

# Life and Death in Secastilla

– El Día de la Matanza –



by Kate Wilson

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In the pre-dawn shadows, the quiet rustle of a man lighting a fire barely disrupts the stillness. Shuffling a pile of branches from the local Garnacha bush vines, 31-year-old Jesse Robinson kneels to the ground and strikes a match that briefly

**Above:** *Longaniza* sausages are hung out to cure in a well-ventilated food storage room. María José Girón and Jesse Robinson made the sausages with fatty pork belly, leaner minced meat, garlic, thyme, wine and other spices. The pig's intestines are filled with the mixture and used as the outer casing (photo © Sole Sol).

casts a warm glow across his face, illuminating his breath in the chill air. Behind him is a low wooden table and a tractor, both barely distinguishable in the dark. It is a moment that feels profound; a dell of thoughtful tranquillity before the day erupts into a kaleidoscope of activity.

Today is *el día de la matanza* — the day of the *matanza* (from the Spanish word for 'slaughter' or 'killing'). No other day in the calendar produces so heady a mix of sights, sounds, smells and sacrifice. The victim is a pig, and the *matanza* is a traditional

Spanish pig slaughter which is rooted in ideals of sustainability, community and survival. It is as good a reason as any to gather, work and celebrate. We are in Secastilla, a community of about a hundred people in the province of Huesca on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees. As custom has it, the three days to come will be spent processing every last part of the pig into sausages, pâtés, chops and all manner of savory comestibles.

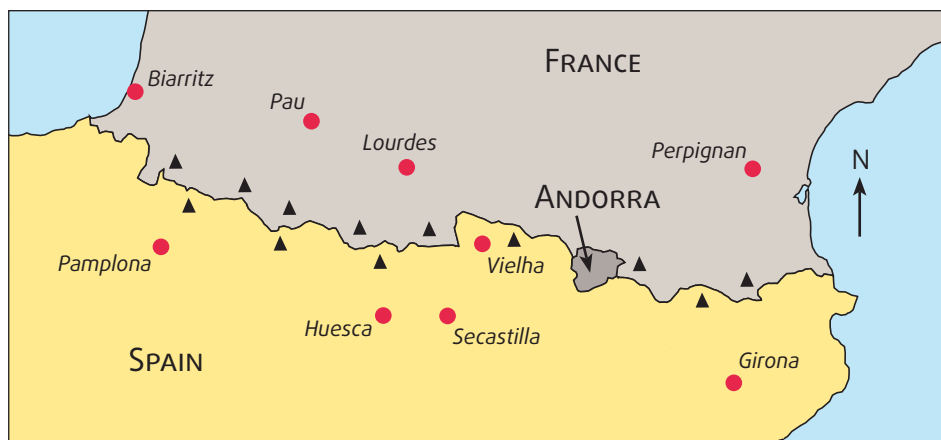
“We don’t exactly know when the *matanza* began, but it must coincide with the development of livestock and domesticated animals in prehistoric times,” says Jose Miguel Pesqué Lecina, Spanish historian and archeologist who serves as the Head of Culture for the government of Huesca.

“But the process as we know it today surely came about much later,” explains Jose Miguel. “Some historians place its inception in the Middle Ages with the Celtic pagan holiday of Samhain, which later became Christianized as the feast of St. Martin.”

Jose Miguel, a native of Secastilla who has participated in over fifty *matanzas*, continues: “The time to store food was before the start of winter. Animals were slaughtered at the beginning of the cold season in order to give the meat the proper time and environment to cure. So, in many European cultures, the autumn was associated with the killing of animals; of course, that meant many large meals and for most communities it was a chance to taste the first wine of the new season.”

It’s a mark of how things have changed that ritual animal slaughters in Secastilla, in common

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Our map shows the location of Secastilla in northern Spain. Only principal communities are shown – all in the wider Pyrenean region (map scale 1:4.5m).

with similar events in other parts of Europe, are no longer confined to the autumn. The advent of refrigeration has freed rural communities from the calendrical constraints of yesteryear. No longer is the killing of the fatted calf or swine reserved for Samhain (on 31 October) or the feast of St. Martin (on 11 November).

#### A COMMUNAL AFFAIR

Today’s *matanza* (on 20 February) is a pre-Lenten version of the traditional pre-Advent ritual. So the first wine of the harvest has already been enjoyed for months. But little else differs from the ancient tradition: the pigs have been fattened, the community has come together and the busy and sometimes gory work of preparing a year’s worth of pork products is married with big meals, drinking wine from the *bota* (a traditional Spanish leather canteen) and a general sense of mirth.

