

Barcelona ‘grandmas’ dish out cooking wisdom, and find nourishment themselves

BY ALBERT STUMM
ASSOCIATED PRESS

BARCELONA, Spain — Once the potatoes are cooked and the eggs half set, Sonia Castel places a plate over the sauté pan and instructs one of her students to grab the handle.

Castel, 63, thrums on the counter for a drumroll as Mason Kauffman, one of a group of American exchange students in the cooking workshop, holds the plate steady and steels himself to flip the pan. After a countdown of 3, 2, 1, cheers erupt as he makes the flip, sliding the eggs back into the pan to finish cooking a Spanish tortilla, or omelet.

“I was so nervous,” says Kaufmann, a junior at New Hampshire’s Plymouth State University, smiling broadly.

After each student has a turn, Castel pulls them into a hug and practically demands a kiss on the cheek. “You have to pay for the lesson!”

The workshop at Grandmas Cooking Barcelona offers tourists, schools and other visitors “authentic Barcelona cooking classes with local grandmas and grandpas.” It aims to share traditional Spanish and Catalan dishes and techniques that have become harder to find in the city’s restaurants.

The benefits run both ways. The program helps provide purpose to older people who might be struggling with loneliness, says its founder, Veronica Baena.

VISITORS CAN LEARN TO COOK THE WAY GRANDMA MIGHT

“Yes, it’s a gastronomic experience, but above all it’s about the empowerment of older people,” says Baena. “The idea was to try to recover their own personality, their own selves and integrate them into the international Barcelona.”

Baena founded Grandmas Cooking Barcelona in 2017 after



Nuria Isanda, 75, third from left, teaches tourists how to prepare and present traditional Spanish dishes during a cooking workshop at Grandmas Cooking in Barcelona, Spain, on Oct. 14..

seeing grandparents dropping off and picking up grandchildren at her son’s school. She learned some didn’t have much else going on in their lives anymore, so she invited a couple of them to cook at her house. Now, there are 20 older women — and one man — who share cooking tips, life lessons and more than a few jokes at civic centers, social service organizations and other locations in the city.

PASSING DOWN KITCHEN WISDOM HELPS THE ‘GRANDPARENTS,’ TOO

Early on, Baena recruited a friend’s neighbor, Nuria Isanda, because of the irresistible aromas wafting from her kitchen window.

Isanda, 75, said her recipes are rarely found these days in a city whose restaurants increasing-

ly cater to tourists. Such dishes cooked by older people might not even be appreciated by their own families, who may visit on weekends and “don’t even thank them for the food.”

The workshops, Isanda says, “can be the platform that makes grandmas feel valued and useful.”

At the recent workshop for study-abroad students, held in a rented kitchen at a civic center, Isanda showed them how to make zucchini ribbons, thread them onto skewers and dress them with a vinaigrette. Students also smeared crackers with goat cheese and blueberry jam, or decorated ensaladilla rusa, a potato salad laced with hard-boiled egg, chopped pickles and tuna.

DON’T CRACK EGGS ON THE BOWL, AND OTHER TIPS

Isanda and Castel passed along

cooking tips, like to always crack eggs on a counter, not the edge of a bowl, to keep out the shells.

They also stressed the sustainability of traditional cooking. For example, don’t waste anything, even carrot peels, onion skins and the ends of cut vegetables. Save them in a bag in the freezer. When the bag is full, make vegetable stock.

Castel joined Grandmas last year after retiring from a career in hospital admissions. Relating with so many foreign people has made her feel more connected and “more alive.”

“The joy of sharing food is a social act, and they leave happy,” she said. “Grandmas gives me that, and you can’t put a price on it.”

Albert Stumm writes about travel, food and wellness. Find his work at <https://www.albert-stumm.com>

Fire roasted corn soup

BY MAYO CLINIC RECIPES

Roasting corn develops its natural sugars and creates a caramelized flavor. If you don’t have jalapenos, you can use 1/2 teaspoon of cayenne pepper instead.

Serves 12

- 4 cups corn kernels
- 1 1/2 tablespoons olive oil
- 3 cups chopped onion
- 2 cups chopped carrots
- 2 cups chopped celery
- 2 teaspoons chopped garlic
- 1/4 cup all-purpose flour (substitute with corn starch for a gluten-free soup)
- 1 teaspoon cumin
- 6 cups vegetable stock
- 2 jalapeno peppers, minced
- 1 1/2 cups half-and-half
- 1 teaspoon salt
- 1/8 teaspoon white pepper
- 1 tablespoon chopped parsley

Heat oven to 500 F. Place the corn kernels on a baking sheet. Roast in the oven until they begin to caramelize, about 8 minutes.

In a large soup pot, heat the oil over medium-high heat. Add the onion, carrots, celery and garlic, stirring constantly. Cook until the vegetables are soft and tender, about 5 minutes. Reduce heat and stir in the corn, flour and cumin. Mix until the flour is evenly dispersed.

Add the vegetable stock and jalapenos and let simmer for about 30 minutes. Stir in half-and-half, salt, pepper and parsley. Remove from heat and serve.

