

INTERVIEW

ESTHER OLLÉ COBOS

Sensing food stories
and culture

By Dr R. L. de Matas



I am a London-based food photographer and food enthusiast, native to Barcelona, Spain. I consider myself a food and still-life photographer, food stylist, and food product photographer, whose goal it is to bring stories of food to life through authentic, warm, and appetising images.

Throughout my life, I have been surrounded by food, starting as a curious girl in my home in Barcelona, where I would write down my mother's home recipes, to now writing and creating recipes for my first food photography book, which is still in progress. I have a Master's in Administration and Restaurant/Hotel Management, which I completed in Barcelona. Since moving to London with my husband and two children, I have made it my goal to work in a food-related field. I was a Senior Sales Associate at Borough Kitchen for several years, a kitchen and cookware store in London, and I am currently working as a food stylist for QVC UKTV shopping channel.

My creative journey into photography is relatively recent; I developed an interest in it and began to dive deep into food photography in 2020. Since then, I have undertaken several photography courses, including being a member of the Foodlight Photography Community, led by Lucia Marecak, and participating in the Domèstika platform. Through these courses, I learned about editing, lighting and composition techniques, colour theory, and post-

production. I also learned about food styling, dark mood photography, cooking, and writing, learning to tell stories through recipes. In my spare time, I work from my home studio, where I create, style, and photograph all the images you can see on my Instagram profile, where most of my published work is featured, as well as in my portfolio: <https://estherollecobos.myportfolio.com>. You will also find my popular paella recipe, which was the winner of a contest on the food platform Connect the Pots, and is now published on the Borough Kitchen website as Esther's Authentic Spanish Paella. My passion for food and photography came together in a dream opportunity when I wrote and photographed three articles for two issues of Food Connects Us, published by Foodlight Magazine, a magazine created by and for food photographers and members of Foodlight. My mission is simple: to connect people with food. I like to tell a story with a unique style through an image that evokes that specific moment, featuring food full of flavours and making food stand out to the audience. Perhaps my photography will allow you to catch a hint of the aromas in those recipes!



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Tell me a bit about your childhood and background and how it influenced your passion for food?

I grew up in a family where we loved eating lunch or dinner together at the table. My mum was the cook; I remember her preparing the food early in the morning before going to work, so while I was having my coffee, she was cooking lunch. She learned everything from my father's mum, who had a small restaurant in the old port of Barcelona. I have great memories surrounded by my family at the table enjoying my mum's food. Later on, I decided to start writing and collecting her recipes. Over time, this idea has developed into my first recipe book project. One day, I would like my children to inherit that knowledge of home cooking. I also want to mention my dad, who worked in the photography business and loved taking pictures of us while we were distracted. So, I am sure that my passion for food photography reflects the mixture of both my parents' influence.

What inspired you to pursue food photography?

Back in 2020, while we were all in lockdown, I discovered a phone food photography online workshop that really clicked with me. I began following other photographers on the field, looking for inspiration, and the following Christmas I got a new camera. Since then, I have been learning camera techniques, styling, and composition, lighting and editing through post-production.

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When did storytelling become meaningful to you?

When I started delving deeper into the work of other photographers, I realised the importance of storytelling through a simple image. Sometimes in food photography, less is more when you want the main subject to pop, but at the same time the props, textures, colours, and light can make a difference when you want to express a story.



How would you describe your role as a storyteller?

Food connects us, and I have a strong belief that the only way to express that connection in photography is through a powerful image, one that tells a story of that recipe and that moment in the kitchen or sharing food at the table. I love to play with textures, colours, and especially light. Side or backlight can really elevate an image and explain the narrative, be it soft light or strong daylight, reflecting the essence of the recipe story I want to express. When I style a scene, I have usually explored different images of the subject; I also look up different recipes. Then, I get to work designing the idea by creating a mood board focusing on the scene and colours. The rest unfolds as I prepare the recipe, with my camera in my hands. Take, for example, this image of a lemon and lime cake with a very pronounced backlight, taken during early summer this year, which raises the tone of the scene, evoking a vibrant, light-filled and exciting moment due to the fact of discovering the flavour and texture of the freshly baked cake.

