

Ella Robbins – Santander Travel Award Report

After being granted the Santander Travel Award, I was able to travel to Spain for 3 weeks to complete my dissertation research on the production and consumption trends of Organic Avocados. The country has the highest percentage of organic avocado wholesalers within the world market, yet 70% of total organic production in Spain is exported. It is also the only European country that both exports and imports avocados. Based on these astonishing facts, I set out to explore the consumption trends of organic vegetables in Barcelona, as it is one of the densely populated cities in Spain, to understand why based on this information, the country's organic avocado consumption is low.

To explore the trends of consumption in Barcelona, I spent just over a week exploring local markets and neighbourhoods and decided to focus on two areas of the city. I attempted to minimise my research in areas inundated with international tourists, as it is likely they would skew my understanding of the organic consumption trends. To gain a representative of Spanish locals, I focused on a local residential area, Guinardó and Gracià, a local area with a higher population of foreigners and young professionals.

In Guinardo, I attended an organic vegetable box scheme, which was a cooperative where the farmer directly distributes the seasonal vegetables directly to a local hall, and then a certain weight of produce is measured out into a basket per person. Each member of the cooperative is on a rota to distribute the vegetables on a given week. This scheme is totally organic, and they receive only what is being harvested on the local farm, so is also fully seasonal. These types of social groups are great for conscious consumers living in a city, however; they do pose a question of sustainability. An Individuals closely intertwined in the organic world mentioned that although these schemes are very promising and provide good quality, fresh, local produce, there is a risk that it is no longer sustainable for the farmers to drive into central Barcelona once a week and distribute to all the different locations across the city, and that is why we shouldn't demonise 'middle men' in the food distribution network.

I found it particularly interesting talking to a range of people, from vegetable market stall owners to pioneering businessman selling organic produce to meet the demands of trends. From Barcelona, I travelled down to the south of Spain to understand the production aspect of the network, where I stayed and worked on an organic avocado farm for a week. This gave me the opportunity to immerse myself in the grounds of a working farm and attempt to absorb interesting information from this environment. I quickly learnt that the most efficient way to find contacts in a very specific field, is by a snowball effect, and using the current contact you have. When I was working on the farm, the owner arranged an interview for me with a larger organic avocado commercial farmer, alongside the distributor of these farms. To compare my data on organic vegetable shops in Barcelona, I also interviewed one in Malaga town, which was interesting to see the contrast in views on the whole network, and what the future predictions are likely to be.

The information I have managed to collect on this trip has been invaluable and talking to individuals in this industry has been particularly useful and has helped to create strong representation of the organic avocado network as a whole. Although this research is very specific and, it has really educated me on how many people and livelihoods, time and pressure, is consumed to ensure that the UK receives avocados all year round in our supermarkets.

I would like to express my gratitude towards this Santander Travel Award, as without the grant, I would've been unable to gain research experience abroad for my dissertation. It has developed my confidence in researching, awareness of cultural differences, and an interest to learn Spanish. Applying for a travel research grant is an invaluable experience, which I would encourage anyone to do.

