

Faded Glory in Spain

A mosquito-ravaged Gareth Evans writes from Barcelona, where he describes a welcome survival from Barcelona's herbal heritage

Barcelona's oldest quarter is the Barri Gtic. This is the site of the ancient Roman city and its tortuous alleys are open to all humanity. Losing yourself in its maze you will mix with the clientele of five star hotels or a junkie, beyond caring about concealment, injecting into his abdomen. Your path eventually will lead you to a flamboyant gothic church, such as the Cathedral or *Seu*, or to a cool arcaded square such as the *Plaza Reial*. This square is close to Barcelona's famous boulevard *Las Ramblas*, and can provide a respite from its hot, busy pavements.

Faded glory

Enjoy the shade of the regal palms and admire the light classical grace of the architecture but then take one step further beyond the far corner and the well trained eye (such as the readers of *Herbs* certainly possess) will see beyond, the dingy exterior of a small corner shop, a particular object of interest, an old-fashioned herbal shop. The Herboristeria del Rei is a herbal shop with a lineage. Found in 1823 it was run by the same family of herbalists until the last surviving member died in 1994. What we perceive now is faded glory. The floral panels that surround the wrought-iron gallery are all a uniform gummy brown with age and neglect, as anonymous as the shop's exterior.

Linnaean fountain

Shining out, however, in the middle of the dark interior, in a spotlight of its own, is a monument to the shop's golden age. Installed in 1860, when Barcelona was in an explosion of trade and industrialisation, is a bizarrely towering fountain. Atop the multiple tiers of white marble scallops are the bewigged features of Carolus Linnaeus (Carl von Linné), founder of modern systematic botany and today's classification system for flowering plants. This Nordic gentleman, benevolently cooling the torrid Spanish summer, is not an immediately obvious herbal mascot today (who would be?). The edifying bust perhaps points back to a time when pharmacy and botany were almost the same subject. Certainly at the time of its installation interested people were more aware than we are today that Linnaeus had been a physician. Writing extensively on plant medicine he overtly looked to the vernacular use of herbs for inspiration, nineteenth-century herbalists would have seen Linnaeus as one of their own.

Heady brew for sleep

I eagerly took my opportunity and asked at the shop's counter for a mixture to help me sleep. Insects had made a meal of me, leaving me looking like something left at the side of the plate. After a few questions, the *herborista* appeared to pull out all the stops, mixing a heady brew from the loose herbs in the apothecary's drawers at the back of the shop. With her help I identified some the ingredients as they went in the mixing bowl. I can still smell the well-rounded aroma of the handsome mixture as I am typing this: valerian, St. Johns wort (*hiprico*), melissa, a little lavender and hops, violets and rose buds chopped up with a pair of secateurs. When the mixture was complete she passed it to me with a polite Spanish incantation. I had no trouble sleeping that night.

What about the future?

A few days later, as I was leaving for home, I found myself passing the shop and dropped in to thank her for her effective brew. She and her husband appeared despondent about the future, which triggered off reciprocal unhappy thoughts in me. I had discovered recently that there had been a herbal shop in the town where I was brought up. Closed in the 1940s, like many of these accessible portals for wellbeing, it seems hardly anyone remembers it now. Will the contemporary emergence of the modern herbal outlet eventually put new life into venerable enterprises such as Herboristeria del Rei or will it suffer the same fate as many other local herbal shops and linger only in the memory like its fragrances?

If you would like to visit the Herboristeria del Rei while it still exists, you will find it at Carrer del Vidre 1, 08002 Barcelona, Spain.

Gareth Evans is a writer on plants gardens and garden history. His article on Linnaeus in the Fields was published in Herbs Vol 25 No. 4, 2000 and more of his writings can be seen at www.thepassionflower.com