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Tea and Scones



Lemon Cake
with Lemon Drizzle





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Food is a very fundamental part of our existence and connects us to our memories and emotions. In terms of styling (textures, colours, presentation), what connections and stories would you like your food photography to evoke in viewers?

I'd like my viewers to see a warm image full of flavours, which evokes emotion, passion, and memories. Of course, I like to work with textures, colours, and contrasts in my photography. To achieve this and add a story to the image, a connection to the food, a sense of feeling the recipe and the emotions it evokes, I need to add textures and play with colours in the scene to transmit the story I want viewers to see. On this image you can see a delicious peach galette with a golden crust, which has been already sliced and it's ready to be shared and served.

What motivates you and where does your creative inspiration come from?

One of the ways in which I nurture my creativity is by surrounding myself with beautiful things, be it a lovely flower bouquet, a pretty ceramic vase, a cup of coffee, or an item of vintage furniture. To find new sources of inspiration, I enjoy taking part in food photography challenges, where I am truly inspired by fellow likeminded food photographers. I usually begin by creating the recipe story; sometimes the story idea begins with a nice walk through street food markets and food stalls, exploring a new city, reading food magazines, or even a walk in the park through nature. I discovered the world of food photography when I saw other professionals' work on Instagram. From that moment, it suddenly became clear to me that the impact of a powerful image connected to a recipe is a way to express the importance of food in our own culture. I have seen renowned photographers like Bea Lubas, Kimberly Espinel, Haniyeh Nikoo, and Betty Shin, who are all impressive artists, make food look magical through their cameras.

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Sourdough Light
Sourdough bread by Layla Bakery

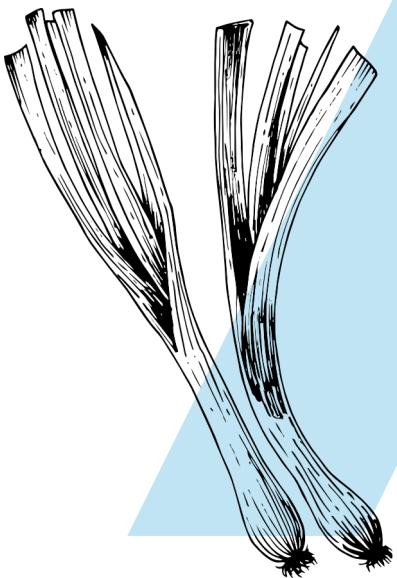


Coffee and Breakfast is Served!



Have you explored food traditions and celebrations in your practice? If so, what particular traditions, celebrations, techniques, ingredients, and recipes, etc., have you explored?

Yes, absolutely! I am Catalan, and we have deeply rooted food traditions, like 'La Calçotada', which takes place during winter. It is a popular feast when family and friends gather together, when calçots are in season (a type of a large, sweet spring onion), enjoy them; still warm, peeled by hand, and dipped into an amazing sauce called romesco. This food festival can last for hours at the table. After the calçots, people usually enjoy some barbecued meat and, of course, desserts, all accompanied by laughter and fun times. I also love to prepare the traditional paella at home, a dish I like to make for my family or when friends come over. My family is half Catalan and half Castilian, so at home we share different types of food and traditions from both places. Of course, Christmas and Easter are important to us, and at home I like to continue the tradition of cooking and preparing all the food and celebrations associated with them.



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What aspects of the preparation of traditional recipes do you find particularly interesting?

Traditional Spanish recipes take more time to prepare; they are usually more elaborate, and sometimes require more slow cooking time to integrate the flavours. I am especially drawn to highlighting the importance of the main ingredient. I have a great deal of respect for the ingredients of a recipe. I like to begin by photographing some ingredients as a still-life image, then I move on to capturing the recipe process, where you can have some fun taking action shots of preparing the food with your hands. Lastly, I take the final shots with the plated recipe as the main subject, along with some of the ingredients I have used, paying attention to the details. Traditional recipes have been passed down for years through the generations, and I believe it is important to respect them.



Straining Matò Cheese
Held in Hands Project



Travel, Food and a Camera
Image Winner of Best Photography Award
Food Art Project May Challenge

“ I am especially drawn to highlighting the importance of the main ingredient. I have a great deal of respect for the ingredients of a recipe. ”



Tea, Apples and a Gentle Light
The Scent of Autumn Project

A large, solid orange circle is positioned in the upper left quadrant of the frame. In the lower right quadrant, there is a smaller flower with five petals. The petals are orange on the left and white on the right, with black outlines and a dark center. The background is white.

