

## August: The Tomato

*Here are two pieces: the first, about the Tomatina written following a visit I made to the festival in 2009, now up-dated.*

*The second is about tomato production in southern Spain and the appalling conditions endured by an estimated 100,000 migrants who are currently existing as virtual slaves, to enable us to eat cheap tomatoes.*

### La Tomatina, Spain

The tomato invokes a particular sort of passion: it's one of those foods - actually a fruit - that people seem to either love or hate.

Visitors to the small Spanish town of Buñol however, who have been travelling to this otherwise unremarkable spot, some 40km west of Valencia, on the last Wednesday in August for the last 60 years, can't get enough of them. The reason? The Tomatina – the world's largest tomato fight, a giant street battle in which thousands of kilos of ripe tomatoes become ammunition for a vast crowd of happy revellers, packed cheek by jowl into one narrow street of this most accommodating town, for just one morning each year.

In recent years - up to 2012 - some 40 - 50,000 people, mostly young and most definitely in search of fun, have come from all over the world to take part in this now notorious but good-natured free-for-all. The Tomatina is the culmination of what has developed into a week-long celebration, featuring parades, music, competitions and fireworks, coinciding with the festival of the town's patron saints. In the preceding twenty four hours, as more and more people swarm into the town and, in particular, the bars, for much high-spirited revelry, the atmosphere of anticipation and excitement becomes tangible.

By 10am the first event of the Tomatina is underway: an entertaining test of strength and ability to detach a ham from the top of the impossibly slippery Palo Jabon – a tall wooden pole that has been smothered with soap. The Plaza Mayor and the Calle del Cid, where most of the action takes place, are packed with men and women, mostly in shorts, T shirts and flip-flops and sporting an entertaining array of colourful wigs, face paint, goggles and snorkels – ready for battle.

The tension rises. The noise made by so many people laughing and talking in so confined a space, rises like the roar of a wild sea. From the roof tops and balconies, the street's residents and friends begin to hurl buckets of water and aim hoses at the crowds beneath, much to their delight. A giant game of 'throw the wet knotted T Shirt' is now underway as items of clothing are launched from one side of the street to the other as a sort of limbering up exercise up for the tomato contest that is about to begin.

At precisely 11 o'clock a rocket is fired. A huge cheer goes up as the first lorry, laden with tomatoes, and with a dozen people aboard scooping them up and throwing them out into the frenzied crowd, makes its way, with difficulty down the Calle del Cid, now transformed by huge sheets of plastic hung down from roof tops to protect the buildings. The giant battle is underway. Having been squeezed first to break the skin and so soften the blow – a rule of

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the Tomatina - tomatoes come flying from all directions and are returned until only the slightest throw-able fragments remain. Those in the thick of the action gradually become plastered in a curiously sticky, translucent orange/red mush. The huge number of people attending however, means that some of those at the edge of the crowd are left almost tomato-free. The firing of the second rocket – one hour after first – brings the mighty battle to a close.

Having used over 100 metric tons of tomatoes to blast ancient buildings with a sticky tomato glue and make a puree that extends all the way down the street, when I visited, in 2009, the locals seemed remarkably friendly and resigned to the monstrous mess caused by the departing crowds. Some stood with hose pipes - waiting to wash the goo off weary combatants as they clambered up steep steps towards the main part of the town – and remarked about the morning's events.

The general opinion seemed to be that whilst the town acknowledged that the Tomatina is indeed tremendous fun, and lucrative for both the tomato growers in Extremadura, who supply the event (these tomatoes are less expensive and grown only for the festival as their taste is considered inferior) and local businesses who profit greatly from the enormous annual influx of visitors to Buñol, the event might be becoming just too big.

There are various theories about how the Tomatina first began. The most popular seems to be that the event dates back to 1945 when an annual parade of giant figures was making its way through the streets of the town. It is said that some youngsters accidentally knocked over one of the giant figures which then got to its feet and started swinging out at the people around. By way of retaliation the youngsters grabbed some tomatoes from a vegetable stand nearby and started throwing them at the giant until the police arrived to break things up.

The next year, on the same day in August, the young people returned to the town hall square and, armed with their own tomatoes, began another tomato fight. Once again the police intervened and in following years the local council tried to ban 'El dia de la Tomatina', but with little success as the event continued to be held, getting bigger and bigger every year.

