Granada (Session 1) - Tasting History

When I first arrived in Spain for UCLA”s Travel Study program, I thought I knew what to expect from the food. I'd had "Spanish" meals back home through some paella at a restaurant or maybe some tapas. What I discovered, though, was much more interesting than I'd anticipate: Spanish cuisine carries the stories of conquests, trade routes, and cultural exchanges that shaped the country, and each dish offers a glimpse into this layered history.

While I ate paella numerous times during the program, my real education about the dish came during a hands-on cooking class included with the program in Granada. A fun afternoon activity turned into a fascinating history lesson that changed how I understood Spanish food. As our instructor guided us through each step, he explained that we weren't just learning to cook but we were recreating over a thousand years of cultural exchange.

The rice itself tells the story of Al-Andalus, the Islamic period in Spanish history from 711 to 1492. As we added the rice to the wide, shallow pan, our chef explained how the Moors introduced rice cultivation to the Iberian Peninsula, transforming part of Spain’s landscape into fertile paddies.

Then came the saffron oil with their precious crimson threads that was carefully added into the warm broth. Our instructor told us how the liquid gold represented medieval trade routes connecting Spain to lands in the East such as Persia and Kashmir. The expense of saffron made paella a special occasion dish, one that demonstrated both prosperity and Spain's connections to the far reaches of the known world.

But perhaps the most surprising lesson came when we added the tomatoes for sofrito, the aromatic base. "These are actually foreign too," our chef smiled, explaining how tomatoes arrived from South America in the 16th century and gradually became so integrated into Spanish cooking that most people assume they'd always been there. As the thoughtful concoction of fresh ingredients sizzled with garlic and olive oil, I realized I was witnessing the New World literally becoming part of the Old World, one dish at a time. Spain taught me that food is never just about sustenance–it's about identity, memory, and the complexity that comes when cultures meet, clash, and ultimately create something entirely new together. In every grain of saffron-scented rice, there's a whole world of history waiting to be discovered. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to participate in the Spanish language and culture program in Granada and I look forward to exploring the myriad of cultures our world has to offer.