Alquerian custom, epithets and dining

Epithets can be a means of implying esteem or in Alqueria's case the reverse. In Spain generally it is impolite to use one's nickname to one's face. Using them openly is however the norm in Alqueria, especially during one of the many heated verbal exchanges that take place nightly after the bars close. The obese olive mill owner Rodriquez, has many such names. These range from the obvious, *El Gordo* through the sycophantic *El Jefe* to the unprintable. Manuela has a vast array of names for him all of which fall into the unprintable category.

Epithets applied to Manuela are in the main complementary. *La Guapa*, *La Preciosa* and even *La Lujuria* by the young men of the village who know her well. It is the village girls who are less pretty than Manuela who call her La Siniestra. Unkind, true perhaps but unkind. Blythe Gruntmore alone is immune from this onslaught of derogatory titles. He cannot understand a word of the Alquerian dialect and Alquerians are mystified by his Geordie utterances. He is known as *El Triste*, The Sad One, meant to show sympathy. The villagers think his Geordie accent is a horrific speech impediment.

Dining can be a purely functional exercise or it can be a formal ritual. Whichever it is the rite of breaking bread is centuries old.

Enjoying a communal bowl of Alquerian Bagre Estofado is an informal affair but still etiquette applies. The bowl's contents are segmented as in the traditional Spanish way with each person eating almost to their divide. It is not polite to eat to the dividing line but to leave a small layer of food adjacent to it. The Alquerian method has been modified in as much as mining of the adjacent portion is much practised. When the person next to you is distracted for whatever reason a diligent excavator can dig into his neighbours portion. If he possesses the necessary dexterity, he can leave nothing but a thin crust for the unwary diner. This can lead to arguments and spoon fights often break out. Those who practise this method of food reclamation often have their

spoons specially sharpened on oil-stones to aid swifter hollowing and to help defend themselves.

On formal occasions it is necessary to show your appreciation of the cuisine. Simple exclamations of praise are considered vulgar in Alqueria so the 'belch' is employed. Probably based on an old Moorish custom of the region, it is exploited with relish in the village.

The belch, after or during dinner must resonate and be audible to all. When members of the opposing barrio are present, sectarian rivalry comes into play and the belches become progressively louder and more robust. On such occasions the noise and emitted gases eventually render the dining-room uninhabitable. All naked flames have to be extinguished to avoid explosion. This is a condition on all Alquerian insurance policies.

Dinner invitations to those outside the village are rarely accepted.