



Southern Europe

ECONOMY

A Farmer's Life in Spain

Joseph Solé owns a farm in far northeastern Spain, near the French border and about twenty miles from the Mediterranean Coast. Here he tells about the agricultural economy of the region, and how farming has changed over the years.

My farm is in Cataluña [Catalonia] in the northeast of Spain. Farms are very much affected by their location. Spain is a big country and the geographical, climatic and cultural conditions vary enormously from one region to another. In provinces such as Galicia, which is very poor, you have *minifundios*, tiny landholdings, which are really too small to make a profit. In provinces such as Andalucía and Castilla, there are huge estates called *latifundios*, where half the land is owned by a tiny minority of the farmers. These *latifundios* mean that the vast majority of farmers are, in fact, farm laborers. They don't own the land and only work in the olive-picking and harvesting season. So, although there are a very few rich landowners, the region is poor and underdeveloped. Both the *minifundios* and the *latifundios* have brought unemployment, and many people have moved to the richer provinces of Spain and to Europe.

I'm perhaps a typical Catalan farmer, with a medium-size farm of 100 hectares (250 acres). Up until a few years ago, my farm was worked in the traditional Catalan way. It was divided into *masoverias* (tenant farms), each of about 15 hectares (37 acres). The rent for these farms is normally paid in kind—that is to say the crop is divided so one third goes to the owner and the tenant keeps the rest. The decision on what crop to sow is usually taken jointly, because both want a profitable harvest.

My main crop is wheat, which is the main [grain] crop in Spain as a whole. Small crops of barley, oats and maize [corn] are grown, and we have to import these cereals [grains] to cover our needs. The central region of Spain—*la Mancha*—is the biggest producer of cereals. Like most farmers, I sell my cereals through the state [government] organization, which offers a guaranteed price. It is not obligatory [required], but it is easier to use this system. The guaranteed price is, in my opinion, very low, and as we hardly receive any subsidies [government financial aid], it is very difficult to make ends meet. This has hit the small *masover* [tenant farmer] the hardest. Of the five *masovers* I had a few years ago, I have only one left and he will be leaving shortly. The land is not profitable any more and everyone is leaving to work in industry.

. . . I have had to reorganize my farm in view of these changes. I decided to specialize in cereals rather than cattle, which require more manpower. I sow these crops on half my land, and turn the remaining half over to forestry. I plant fast-growing trees such as the plane, which takes about twenty years to grow, rather than the pine, which takes between eighty

and a hundred years to grow. Pine is used for making furniture and you can get a good price for it, but it doesn't compensate [make up] for having to wait eighty years to receive your money! I sell timber direct to the sawmills, and from there it goes to make paper, laminates for furniture, or wooden boxes for use in industry. I've also invested in modern machinery, which means that the farm can basically be worked by one man—except when I rent a combine harvester for three days at harvest time.

As is the tradition, my eldest son will inherit the farm and work it by himself. In fact . . . most of the work is done by him already. My two other children have received a university education to give them a good start in other careers.

From "It's difficult to make ends meet" (retitled "A Farmer's Life in Spain") from *We Live in Spain* by Richard Bristow. Copyright ©1982 by **Hodder and Stoughton Limited**. Reprinted by permission of the publisher.

Understanding What You Read After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions

1. In what way does landholding vary from region to region in rural Spain?

2. How do the *minifundio* and *latifundio* systems each help keep rural Spaniards poor?

3. What was the traditional way a Catalan farmer worked his land? How and why has that system changed in recent years?

Activity

Imagine that you are living in rural Spain. Write a letter to a relative explaining why you are leaving home to live in the city.