

# BARRILLA IN ALICANTE

James Howell (c. 1594–1666)

to Christopher Jones

Alicante, 27 March 1621

I am now (thanks be to God) come to Alicante, the chief rendezvous I aimed at in Spain, for I am to send hence a commodity called barrilla<sup>1</sup> to Sir Robert Mansel for making of crystal glass; and I have treated with Signior Andriotti, a Genoa merchant, for a good round parcel of it, to the value of £2000 by letters of credit from Master Richant. And upon his credit I might have taken many thousand pounds more, he is so well-known in the Kingdom of Valencia.

This barrilla is a strange kind of vegetable, and it grows nowhere upon the surface of the earth in that perfection as here. The Venetians have it hence, and it is a commodity whereby this maritime town does partly subsist, for it is an ingredient that goes to the making of the best Castile soap.

It grows thus: 'tis a round, thick, earthy shrub that bears berries like barberries, betwixt blue and green. It lies close to the ground, and when it is ripe they dig it up by the roots and put it together in cocks, where they leave it to dry many days like hay. Then they make a pit of a fathom deep in the earth, and with an instrument like one of our prongs they take the tuffs and put fire to them. And when the flame comes to the berries, they melt and dissolve into an azure liquor and fall down into the pit till it be full. Then they dam it up, and some days after they open it and find this barrillia juice turned to a blue stone, so hard that it is scarce malleable. It is sold at one hundred Crowns a tun, but I had it for less.

There is also a spurious flower called gazull that grows here, but the glass that's made of that is not so resplendent and clear.

I have been here now these three months, and most of my food has been grapes and bread, with other roots, which have made me so fat that I think if you saw me you would hardly know me, such nutriture this deep sanguine Alicante grape gives.

I have not received a syllable from you since I was in Antwerp, which transforms me to wonder and engenders odd thoughts of jealousy in me that as my body grows fatter, your love grows lanker towards me. I pray take off these scruples and let me hear from you, else it will make a schism in friendship, which I hold to be a very holy league and no less than a piacle<sup>2</sup> to infringe it.

Joseph Jacobs, ed. *Epistolae Hoelianae: The Familiar Letters of James Howell* (London: David Nutt, 1892), I:60–61.

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<sup>1</sup> Barrilla refers both to three varieties of saltwort plants (*Salsoda soda*, *Salsola kali*, and *Halogeton sativus*) and to the ash derived from the plants. Widely used in Catalan glass-making since at least 1189, barilla became a major export by the seventeenth century.

<sup>2</sup> *piacle* — a heinous offense requiring expiation