In 2013 it was decided that numbers had indeed become too vast and now only 20,000 people are allowed to attend the event, by pre-purchased ticket, at a cost of 10 Euros per person. (1)

**Spain's Tomato Slaves: Seeing Red – the real cost of tomatoes at Christmas**

There's no denying that the Tomatina is tremendous fun: a giant party, an escape (and who wouldn't enjoy the chance to catch a friend, or stranger even, quite unawares, with a soft tomato on the back of the neck, just once?), but in a country in which unemployment is now running at 26%, with the members of some 686,600 households having no income of any kind (2), and, presumably therefore not enough to eat, this excess, this waste of food, waste of water and waste of land, is hard to justify.

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Three of the 5 regions of Spain with the highest rates of unemployment: Andalusia, which comes top with 36.3%, the Canaries with 34.1%, and Extremadura, with 33.7%. (3) are the very regions where most of Spain's tomatoes are grown. And much of this harvest is steeped in human misery.

Concerns have been raised about the effect of intensive production on the nutritional value and health benefits of tomatoes.

According to a study by the British Tomato Growers' Association, certain Spanish tomatoes can contain up to five times less lycopene (an antioxidant that scientists believe can produce significant health benefits) than their British counterparts.

[www.britishtomatoes.co.uk](http://www.britishtomatoes.co.uk)

Whilst Extremadura grows much of its crop outside, in order to ensure year-round production, the vast majority of tomatoes grown in southern Spain are produced inside enormous plastic-covered greenhouses or 'invernaderos'. Here, plants are grown in a special soil mix or hydroponically, in sacks of perlite or rockwool (an inorganic substance made from mineral fibres). Trained onto wires suspended from the ceiling, the plants are drip fed with water and chemical fertilizers as part of a computer-controlled system to ensure maximum growing efficiency.

In the Andalusian province of Almeria, the number of these white-roofed greenhouses has grown enormously, with the help of EU subsidies, over the last 35 years to cover a mind-boggling 450 sq km (173 square miles).

Quite apart from the serious environmental problems such industrial production is causing, the effect upon local aquifers in an already drought-stricken region, the health risks associated with chemicals used, and the accumulation of plastic waste (4) the sight of these greenhouses, viewed from above, or indeed from space, is alarming: what was formerly the sandy plain of Dalías has been transformed into a colossal sea of white plastic lapping up the valleys of the Alpujarra hills.

The plastic sheeting is so reflective that it shines back into space like a giant mirror, and according to researchers from the University of Almeria the effect is so great that it has resulted in a cooling of the air temperature of the province. While temperatures in the rest of Spain have climbed at rates above the world average, the local temperature, it is reported has dropped an average of 0.3°C every 10 years since 1983. (5)

China is currently the largest producer of tomatoes worldwide, followed by the USA and then India and Turkey. Tomatoes are however, the most widely consumed vegetable in Europe, and Spain now has the EU's third largest acreage, following Italy and Romania.

[www.freshplaza.com](http://www.freshplaza.com)

[www.seriousrankings.com](http://www.seriousrankings.com)

Conditions inside the greenhouses are not so cool, however. Owned by a collection of thousands of smallholders and large companies, growing a range of vegetables for the European market, including peppers, cucumbers and courgettes as well as tomatoes, temperatures are reported to reach up to 50°C.(6)

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It is in this heat, in brutal, sweat-shop conditions, not tolerated it would seem, by many Spanish workers, that 100,000 immigrants, both legal and illegal from Africa (mostly Morocco and other countries of the Mahgreb as well as sub-Saharan regions), Latin America and Eastern Europe are picking our tomatoes.

The account below, entitled 'The Plastic Sea of Almeria' is from a study (carried out by the Consumer Information of Upper Austria' in cooperation with the Austrian Trade Unions) into the working and living conditions endured by these migrants carried out in 2011 for the Network for the Promotion of Sustainable Consumption in European Regions (NEPIM) (6):

*'About 100.000 migrants, who have come with great expectations and hopes for a better life in Europe, work under degrading conditions in the so called "invernaderos", the greenhouses of Almería.... Many come by boats to Spain overnight. Others already buy themselves a contract of employment in their origin country for several thousand euros, which they have to repay. Over the years facilitator gangs have formed, which hide people for money in trucks and cart them to Europe without water, in the dark and confined spaces.*

*Fixed contracts that guarantee employment during the whole season are rare. Many workers try every day to find a job by going to the farmers and asking for work for this day. Others offer their work force [sic] in well-known streets in the area of El Ejido, Almeria and San Isidro / Nijar early in the morning. The farmers or so called "patrones", come with small buses and trucks and seek out their day-laborers. The selection is based on age, size and appearance, as in a cattle market.*

