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May X: Food, glorious food

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Food, glorious food

On a sunny Friday afternoon in May, a group of Furman students gathered around an outdoor grill at the North Village apartments.

Some students stoked the fire, while others sliced fresh bread and chopped vegetables on a nearby picnic table. As the students prepared the traditional Spanish dish *paella* and enjoyed each other's company, they couldn't believe they were also actually getting class credit.

This may not seem like the typical Furman class — and it wasn't. Spanish 352 — “Hispanic Cultures Through Food” — was part of Furman's first May Experience. We were lucky enough to take it, as it quickly became the envy of all May Experience classes.

A typical day would consist of a discussion of the previous night's assigned reading, a group presentation regarding a specific Hispanic country, shopping and preparation of that day's *plato* (food), and perhaps an informational DVD or two.

The first week we focused on the culture and food of Spain. Under the direction of professor Ron Friis, we covered a brief history of the country and the cultural influences that affect the different flavors and products of Spanish cuisine. We tasted traditional Spanish cheeses, olive oils and olives, and prepared the *tortilla Espanola*, *pintxos* (appetizers) and *paella*.

The second week was devoted to the food of Mexico, which included chicken and beef tacos and homemade tortillas. We also discussed the important differences between the Hispanic tradition of “slow food” and American fast food, while learning about Mexican culture and business practices. The final week, we focused on Cuban cuisine.

In the true spirit of Furman professors, Dr. Friis took advantage of the long Memorial Day weekend to assign group projects, such as

having us compare our prepared Mexican food to that of a local Mexican restaurant.

Besides the obvious benefits of our culinary work, the class taught us how to work together as a team and to plan for the unexpected.

Oftentimes organizing the tasks that needed to be completed necessitated a list called “*Menú del día*,” in which the day's chores were laid out. Certain people would then be assigned to each chore, and we would set to work.

Surprises were few, but when they occurred we discovered the value of improvising. When we overcooked lentils for our salad, for example, we made a soup from the remains.

In some cases, even a well-detailed plan did not account for the amount of time it would take to prepare certain foods, such as tamales. It was not uncommon to have more on our list than could be done during class time, but between presentations, discussions about food-related videos and readings, and shopping for the next day's groceries, we were almost always able to gather afterwards to share our creations.

While we enjoyed the food we made, we were reminded that it is impossible to talk about food without discussing hunger. Among the many controversial issues tackled by our class, several important topics were addressed by guest speaker Adela Mendoza, a community advocate. By hearing about the plight of impoverished Hispanic families in Greenville, we also learned how we could help to improve the conditions of these people, whether through political activism or donations of money or food.

While we cooked, ate, talked and ate some more, we realized the importance of keeping an open mind when learning about and experiencing different types of food — and especially when interacting with other cultures. And isn't that what a college education (and a May experience) is really all about?

For those who are interested — and who can read Spanish — enjoy a taste of our course at <http://archivogastronomico.blogspot.com>.

— EMILY MYERS AND SARAH WEATHERFORD

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