, most often it would just have tomato sauce, mozzarella, and basil. Another factor that comes into play when eating pizza in Italy is that the entire pizza is presented to you on your plate, and you have to cut the pizza yourself. Although seemingly insignificant, I found that this actually helped me to slow down and enjoy my food more instead of just grabbing piece after piece. My third week abroad gave me great insight on the importance of coming together for holidays and celebrations and how foods that are commonly thought of as "unhealthy" can fit into a diet as long as they are the right portion size and made of fresh quality ingredients.



## **Blog #4: Week 4**

This week, we went with our program on an excursion to Valencia, Spain. Here, we had an amazing experience at La Barraca de Toni Montoliu where we enjoyed an authentic Spanish lunch. We even got to help cook our own Spanish paella. Paella is a Spanish dish often made with rice and seafood. We got a tour of the farm that produces many of the ingredients that we used to make the paella. Then, we went to the kitchen and watched the chef make this dish while we helped along the way. After it was finished cooking, we sat down for a traditional Spanish lunch. Lunch is the largest meal of the day in Spain, so we were served many courses such as salad, bread, hummus, mussels, and finally the paella. I ate the vegetable paella, but there was also an authentic Spanish paella with rabbit, snails, and chicken. After our meal, we were given the option of fresh Valencia oranges or pumpkin for “dessert.” Not pumpkin pie, an actual piece of pumpkin that was roasted and had walnuts on top. I tried both dishes and they were very delicious and refreshing after the meal. This was very different compared to the U.S. where it is normal to have something like ice cream, cookies, or candy after a meal. This experience was eye opening to how many people in Spain and Europe are able to grow their own food or consume locally sourced food. The fact that we were able to make a meal out of things that we harvested from a garden was very different from how when I make a meal at home, I pick up fruits and vegetables from a grocery store that are often flown in from places like California or Mexico.

Another food item I tried this week was hot chocolate with churros, or “churros con chocolate.” This is a popular sweet item in Spain that combines rich melted chocolate with

cinnamon sugar churros. The few times I ate this dish were basically the only times I really had dessert in Spain. The fact that I only had a big dessert like this only once in a while made it so much more enjoyable. After meals, I would often have things like fruit or yogurt or sometimes just a small piece of chocolate. I felt that with the balance of foods I was eating throughout the day, such as having a sweet pastry for breakfast, I didn't really miss common U.S. desserts like cookies, brownies, cake, etc. This week was one of my favorites in Barcelona because I got to gather ingredients for, help cook, and then enjoy an authentic Spanish meal which reminded me how much more this makes you appreciate your food.



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## **Blog #5: Week 5**

This week, to celebrate our last week of classes and finishing exams, my friends and I went to a big tapas dinner at a restaurant called Sensi Bistro that specializes in tapas style dishes. This restaurant serves tapas inspired by French bistros. The restaurant perfectly blends the Mediterranean flavors of both Spain and France. Their slogan at this restaurant is “Come, bebe, la vida es breve,” which means “Eat, drink, life passes in a blink!” This phrase really embodies the Spanish dining experience because it is really about not only enjoying food, but also enjoying life. Spanish dinners are so focused on coming together with friends and family and spending a long time at the table talking and enjoying good food. We got to try a variety of unique tapas at Sensi Bistro including pan con tomate (bread with tomato), Catalan cheeses with seasonal jam, bravas potatoes, escalivadas (seasonal grilled vegetables with crispy basil chips and sherry vinegar vinaigrette), red pepper and parmesan souffle, shrimp, and squid ink paella. I noticed that these dishes fit in perfectly with the Mediterranean diet as they emphasized fresh vegetables, grains, and seafood with less focus on meat.

Along with our dinner we shared a pitcher of sangria, or Spanish red wine flavored with fruit. Drinks like wine and beer are staples for mealtime. Many people even have a glass midday with their lunch. These drinking customs are very cultural because mealtime in Spain is meant to be very long and shared with friends and family. In the U.S., mealtime is more rushed and meals, besides dinner, are many times eaten alone. On top of this, drinking in the U.S. happens more at night and especially at bars or clubs people tend to binge drink their liquor. In Spain, alcoholic

beverages are more spread out throughout the day and usually only one or two are consumed at a time.

Along with the style of food and beverages consumed, one thing that is very different between Spain and the U.S. is the time that meals, especially dinner, are eaten. In the U.S., it is common to have dinner around 6 or 7pm. However, dinner in Spain is served much later, between 9pm and midnight. This was a huge adjustment factor for me while living in Spain. What made this change easier was that lunch in Spain is the largest meal of the day. Therefore, the dinner isn't a meal that people are starving for, and it is more of a small meal. In the U.S., this custom is normally the opposite. Lunch is a smaller meal, and dinner is the main large meal of the day, so it is eaten earlier. Spain has a Mediterranean climate, so the weather makes it convenient to eat outside at restaurants at night. Walking around in Spain at night, I saw streets lined with tables of restaurants filled with families eating dinner, even around 11pm and midnight. This week was filled with tapas, friends, and late-night meals which is exactly how I would explain Spanish dinner culture.



