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MARZIPAN / MAZAPÁN:

From Toledo and Beyond

A View of Toledo

photo by Lucy Gordan

The Origins of Marzipan

When and where was marzipan invented? No one knows for certain; some connoisseurs say Persia; others Arabia; and still others China. A clue lies in its list of ingredients, which is short and sweet: almonds and sugar -- although food colors, flavors, other nuts, such as pistachios, hazelnuts, pine nuts, and apricot seeds, and rose water can be added.

According to Tor Eigeland's article, "Arabs, Almonds, Sugar, and Toledo," published in *Saudi Aramco World*, May/June 1996, almonds originated in Central Asia and migrated through Persia, the Middle East, and North Africa, to Greece, Cyprus, and Spain. Their traces have been found in "Tutankhamen's tomb, and in tombs at Baza, in the Spanish province of Granada, that date back to the fourth century BC."

Instead, sugar originated in the Malay Peninsula and traveled to Persia via India. Eigeland writes, "The Arabs, after they conquered Persia in 640 AD, gradually introduced the sweet reed to North Africa, Syria, and Spain while perfecting the process of making sugar." The rest of Christian Europe was introduced to sugar in Palestine during the Crusades.

Thus, no matter where its birth place, marzipan almost certainly reached Europe through the Middle East, whether it's thanks to the Crusaders, or earlier, through Arab traders. At first considered both a luxury and a medicine, in Europe it seems to have been mainly produced by pharmacists, who were often clerics, particularly in Spain and in Sicily, which was under Spanish domination at the time. From the Mediterranean its popularity spread north to port cities like Lübeck in northern Germany.

The Etymology of Marzipan

The etymology of its name is as disputed as its geographical origin; there are dozens of theories. *Marzapane* is documented in Italian earlier than in other languages, and the meaning of pan for "bread" is found in many Romance languages. However, it is unclear whether its etymology derives from the Latin: *Panis martius* (March Bread), or *marci panis* (St. Mark's bread), or from Greek: *Maza* (pastry) and *panem* (bread). The latter seems the most likely thanks to *masspan* in Provençal, Portuguese *maçapão* (where ç is an alternative for ss), and old Spanish *mazapán* (with a z instead of ss). However, according to the Wikipedia online encyclopedia, if marzipan has its origin in Persia, it is not unlikely that the name may come from *Marzban* with *ban* meaning "guardian" and *marz* meaning "border or boundary," or by extension "a person of quality," so that, when Arabized to *halwa-al-marzuban*, it means "the elite sweet."

photo by Lucy Gordan

Eigeland reports that he found marzipan's most probable etymology in José Carlos Cabel's *Historia y Legenda del mazapán*. "The Arabs of Toledo," Cabel writes, "called their paste of sweet almonds and sugar *mawthaban*, which supposedly means 'seated king,' for, before they were baked, the pieces of marzipan were stamped with a coin that showed a king seated on a throne. There was in fact a Byzantine coin, widely circulated in the Middle East by the year 1000, that showed a seated figure on the reverse, and which the Arabs called *mawthaban*."

Eigeland asks the question: "But did we get Spanish mazapán or German marzipan directly from the Arabic?" He answers: "Possibly not. The Venetians struck coins like the Byzantine ones about 1200 and called them *mataban*. And Sicilian and Neapolitan trading documents use the words *martzpane* and *marzapane* to refer to small, lightly built wooden boxes -- like the ones in which such precious commodities as spices and confectionary were imported from the East. The word may have been stretched to cover the contents of the boxes as well, giving rise to French *massepain*, English marchpane, and Italian *marzapane*."

Marzipan Today

Today the largest producers and consumers of marzipan are located in Hungary, Lübeck in northern Germany, Königsberg in East Prussia (now Kaliningrad in Russia), Sicily, Portugal, and Spain. Both Lübecker marzipan and mazapán de Toledo have obtained protected status from the EU (DOP). In the province of Toledo, other towns which produce mazapán are Ajofrín, Carpio daTajo, Consuegra (also famous for its Cervantes-style windmills), Gálvez, and La Mata.

Although possibly brought there from Andalusia by the Arabs during the Middle Ages, after Alfonso VIII's victory, at the Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa, near Jaen on July 16, 1212, in Spain today the capital of marzipan is the hill town Toledo above the River Tagus, once the nation's capital and still the seat of the Spanish Primate, designated a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1986, and an easy day trip south from Madrid (25 minutes by the AVE fast train). Since Arabs, Jews, and Christians lived here in harmony, or *convivencia*, for centuries, Toledo was nicknamed "the city of three cultures." Natives insist that marzipan was born here during one of two Moorish sieges, the first from 850 to 900, the second during the reign of Alfonso VII around 1150. According to tradition, food supplies were running extremely short so the inhabitants

(especially nuns in their convents) mixed together and baked the only available foods, namely almonds and sugar, after adding some water and baking the mixture, which producers, both industrial and artisan, still do today.

