



# THE GRANDMOTHER

## THE KITCHEN CABINET

Clockwise from main image: Cali Caparros; Paca Sola Franch; Adela Sanz; Sanz serves her lobster rice; Conchita Alejandre



Catalonia's food scene has long had a bro complex: Albert and Ferran Adrià at elBulli, the Roca brothers at El Celler de Can Roca. But a new cooking collective in Barcelona is going back to the matriarch – and it will warm your stomach *and* your heart. GEMMA ASKHAM finds that the real stars of Spanish cooking have nothing to do with Michelin

Photography: Adrian Morris

# OF ALL RECIPES

**I** take my eyes off her for four seconds and she's gone. It's Tuesday morning on Las Ramblas, and somewhere in the labyrinthine veins of La Boqueria market – a salty, stomach-rumbly chaos of human-sized hams, calamari stalls and rainbow stacks of fruit – I've managed to lose a grandma. Cali Caparros, my 72-year-old cooking guide for the morning, has vanished. I pace the alleys, half-expecting Danny DeVito to pop up from behind a crate like in a 1980s action movie. When I finally catch up with the leather jacket and silver loafers of Barcelona's fastest and best-dressed granny, she loops one arm snugly into mine. "They call me Grandma Frisky, you know," she whispers, laughing. "I have all this energy."

A widow and grandparent of three, you'd forgive Grandma Caparros for putting her metallic feet up. It's unlikely, though. In the short time that I was floundering around the market being as helpful as a fish head, she's bought salt cod and a loaf of bread for our cooking class. *Doing* is in her DNA. "I worked as a sales agent in a decorating company for years, even though I didn't need the money," she says. "I knew that working would maintain my self-esteem, so that's where I started my feminist fight of being independent."

Now, when she's not at university twice a week, "learning what I couldn't when I was younger," she's part of Grandma's Cooking Barcelona – a new social cooking community championing Spanish grandmas, who offer immersive @



classes that forge emotional, intergenerational friendships. In less than four hours, a grandma will set a seasonal three-course menu based on her family's secret recipes, she'll train you up, apprentice-style, on how it's done, and then you eat together – sharing food, wine and a side order of warm granny wisdom.

In today's class, however, there's a twist. Not only that the least culinarily talented expat in town will be joining them (I don't want to brag, but I once food-poisoned myself), it's also the first time that four of the community's grandmas have joined forces and cooked together. Considering that I've already been outpaced by one, should I be worried? "I think they will behave," jokes Yves Nicolier Sandrock, 42, the founder of Grandma's Cooking Barcelona, as we weave into the haphazard streets of the Gothic Quarter. Behind the unlikeliest of graffiti-scribbled doors, our kitchen awaits.

Born to a Swiss mother and a Turkish father, Sandrock and his mum left Switzerland for Barcelona – where their Swiss Francs went further – when he was eight. But his mum never embraced a Spaniard's love of cooking: "She had three or four recipes, and one was 'fire chicken wings,'" says Sandrock. "She poured every spice we had into a thick brown layer. Uff, it was so hot that it drove me crazy."

I keep to myself that I have a recipe-gone-wrong called fire-alarm chicken – an attempt at a Jamie Oliver 15-minute meal that backfired into a fire alarm, an evacuation siren and the closest call to my apartment complex's sprinklers going off that the building warden could recall. I was living in a Sydney wharf with hundreds of flats, a hotel and a penthouse owned by someone called Russell Crowe. My urge to cook again burnt out before it got started.

Sandrock, however, embraced his baptism of fire: "We had to bring a crayfish in to school to dissect, so I went to the supermarket, asked an assistant, bought some and cooked one. Next, I tried an omelette. Soon I was in charge of family dinners." He was nine. That he'd go on to lead cooking workshops professionally was practically predetermined. While teaching them, he kept returning to the same reference point – grandmas.

"Tradition is in every story around food," he enthuses, explaining how Catalan surf-and-turf dishes – meat served with langoustines, crayfish and mussels that in the UK we pay a fortune for – originated from tough times. On the one day a month that the fishing villages had meat, grandmas would bulk it out with shellfish – an everyday product – to make it feed the whole family. It's an example of matriarchal ingenuity that feels especially precious because Sandrock never met his own grandmas. His Swiss grandmother died when his mum was eight. "On my father's side, I have no idea," he sighs.

But his grandma status changed thanks to a chance meeting with another parent at his son Luka's school. Verónica 'Vero' Baena, 47, was also teaching traditional



## "I WAS RAISED WITH GENERATIONS OF WOMEN COOKING AND PLAYING CARDS"

cooking workshops, using the recipes from her Mexican upbringing, "raised next to my grandmother's apron, with generations of women cooking and playing cards," she smiles. Inspired, in 2016, Sandrock and Baena ran a pilot session. Today, they host four Grandmas Cooking

classes a week, attracting international couples and families from as far afield as Australia and Hong Kong. It's formed some unexpected bonds that simply wouldn't have happened otherwise: a new friendship that blossomed between a visiting American grandma and her Catalan counterpart; another grandma, originally from Seville, took her class drinking and dancing at Barcelona's Feria de Abril – a celebration of all things Andalusian. ©



### HOB RULE Generation-approved kitchen tips

"Always buy seasonal fruit and vegetables. They help our bodies face the changing climate. Why else would we have oranges and citrus fruit in winter if not to combat colds and our lack of sun?"  
Grandma Paca