Leading the charge are Jesse and his wife, 34-year-old María José Girón, both firmly devoted to preserving the traditions of this rural community, of which María José is a native. They have spent the last eight months feeding and caring for the two pigs to be killed today, and with

the help of Maria José's mother and aunt, have been planning the *matanza* for weeks.

"I love being able to learn stuff from my elders. I have spent so many years hearing my mum, Elisa, and my aunt telling me they know nothing because they didn't go to school," Maria José says. "But I want to show them that their life experience and skills are the most valuable thing they can share, after their unconditional love."

Elisa and her sister are dark-haired and petite. Both women, armed with aprons and knives, are preparing to show the younger generation how to clean pig intestines, stir the blood so that it doesn't coagulate and remove fat from long, pink loins. They also encourage everyone present to eat their fill as they walk around with trays of bakery-fresh pizza and potato tortillas.

Without their knowledge or that of other villagers who have showed up ready to work, today's *matanza* wouldn't be possible. Jesse and Maria José have participated in several slaughters over the past few years, but this is the first of their own and it marks an important day of one generation passing down information to the next; of preserving tradition.

Villagers watch on as the *matarife* separates the pig into workable sections and women prepare the intestines for cleaning (photo © Kate Wilson).



"I feel like today is two weeks of my life," Maria José said. "So many things are happening."

#### ENTER THE MATARIFE

With Jesse's fire now burning well, copious quantities of water are brought to the boil in a stout iron cauldron propped over the fire. It will be used to clean the pig and refilled as the day goes on.

The *matarife* — the man who actually performs the slaughter — has laid out his tools with the same calm and certainty as a dentist preparing to perform surgery. There are buckets to move water and store intestines, pumice stones to scrub the pig's rough spots, a blowtorch for removing the hair, a mallet, an axe and several very sharp knives.

And there is the tractor — which will be used to hoist the animal in the air while the butcher takes it apart — and the wooden table, a primitive holding spot for the pig after its death.

A current of adrenalin charges the air as the *matarife* unfolds a pristine white apron and ties it around his waist. No one says it but everyone knows it. It's time to get the pig.

Weighing in at about 150 kilos, one-year-old Tia is ushered up the dusty lane and into an empty garage. The men quickly spring into action and the *matarife* is fast and efficient, barking instructions to his helpers. In a matter of two or three minutes, the animal has been lifted in the air and its throat is cut, and its blood is draining into buckets. The killing is done.

The reactions of onlookers vary. Some have seen this a score of times before and barely pay any heed. Others seem keenly interested. Many are unsure of how to help. Others turn away from something they perceive as being sad. And some continue chattering as if the nearby commotion doesn't faze them in the slightest.

"For a split second, I do feel as though I am betraying the pig," admits Maria José. "But without the slaughter then these eight months of feeding her,

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caring for her and rescuing her — Tia enjoyed several adventures roaming through Secastilla after escaping from her pen — just wouldn't have made any sense. This was the climax of my love relationship with them. Next, I eat them.”

After the pig's hair has been singed off and its body scrubbed to a glistening white, the *matarife* continues with his business, separating joints of meat which are carried to the house. There, in a series of small, concrete rooms that normally serve as workshops or storage for olive oil and vinegar, Maria José and Jesse have organized lines of make-shift tables and workspaces. Although tradition holds that it is the women of the community who process the meat, today young men join the aproned workers leaning over red slabs of pork.

“Pacing is really important, and there's a priority for what needs to be taken care of first,” Maria José explains. “Some cuts need to be hung, while others must be processed right away.”

Blood is handled immediately because it's the first part removed and if it congeals it becomes unworkable. It's an important ingredient in *tortelas*, the doughnut-shaped blood sausages which are a culinary hallmark of the Aragon region.

Next, the intestines are cleaned with vinegar and lemon; the intestines will later be used as casings for sausages. The liver, heart and lungs are cut into cubes and cooked with onions and tomato in another regional dish, called *frechinache*, which is enjoyed right away because the innards spoil quickly. But it's an early reward for those who work so hard on the day of the *matanza*.



Jesse, pictured here wearing his trademark *boina*, a Spanish beret, is devoted to learning and adhering to traditional Aragonese customs and way of life. He watches and lends a helping hand to the *matarife*, who cleanly and skillfully separates the pig (photo © Kate Wilson).