To purchase the best in town, there are three places to go. Two are convents, the 12th-century Convent of San Clemente, and of the 11th-century Santo Domingo el Antiguo with its splendid altarpiece and several other paintings by El Greco, as well as a small museum of his belongings. The nuns' recipes are secret and have been jealously preserved since the 13th-century. The third is Confitería Santo Tomé , founded in 1856 by Francisco Martinez, and run today by the fifth-generation of his descendents. Often in the window of this pastry shop, one may see either a replica of part of Toledo's cathedral, or of the *Sinagoga del Tránsito*, one of two surviving synagogues buildings and now the only Sephardic museum in the world. This shop is opposite the most famous monument in Toledo: Santo Tomé Church, which houses El Greco's masterpiece, "The Burial of Count Orgaz."

Mazapán treats at Confiteía Santo Tomé

photos by Lucy Gordan

During a recent visit to Toledo (thanks to the Spanish National Tourist Board in Rome) for the 2nd Congress of Industrial Tourism, I sampled sweets from all three, but was given a rare treat by Ines Garate, the wife of Confitería Santo Tomé's present owner, Juan Ignacio De Meso. She invited our small group of journalists for a behind-the-scenes tour of her kitchen, which sports the only wood-burning oven in the old, and once predominantly Jewish, quarter of Toledo, to see how her family's marzipan is made. Santo Tomé's pastries are only sold at the Santo Tomé 3 address (tel. 0034-925-22-37-63, or email santotome@mazapan.com).

Confitería Santo Tomé's mazapán paste counts the following ingredients: almonds from Valencia (the three types used are: *marcona, largeta*, and *planeta*), which is considered the best source, sugar, and 1000-flower honey. The procedure has seven distinct steps:

1) the raw almonds are crushed
2) the sugar and honey (the secret) are added and mixed with the almonds; this takes four hours
3) the resulting paste is left to rest for 24 hours
4) the paste is hand-rolled into long strips and hand-cut into various shapes
5) the various fillings are added, and then the raw pastries, basted with egg white are left to rest for another twenty-four hours
6) then they are baked until their tops are browned (only a few minutes) in wooden dishes at 220 - 230 degrees centigrade (400 - 450 degrees F), which adds a subtle roasted flavor, and when slightly cooled, glazed with egg yolk
7) Another 24 hour rest follows

The proportions are 60% almonds, 40% sugar, and the amount of honey by eye. Here they make 50 kilos of paste at a time. Although mazapán is especially popular at Christmas, at Santo Tomé 48 full-time employees make mazapán sweets all year round. In summer the mazapán has a lighter color than winter because the raw almonds are drier. During the Christmas season 30 temporaries, all of whom are women, join the workforce. The kitchen staff works from 5:30 AM to 1 PM.

Master Chef Rafael Agudo sculpts his *anguila* (marzipan eel)
photos by Lucy Gordan

Ines Garate told us that artisan mazapán like hers, which has no preservatives, takes three days to reach its peak, but should be eaten within 15 days because after that the almonds' delicate flavor deteriorates. She is assisted by Master Chef of Marzipan (there are only two in Toledo), Rafael Agudo, who is 60 years-old and has been working here for 48 years. Another chef, Manuel, has worked there for 36 years. We watched Agudo sculpt by hand (there are no molds) an *anguila* (a marzipan eel) filled with purée of pumpkin (*cabello de angel*) or sweet potatoes (*batata confitada*) and decorated with candied fruit and sugar glaze. It is a Christmas tradition. Garate told us that during the Middle Ages, during the *convivencia* of the Christians, Jews, and Muslims in Toledo, the Christians thought up this shape to tease their Jewish friends whose dietary laws forbade eel. Of course they could enjoy one made of mazapán with their friends.

The day before, at the town of Sonceca, 18 kilometers south of Toledo, we had also seen *anguila*, other marzipan sweets, hard and soft *turron* (nougat), and chocolates made at Delaviuda, the largest industrial manufacturer of sweets in Spain. Its annual production of traditional mazapán (excluding other mazapán-based specialties like Marquesa cakes, Soto mazapán, Gloria cakes, pine-nut cakes, Cadiz cakes or egg-yolk cakes) amounts to approximately 400,000 kilos or 880,000 pounds. If the whole range of the above products are included, the annual production amounts to almost 1,000,000 kilos or 2,200,000 pounds.