"There are three steps to the perfect gazpacho. Firstly, the right tomatoes. Squeeze them – they should have lots of 'meat' and very little juice – then peel them. Cut your garlic cloves in half and remove the heart so they won't repeat on you. Thirdly, the longer you can chill it, the better."  
Grandma Cali

"The best rice for Spanish seafood is called *bomba*. It's round and very porous. It's usual to serve a rice dish in three stages: first the broth, then the broth with some rice, and finally broth, rice and seafood. Some people go back for a fourth. I, for one, am addicted to rice. It's a problem."  
Grandma Adela



### GRAN'S THE WORD One-sentence wisdom. It isn't rocket science, it's better

"Be independent, humble and honest – above all, try to be satisfied with yourself."  
Grandma Cali

"Life is marvellous, and it's even better with a positive attitude and a smile."  
Grandma Conchita

"Use your free time on the things that you really like to do, and don't waste it."  
Grandma Adela

"The only thing that can ever make a dream come true is passion."  
Grandma Paca



### ROLL OVER, MARY BERRY

Clockwise from above: Gemma Askham learns how to make an omelette the Grandma Conchita way; Grandma Paca's *empedrat*; Grandma Cali's gazpacho; prepping the *empedrat*; Grandma Cali searches for the perfect herbs at La Boqueria market; more than 200 traders work at La Boqueria market



BA flies daily to Barcelona from London Heathrow, London Gatwick and London City. Flight time: just over two hours

While we're counting grandmas, Sandrock now has 30. Some are the mothers of other parents at school – such as Conchita Alejandre, 68, a grandmother of two, who teaches me a spinach omelette that reminds me how good an egg can taste. Other grans are scouted, like catwalk models of the kitchen. “We're always on the lookout: walking around, listening in at the market, asking if existing grandmas want to bring friends into the project,” says Sandrock. Once ‘signed’, Baena is the grandmas’ manager – in charge of traditions, schedules and, presumably, making sure their rider requests don't go too far beyond an apron.

One grandma already accustomed to the limelight is Paca Sola Franch, 68. Although she trained as a clinical psychologist, in 1971 she joined the theatre company Comediants and took productions around the world for 40 years. She's now happily settled in a Catalan seaside town and, back in our class, prepares one of the region's signature dishes, *empedrat* – a salad of small pieces of tomato, red and green pepper, onion, olives, chickpeas and the star, salt-cured cod. “Never cut the cod, flake it in by hand,” she instructs. “My mum said so.” No spoons are needed here. When Caparros invites me to try

### CATALAN CLASSICS

Local haunts worth the hype

#### | -> | ROCAMBOLESC

Epic ice cream by Jordi Roca, pudding pro at currently the world's third-best restaurant, El Celler de Can Roca. Try *panet* – an ice-cream-stuffed brioche topped with chocolate cake, popping candy and honeycomb. [rocambolesc.com](http://rocambolesc.com)

#### | -> | PASTISSERIA ESCRIBÀ

One of the city's best (and best-looking) patisseries – particularly the Rambla branch, whose Modernist architecture could make Gaudí weep. Find cakes that look like works of art, plus Barcelona's butteriest croissants. [escriba.es](http://escriba.es)

#### | -> | LA COVA FUMADA

A cellar-based tapas institution that's brought seafood snacks to Barceloneta since 1944. The *bomba* is the house speciality, a spicy potato and pork croquette. [Carrer del Baluart, 56](http://Carrer del Baluart, 56)

#### | -> | VILA VINITECA

A third-gen family wine shop that's supplied the city's Michelin-starred restaurants since the 1930s. There are 8,000 bottles, plus a decadent deli next door. [vilaviniteca.es](http://vilaviniteca.es)

#### | -> | MAREA ALTA

Fine dining on the 24th floor, where 360° views meet Spain's best-sourced seafood, including oysters from the Delta del Ebro, tuna from Cadiz and lobster from Menorca. [mareaalta.mareabajaja.com](http://mareaalta.mareabajaja.com)

### TOP TABLE

From top left: the first tasting of the lobster rice; Plaça Reial



## ONE GRANDMA GRABS A BOTTLE OF WINE AND PULLS OUT THE CORK WITH HER TEETH

her gazpacho – the sweet, vinegary zing of which fills the room – she gestures to cup my hand. My reward is a palmful of punchy orange goodness.

At the hob, 64-year-old Adela Sanz grabs a bottle of white wine and pulls out the cork with her teeth. I joke that she's done that before – she smiles and explains that she needs her hand to stir her *sofrito* – a slow-fried Catalan sauce of tomato, onion, garlic and paprika that needs up to 90 minutes' cooking time. Used in many Spanish dishes, it'll form the base of her lobster rice.

At the lunch table later, when my stomach is as full as my awe for the powerhouses that cooked it, Baena tells a story about a guest who took a shine to his host. “He started touching the grandma's leg, flirting, telling her, ‘I much prefer mature ladies. Young ladies never look after me.’ Our grandma was horrified.” While I'm dwelling on the cheek of it, Franch exclaims, “Look after him?! We're working women. As if we're going to look after him. We're feminists.” And with those words, she sums up the essence of Grandma's Cooking Barcelona. Sure, these grandmas may not be the most famous names on Barcelona's culinary scene, but they're doing food their way – and the best thing we can do is to listen. ■

© @GemmaAskham

Classes start from £74pp. [grandmascookingbcn.com](http://grandmascookingbcn.com)