What is it like to capture festive food or food associated with celebrations (any celebratory event) and the emotions they evoke?

When you take images of a festive food, you take on the role of the viewer through your lens. Usually, there are lots of people around, walking, talking, with food in their hands. You become a part of that moment when food connects us. If I can capture the emotions, the joy of those moments of celebration, and the social connections, creating a memory full of significance, I feel truly pleased and satisfied.

When it comes to your creative practice, what are the most memorable moments in the process?

Sometimes, creating something new can be challenging, and finding inspiration can prove challenging. The good thing is that food and recipes are endless. When you have a new idea for a recipe, everything is inside your head at first. Sometimes, I like to design it by preparing a mood board for the storytelling. Once I have all the equipment ready in my home studio, I set the scene at the table by the window, arranging the backdrops and props. Then, when I add the food to the beautiful plates, bowls, or pans, everything flows, and I feel like I am creating something truly beautiful on the screen. I might need to move or change the ingredients on the composition a little. Then, I click away with my camera until I am satisfied with the images. It can be difficult to stop clicking the shutter! The most memorable moment is when you see how the best images look after the post-editing process.



Tomato and Burrata Salad with Garlic Pesto in Shades and Light



Torrijas de Semana Santa



Figs and Strawberries
to Welcome September





Walk me through your process of making, tasting, and photographing? For example, how do you come up with recipe ideas? Are you combining flavours or testing different ingredient combinations to create unique and delicious dishes? How do you balance taste and visuals so that they are equally appealing?

That is not an easy question to answer, but I'll try to explain and walk you through it. As I mentioned earlier, I love to read, watch, and try recipes. Nowadays, food stories and quick, eye-catching eye recipes surround us on social media, which makes it relatively easy to find creations. But every cook needs to find their own taste. I like using seasonal ingredients. For example, right now my mind is full of all the autumnal foods, like mushrooms, figs, pumpkin, apples, and pears. I will create a few recipes with those ingredients. It could be a special warm soup, a warm salad, or a lovely dessert. Sometimes the recipe is not my own, but I make my own version of it, changing and adding ingredients. In the process of creating a recipe, you can add your touch by using a specific flavour that you love. After tasting, my favourite part is plating; it's when you can create beautiful images. Different layers are important, as well as adding some fresh herbs or a touch of oil to create a vibrant colour, which is very important in food photography. To balance everything, you need to understand colour palettes and colour theory to create the right mood for a food story, as well as an understanding of scene composition.

Food and stories are a significant part of culture, so what are your thoughts on how they can help preserve and shape a culture?

Food and culture go hand by hand. We are lucky that we can now access recipes or a quick video of a recipe in a matter of seconds, but it can fade and disappear in seconds too. I believe it's important to share food with your loved ones and pass those traditions down to your children, through special moments spent cooking together. Living away from my hometown sometimes doesn't help, but I make sure that at home we cook together and enjoy our traditional food on special occasions. Some recipes hold a special place in Spanish culture, meaning that they are only prepared for a particular celebration, like the calçots I mentioned before. There are also others, like roasted chestnuts and panellets, sweet treats made with almond flour and sugar, which are only prepared for All Saints Day in Catalonia, or the famous torrijas, a traditional type of French toast coated in egg and fried, which we enjoy at Easter.



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Escabeche with Shades



Poached Pears in Rum



Hot Chocolate
Winter Warmers Project



Blush and Bloom with Mini
Meringue Pies and Raspberries



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What are some sensory links you have to your cultural traditions and heritage?

The smell of the dishes we cook holds a special connection to our culture. One particular scent is that of the traditional Christmas soup, called 'escudella i carn d'olla', which my mum cooks. Another is the smell of the burning fire when my dad used to prepare vegetables and grill lamb, served with handmade allioli sauce in our old summer house. There is also the noise and the smoky smell of the fireworks that take place during the beginning of summer celebrations on the night of Sant Joan. On that day, we enjoy the traditional 'Coca de Sant Joan'. I've been told that we Spaniards speak loudly and very quickly! When we cook, we also talk a lot!