Nutritional analysis per serving

- Serving size: 8 ounces
- Calories: 119
- Total carbohydrate: 17 g
- Cholesterol: 9 mg
- Dietary fiber: 2 g
- Monounsaturated fat: 3 g
- Protein: 3 g
- Saturated fat: 2 g
- Sodium: 184 mg
- Total fat: 5 g

Delivery robots accused of scanning customers’ faces, sharing data

Chicago’s food delivery robots are facing legal challenges

BY KADE HEATHER/
BLOCK CLUB CHICAGO

The battle over Chicago’s food delivery robots has reached the courts, with two customers accusing the companies behind them of collecting their biometric data without consent.

The men filed separate class-action lawsuits in Cook County court Oct. 9 against Coco Robotics and Serve Robotics, alleging the companies violated a state privacy law. They claim the companies’ machines scanned their faces and hands without their knowledge or consent.

Both companies dispute the allegations.

The lawsuits allege the robots’ cameras and LiDAR — a technology that sends out laser pulses to measure distances and map the surrounding environment — captured measurements of customers’ faces and hands as they approached the machines to retrieve their orders.

Mitchell Breidinger, from the Near North Side, says he ordered groceries through DoorDash in September 2025 and never chose robot delivery. But his order was assigned to a Coco robot, according to his lawsuit. When it arrived, he had to stand close to the machine to enter a code and retrieve his groceries.

Breidinger alleges the robot’s cameras recorded his face, head and hands, while its LiDAR sensors measured their geometry. His lawsuit also alleges a remote operator watched video of the delivery in real time. He says Coco did not tell him in writing that it would collect his biometric information, explain how long it would keep the data or obtain his



A Coco Delivery Robot sits in Chicago’s Lakeview neighborhood on April 22.

written consent.

Barry Schain, a Lincoln Park resident, alleges a similar experience with Serve Robotics. He says he has received three deliveries from Serve robots, most recently Oct. 4, when an Uber Eats order was assigned to a robot even though he had not selected robot delivery, according to the lawsuit.

Both lawsuits claim the companies retain video and sensor data to train artificial intelligence systems. Schain’s lawsuit also points to Serve’s disclosures about licensing video and LiDAR datasets to third parties for AI training. Breidinger’s lawsuit claims Coco has shared robot-collected data with OpenAI and other third parties.

Customers’ biometric measurements are then stored alongside their names and addresses in the companies’ data systems, according to the lawsuits, linking the data to identifiable individuals.

The lawsuits accuse the companies of violating the Illinois Biometric Privacy Act, which requires companies collecting

biometric data to provide written notice explaining what they collect and why, obtain written consent and maintain a policy for retaining and destroying the data.

Spokespersons for both Coco and Serve denied that the companies collect biometric information from customers or passersby. A Serve spokesperson said the company “will defend against” the lawsuit, while a Coco spokesperson said the company is “confident that this frivolous lawsuit will go away.”

“This lawsuit fundamentally misunderstands our technology, we have not collected biometric data in Chicago,” the Coco spokesperson said in a statement, adding that complying with privacy laws is a “top priority” for the company.

“The data we share is navigational data used to make sidewalks safer for all users,” the Coco spokesperson continued. “For example, we provide real-time sidewalk hazard information to BlindSquare, a navigation app built for people who are blind or

have low vision. We do not share data from the beginning or end of delivery trips under our data sharing partnerships. Privacy and compliance with the law are top priorities in everything we do.”

The Serve spokesperson said the company’s robots use cameras and sensors to navigate sidewalks safely.

“Serve does not use that data to identify individuals and our systems are not designed to identify individuals or create biometric profiles,” the spokesperson said in a statement.

The lawsuits seek statutory damages of \$1,000 per negligent violation or \$5,000 per intentional or reckless violation, as well as other relief.

The lawsuits add to growing scrutiny of delivery robots that have become a regular sight on Chicago sidewalks, where residents have raised concerns about safety, accessibility, surveillance and the potential loss of delivery jobs.

Chicago launched its delivery robot pilot program in 2022

under former Mayor Lori Lightfoot. Coco began operating in the city in late 2024, followed by Serve Robotics in September 2025. The program, overseen by the Chicago Department of Transportation and the Department of Business Affairs and Consumer Protection, is set to expire in May 2027 unless the City Council approves an extension.

Lincoln Park resident Josh Robertson started a petition last year calling on the city to pause the program until officials release safety and accessibility data, hold a public hearing and establish clearer rules. More than 4,500 people had signed the petition as of last month. Residents have reported robots blocking sidewalks and crosswalks, creating obstacles for people with disabilities and raising concerns about cameras recording pedestrians.

The pushback has also reached City Hall. Ald. Daniel La Spata (1st) rejected plans to expand the robots across much of his ward in February after more than 83% of residents who responded to an online survey strongly opposed the expansion.

The city has also created a 311 category for residents to report safety concerns and other complaints about the devices.

In March, a Serve robot smashed through the glass of a CTA bus shelter in West Town, scattering shards of glass across the sidewalk. Days later, a Coco robot collided with another bus shelter in Old Town. Both companies said they were investigating the crashes and took responsibility for repair costs.

In September, a video showing more than a dozen Coco robots apparently circling one another and getting stuck on a Lincoln Park sidewalk went viral, drawing hundreds of thousands of views and renewing criticism of the technology.

The companies have defended the robots as a safer, more sustainable option for short distance deliveries that can reduce car trips and traffic congestion.

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