Bones are boiled for hours to make stock, which is then used to cook the blood sausages. Fat and skin are processed to be used for lard, soap, sausages, pâtés and spreads. A smorgasbord of

## SECASTILLA FACTS

Secastilla is in the hills between the valleys of the Río Esera and Río Cinca about 60 kilometres east of Huesca. The flooding of the Cinca Valley in the late 1960s accentuated the relative remoteness of Secastilla, severing the minor road which ran west from the village. Buses from Barbastro to Graus (operated by Avanza, thrice daily during the week but less frequent at weekends) run along the main N123A road, passing the end of the lane which climbs up through the Valle de Secastilla to the village.

Secastilla lies close to the Ruta Mariana, a 350-km pilgrim trail which links five major shrines in three

countries (France, Andorra and Spain) in the Pyrenean region. It is an easy walk from Secastilla to the shrine at Torreciudad, a major pilgrimage centre (and a favourite among members of Opus Dei) set in a glorious location on the east side of the reservoir created by the flooding of the Cinca Valley.

The Valle de Secastilla may ring a bell if you know your Spanish wines. Secastilla and the surrounding countryside are known for its slightly peppery deep red wines produced from the Garnacha (a grape type more commonly known outside Spain under its French name grenache).

## A COMMUNITY RITUAL

There is a Spanish saying which runs: “a cada cerdo le llega su San Martín”. Every pig has its St Martin’s Day, referring to the traditional pre-Advent slaughtering of pigs. Yet the rhythms of the agricultural calendar don’t just target pigs. In Germany, St Martin’s Day signals the start of the goose-eating season.

Spanish pig slaughters are, as explained in our feature, no longer tied to the autumn, and are equally likely to take place in the run-up to Lent. The Czech or Slovak *zabijačka* is essentially a similar emblematic community ritual as is the Croatian *svinjokolja*.

The practice is generally associated with Catholic communities. In 14th-century Spain, the integrity of intent of Sephardic Jews who converted to Catholicism would sometimes be ‘tested’ by requiring *conversos* to take a leading role in the communal pig slaughter. This is a theme well explored in Antonio Gala’s 1974 play *Las cítaras colgadas de los árboles* (The Zithers Hanging from the Trees). That’s not the only stage play to feature pig slaughters. Václav Havel also touches the theme in his writing, most notably in his very last play, performed under the English title *The Pig*.

sausages are tied into long chains and hung to dry, including *longaniza*, *chorizo* and *butifarra* — the latter a classic Catalan sausage which is popular in northern Spain. Lastly, lean meat and the finer cuts are bagged and frozen. Other than the bones and teeth, nothing gets thrown away.

“The food we make is infinitely better tasting, healthier and more satisfying than anything you’d buy from the shop,” says Maria José. “It’s just the same with garden produce,” she adds. “The flavour is in the freshness. Yet supermarkets don’t allow for fruit and vegetables to mature and grow fully, so the rich flavours are watered down.”

The sustainable way of life in Secastilla and scores of other villages in Huesca province is a far

cry from modern Spanish urban lifestyles. Jose Miguel worries whether the distinctive culinary rituals of the Huesca region can be preserved for future generations. “The importance of the *matanza* as part of the normal rhythm of the community may gradually fade. I suspect it might remain only as a traditional festival.”

José Miguel, like many others in Secastilla, is well aware that most people fall all too easily for the tyranny of consumerism. “But there are other pressures on the *matanza*,” he explains. “Modern regulations on health and food hygiene are at odds with the traditional village rituals. And, although the quality of our produce here is much higher than that of supermarket goods, the *matanza* just isn’t economically profitable.”

Maria José, for one, is not deterred. “I do not mind the hard work,” she declares. “I want to grow old to be tough and strong like my mum and my aunt. I want to know that my hands can create and produce food and all sorts of things so I don’t need to buy them. I don’t like buying things. I much prefer making them.” ■

Kate Wilson lives in the village about which she writes in this article. She moved to Secastilla last year where she is now busily peeking into larders and watching the womenfolk of the village at work in their kitchens. Read Kate’s articles on sheep’s-head dinners, truffles, *calçotada* and other culinary delights at [www.afoodfile.com](http://www.afoodfile.com).

The pig’s intestines are turned inside out before being cleaned with boiling water and lemon. The intestines will later be used for sausage casings (photo © Kate Wilson).