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## **Blog #6: Week 6**

For our last week in Spanish class, our professor took us on a field trip to a large indoor Spanish market. One of our assignments was to speak to one of the food vendors and ask them questions about their work in Spanish. My group spoke with very kind woman named Lourdes who told us all about her life selling food at the market. She showed us different types of fruits, vegetables, fish, and seafood. I was surprised that there were many types of food that I have never heard of before.

After finishing up my study abroad program in Barcelona, some friends and I decided to make a short stop in Paris, France before heading home. France, which is another country that consumes the Mediterranean Diet, had many interesting dishes that also stood out to me compared to what I normally eat in the United States. The few foods I tried in France were some of the best I had ever had. Starting with breakfast, we went to a Boulangerie, which is a French bakery. Here, they had fresh pastries and bread. I had a delicious chocolate croissant which is a popular breakfast in France. I also had a French omelet at the famous Café de Flore restaurant. Another food I tried, despite my apprehension was escargot, or snails. This dish was surprisingly much better than I thought because the snails were cooked in a pesto-like sauce, and they tasted like seafood to me. The last thing I ate in France was an authentic crepe. The food in France was definitely some of the best I have ever had.

Another unique thing that surprised me about France was their public water fountain system called Eau de Paris. This company provides fresh mineral water fountains all over the



city for people to fill reusable water bottles up with. These fountains seemed to be located everywhere and the company even has a phone app that shows you where the fountains are. This made it really easy to locate good clean free water throughout the day. These fountains also provide the mineral content information on the side of the fountain so you know exactly what you are drinking. This system is extremely different than that of the U.S. where bottled purified water is so widely available and purchased. Water is such a huge part component of overall health, and to see that Paris makes it so accessible shows that they are really contributing to the health of its citizens. This final week, I wrapped up my experience in Barcelona and got to briefly explore the amazing food and food system of Paris, France which was especially unique because of this public water system.



## **Final Reflection**

Before embarking on this journey to Spain, I wondered how this country could be considered the healthiest country in the world according to the Bloomberg Global Health Index in 2019, or how average life expectancy was 82 years according to The World Bank. I found that these striking numbers were not caused by one sole factor, but a combination of many food system factors, including the consumption of the Mediterranean Diet. Because this diet de-emphasizes meat and instead emphasizes the consumption of fruits and vegetables, fish, whole grains, and unsaturated fats, it helps to reduce rates of chronic diseases and makes this country and its citizens much healthier. My six weeks in Spain and short trips to Italy and France gave me so much insight on how the culmination of daily habits and this diet contribute to an overall healthy population and a food system that differs a lot from the U.S.

Upon arriving in Spain, adjusting to the late mealtimes and the small breakfast and the tapas plates to share for dinner was interesting. However, this started to give me some insight into the food system in Spain and what results these differences had. Further into the first couple weeks, the frequent walking, accessible food markets, healthy restaurants, and lower priced grocery store items made it clearer how Spaniards are able to have fresh clean food, such as Mediterranean Diet fruit and vegetables, on a daily basis and fit getting this food along with some exercise into their routine. Around my halfway point of time in Spain I got to see the festivities and celebration of the Sant Joan holiday and how families came together to relax and enjoy good food. Shortly after this, I got to see how bread, pasta, and gelato can all easily fit into a healthy diet in Italy because of the portion sizes and fresh quality ingredients. On top of this, it

was clear that the Mediterranean Diet is incorporated into this culture through the increased consumption of fish and seafood and decreased consumption of meat. Making our own paella in Valencia Spain and enjoying a traditional Spanish lunch made me truly realize how important coming together to make and eat a meal with others can be. Also, seeing how Spaniards drank alcoholic beverages at any time of the day and especially with meals, but generally avoided going out and binge drinking was very interesting. Finally, the public water system in France gave me insight into how important clean drinking water is and how much it can improve the health of a population when it is provided.

After living in a country that consumes the Mediterranean Diet and truly immersing myself in the food culture, it is clear that there are many differences between the food systems and diets of those living in Spain and the United States. These many food system factors include how the food is grown, typical diet, cost of food, social and economic factors, physical environment, food security and access to nutritious food, time of eating, activity level, portion size and more. I would say that the biggest factors that stood out to me in terms of difference to the U.S. and making Spain a very overall healthy country included eating tapas, timing and size of meals, frequent walking, availability of fresh quality food, and of course adherence to the Mediterranean diet. I would say many of these characteristics also apply in other Mediterranean Diet following countries such as Italy and France, along with the availability of clean drinking water in France. On top of these factors though, there is something to be said about the attitudes, beliefs, and spirit of the people living in these countries and their willingness to come together for meals and enjoy the gift of food that I believe really makes a difference in the health of Spain and these countries. Instead of only using food for fuel and quickly eating it or getting it on the

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go, which is common in the U.S., Spaniards really take the time to appreciate their meals.

Overall, I thoroughly enjoyed my time studying abroad in Spain and my trips to Italy and France.

I commend these countries and the people for the quality of their food systems and their love of food which ultimately makes them very healthy.

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