#### *Harvesters in the greenhouses of Almería*

*In the „invernaderos“ mainly men are employed. Women frequently work in packing stations, as nursing staff or home help. Many women end up in prostitution out of desperation and earn their living from sex work. An estimated 80 percent of prostitutes in Spain are immigrants aged 20 to 35 years.*

#### *Work of agony*

*Especially in the warm spring and summer months, the temperature under the plastic foils rise up to 50 degrees and make the hard physical work a misery. Breaks are rare and toilets are not to be found around the greenhouses. Often workers have to provide piecework. Although they are employed under contract, for example for 6.5 hours, they must provide a certain number of boxes of vegetables per day. If their row has a low density of vegetables, it can hardly be done in the pretended time.*

#### *Collective Agreement will be ignored*

*Corresponding to the collective bargaining agreement workers should earn a wage of 44 euros per day. Workers told us that they actually earn between 33 and 36 euros, some only 20 euros per day. According to the collective bargaining agreement entrepreneurs are bound to register their workers in a social insurance system, if they work more than 180 days per year. To save these costs workers are employed shorter or not employed on paper. Wages*

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*are sometimes not paid for months. To complain or organize resistance dare only few, because employers often threaten to report to the police.*

*Without papers - without rights*

*Many of the agricultural workers live in Spain without a work or residence authorization. A residence authorization is dependent on whether you were registered in Spain during a year or not. Also sufficient financial resources, for example from relatives can lead to obtain a residence permit.*

*Slum dwellings between the greenhouses*

*Most workers cannot afford an apartment because of the low income and the high rents in Spain. So they have to build communities between the greenhouses, called "chabolas". These barracks are made out of old pallets, paperboards and plastic waste and people live their under degrading conditions. Sanitary facilities are not to be found far and wide. Quite often there is a fire in the densely built chabolas because power lines were not installed correctly.*

*Racialists and foreigner enemies*

*The situation between the Spaniards and the migrants is tense. The natives even fight with a high unemployment rate due to the world economic crisis and often blame the migrants for their problems. Racist riots are not unusual. Actually hardly any of the natives work in the greenhouses of Almería. 99 percent of workers in the "invernaderos" are immigrants.*

*The intensive farming damages the environment*

*Although they changed from a large-scale irrigation to droplet irrigation in the greenhouses, water scarcity is one of the ecological problems in the region among the usage of pesticides, leaching of soils and tons of plastic waste.*

*The use of pesticides will be reduced also in the conventional agriculture according to statements of civil servers and farmers. Instead of spraying agents - so the official version – they try to use beneficial organisms to control pests. Some workers, however, told us that they still use pesticides in the greenhouses and they do not always have protective suits. Also local aid organizations told of diseases, which were probably caused by pesticides.*

*They also try to recycle more and more the plastic waste, but piles of rubbish pile up around the greenhouses and the chabolas.*

*Exploitation due to pricing pressure*

*As a reason for the bad payment of the greenhouse workers farmers argue with the bad purchasing price. Farmers receive between 5 and 15 cents for a kilo of tomatoes during April and May. The operation of one hectare greenhouse costs between 30.000 and 40.000 euros. Especially smaller producers have to struggle to produce at least break-even. In Austrian supermarkets you pay about 5 to 8 euros for a kilo of tomatoes during the winter months. The difference stays on track. Lots of the fruits and vegetables spoil and supermarkets have to calculate this loss into their profit-margins. Probably most profit gains the functional intermediary.*

*Organic farming*

*Up to now only a small part of about 5 percent of the fruit and vegetable production is cultivated in biological way. The demand for organically grown vegetables increases as well*

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*in Spain. But biological farming doesn't imply automatically the compliance with social standards. It doesn't exist a label for fruits and vegetables, which implies the compliance of minimum standards concerning collective bargaining provisions and ecological and social standards.*

*Consumers take responsibility*

*The exploitation of labor is the basis of the method of production like in Almeria. But a boycott of Spanish fruits and vegetables is not a solution. Consumers should be aware of the situation and put pressure on the supermarkets. Consumers should also think about their own nutrition seriously. Do we actually need the full range of fruits and vegetables 12 months a year or should we consider the seasonality of products?'*

Exactly!

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- See also Tomato Slave Trade:  
<http://www.journeyman.tv/?lid=61652&tmpl=transcript>