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How do you see food stories, culture, and photography evolving?

I see social media taking centre stage right now with video reels and quick, easy, and engaging food stories. On those videos, we see how the food is prepared, cooked, and tasted through hands-on, live recipe demonstrations. Everything is designed to capture people's attention, and I do like that, although in my photography I like to show the ingredients to emphasise their beauty. I also enjoy telling a story through a scene, an imperfect scene that is more realistic, and natural light is the key for me. In our present times, food photography has evolved and become more widespread and diverse. Social media and platforms like Tik Tok, Instagram, and YouTube have increased the power of real home videos, some of which are very well created. And through them, you can see how food connects us; we click on the recipe, even if it is a type of food we've never made before, and then we try to recreate it at home. I think that's fantastic! I must also mention the importance of AI in photography. Anybody, even with no prior knowledge or experience, can ask an AI tool to create a completely new, realistic image. It feels a little out of my hands right now, but it is definitely something I want to learn more about.

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Purple and Green Asparagus



Sliced Figs

LA CALCOTADA: THE SOCIAL AND FESTIVE EVENT IN CATALUNYA

The importance of food in culture

Recipe & photography by Esther Ollé Cobos

The Calçotada is a traditional Catalonian gastronomic festival that originated in the town of Valls, in the province of Tarragona. It is celebrated during winter and early spring (approximately from November to April). The central element of the Calçotada is the calçot, a variety of tender, elongated, sweet spring onion, cultivated in a particular way to achieve its shape. More than just a meal, the Calçotada is a social and festive event enjoyed in groups, often outdoors in farmhouses or restaurants, and is the perfect excuse to get together with family and friends in a cheerful and relaxed atmosphere. It requires getting your hands dirty, and it's common to wear a bib for protection.

The Calçotada consists of:

Grilling: The calçots are roasted directly over an open fire, traditionally made with vine shoots, until the outer layer is completely charred and the interior is tender and juicy.

Eating ritual: They are served wrapped in newspaper to retain heat, often placed on a tile. They are eaten with the hands, holding the green part, removing the burnt outer layer, and dipping the white, tender part in the sauce.

The sauce: They are accompanied by romesco sauce, a thick sauce made with roasted tomatoes, ñoras, almonds, hazelnuts, garlic and olive oil.

Full meal: After the calçots, the meal usually continues with grilled meat (such as sausage, lamb, or ribs) and, as a typical dessert, crème brûlée.





La Calçotada Recipe

Serves 8-10 / Takes minimum 2-3 hours or more!

INGREDIENTS

- 150 calçots
- 2 horas (sweet dried pepper)
- 1kg tomatoes
- 1 whole garlic
- 100g toasted almond
- 100g toasted hazelnut
- Approx 200ml Virgin olive oil
- 30ml vinegar
- 20g toasted bread (optional)
- Salt

RECIPE INSTRUCTIONS

Romesco sauce

- Place the ñoras in hot water to hydrate them.
- Roast the tomatoes and garlic in an oven preheated to 180°C. Place the whole garlic and tomatoes on a baking tray with a cross cut in the top of the tomatoes with a drizzle of olive oil, and cook for 35 minutes, keeping an eye while is cooking.
- Add the almonds, hazelnuts, and toasted bread into a food processor or hand blender.
- Remove the ñora pulp and add it to your blender, along with the baked tomatoes and peeled garlic, the vinegar, the oil, and a pinch of salt. Blend and taste. You can add more oil, salt or vinegar to adjusting the flavour and the thickness of the sauce.
- This would be your dipping sauce for the calçots.

How to cook calçots

- Preparation: Clean the calçots by removing the outermost layer, and trimming the very tip of the green leaves and the hairy roots. Leave a little soil on the outer layer to protect the inside while cooking.
- Make the fire: Build a bonfire or barbecue grill using wood if possible, or charcoal. An open flame, rather than embers, is essential for charring the calçots
- Grill: Arrange the calçots on the grill over high heat. Cook them for about 10-15 minutes, turning occasionally, until the outer layers are completely black and charred.
- Rest: Take the calçots off the fire and wrap them tightly in newspaper bundles. This steams them and makes the inner part tender. Let them rest for about 15-30 minutes.