Delaviuda *anguilas*
photo courtesy of Delaviuda

In 1927 Manuel Lopez, a pastry chef with a shop in the center of Toledo, founded the business which was to become Delaviuda. In 1939 Lopez died leaving his widow (hence *Delaviuda* which means "of, or belonging to, the widow") Maria Rojas and his children to run the shop. They were so successful that Delaviuda became their brand-name in 1973. The Sonseca factory was built in 1975 and expanded in 1992 to 20,000 square-meters, with 20 assembly lines. Today the business with 120 full-time employees, and 650 during the Christmas season, is still in the family. Over the years the presidency of the company has passed from founder Manuel Lopez, to his son Alfredo, and to Alfredo's son, Manuel.

Unlike the Confitería Santo Tomé, Delaviuda offers tours of its facilities (an average of 2 or 3 groups a day in the pre-Christmas season), exports over 15% of its ever-growing number of products (its most recent additions are Florentine cookies and frozen cakes) to the USA, France, Germany, Latin America, and the Middle East, as well as selling a high percentage of its products in duty-free shops in almost every airport in the world (although ironically, yours-truly

found none at Madrid's Barajas airport). In the U.S., Delaviuda has many distributors, and its products are marketed mainly in the Tri State area, Florida, and California. Specifically, they are sold at retailers Marshall's, Cheeseworks, TJ Max, and Wal-Mart, as well as at specialty gourmet shops.

Another difference from the Confitería Santo Tomé is that, while Delaviuda uses 10 to 12 of the 50 varieties of Spanish almonds (for the most part Spanish from Valencia, Murcia, and Tarragona) to produce its many sweets, the almonds of its mazapán are only the *planeta* variety, and its ratio of almonds and sugar is 55% to 45%, instead of 60% to 40%. A requirement of Spanish law states that almonds must make up at least 50% of mazapán. The same proportions are the law for marzipan in Sweden and Finland, while Lübecker marzipan contains 66% almonds, although only 58.5% is required. Some non-Spanish marzipan also includes crushed apricot seeds in the paste, which gives it a slightly bitter after-taste.

Toasted mazapán
photo courtesy of Delaviuda

The sugar proportions in Hungarian and Sicilian marzipan are higher. Moreover, in Sicily the almonds are often roasted before being crushed, and the almond paste is dried at room temperature, not baked. Like Toledo, over the centuries the source of Sicilian marzipan was convents. Even Maria Grammatico, the co-author with Mary Taylor Simeti of *Bitter Almonds: Recollections and Recipes of a Sicilian Girlhood* (See my interview: "Mary Taylor Simeti: An Expert in Sicilian Medieval and Culinary History," *Epicurean-Traveler.com*, 2008) and owner of several pastry shops in Erice, a gorgeous hill town overlooking Trapani, learned her trade as a child in a convent there. Maria specializes in fruit and vegetable-shaped marzipan pastries, customarily put at children's bedsides on All Saints Day, November 1st, to remind them of the ghosts of their ancestors, and the hand-crafted marzipan baby Jesus at Christmas, and at Easter the sacrificed paschal lamb with each curl rolled by hand.

During our trip to Toledo, Francesco Troina, a fellow guest of the Spanish National Tourist Board's Rome office, and photographerfrom Catania on the east coast of Sicily (www.phototroina.com), told me that according to legend, Sicilian marzipan was "invented" by the nuns of the Convento della Martorana in Palermo. As the story goes, during the Middle Ages, a king, a pope, or a bishop was to pay a visit to their convent in the winter when there were no fruits on the cloister's trees, so the nuns made them out of marzipan. Mary Taylor Simeti recounts the same legend in her splendid book on Sicily, *On Persephone's Island*. Marzipan is available all year round all over Sicily, Troina also told me, but, as far as Catania is concerned, to sample the best, he recommended a visit to the pastry stores "I dolci di Nonna Vincenza" (Piazza San Placido 7, Palazzo Biscari, tel. 011-095-7151844, www.dolcinonnavincenza.it, email info@dolcinonnavincenza.it) and "Savia," in business since 1897 (Via Etnea 302, tel. 011-095-316919, www.savia.it, email savia@savia.it). You can order both online.

Although small, visitors to Delaviuda can enjoy its museum of mazapán production in the Toledo

region. On display are old prints, and cooking utensils such as wooden mallets for cracking the almond shells, a granite mortar and a curved granite slab with a rolling pin for crushing them, and a hemispherical Moorish oven. Across from the factory entrance Delaviuda products are also on sale. Their hour-long, free tours, only in Spanish, are given Monday through Friday, 9 AM to 12 PM, and 3 PM to 5 PM. To book, contact Rosana Ballesteros at rballesteros@delaviuda.com, or call 011-34-902-343-342.

For the joy of marzipan historians, other museums (all of which house a café and store), are located in Tallin, Estonia; in Szentendre, 18 kilometers north of Budapest, and in Keszthely on Lake Balaton, in Hungary; in Kfar Tavor, at the foothills of Mount Tabor in Lower Galilee in northern Israel, and at the Niederegger factory, still owned by this dynasty, in Lübeck.

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