

Spanish revellers stub out cigarettes as new law takes force

January 2 2011, by David Williams

Smokers stubbed out their cigarettes in tapas bars and restaurants across Spain as one of Europe's strictest anti-tobacco laws came into force on Sunday.

After a one-day amnesty granted for New Year's Day, the new law banning [smoking](#) in all bars, restaurants and public places -- including even some outdoor areas -- took effect at the stroke of midnight Saturday.

It was a shock for many Spaniards for whom the cafe culture -- lighting up with a few friends while enjoying a drink and tapas -- has been an essential part of daily life.

"It is over already. We have taken away all the ashtrays. When you look at the health question I agree but I also think there should be a minimum zone where you are allowed to smoke," said Elena de Lucia, a 22-year-old waitress, and smoker, at the Variety Tavern, a pub in central Madrid.

Her fellow weekend bar worker, Cristina Madrid, 22, a non-smoker, welcomed the new law. "Really, I used to end up smoking a lot as a passive smoker and the next day it affects you," she said.

Spain had an anti-smoking law since January 2006 but the impact was barely noticeable.

It banned smoking in the workplace, on public transport and in shops.

But it allowed owners of bars, restaurants and cafes to decide whether to ban smoking or not. Most, faced with a drop in business, naturally chose to permit their customers to light up.

The new law bans smoking in all enclosed public spaces, including bars, restaurants and nightclubs and makes it illegal to smoke in children's parks or anywhere on school or hospital grounds.

The catering industry worries it will take a hit.

Cafes, bars and restaurants carried notices on the doors and windows such as "Smoke-Free Area. No Smoking" or showed a lighted cigarette with a red line across it.

Cafes in Madrid's old town Sunday morning were busy with people drinking coffee and eating churros, a traditional breakfast of a coiled fritter of fried dough -- but smokers were nowhere to be seen.

"It is too soon, we are waiting to see how this is going to work," said the duty manager at the Cafe de San Millan, Jose.

One smoker who tried to light up was reminded by a waiter that is was no longer permitted.

"It's a stupidity," the man, Carlos Montesinos, 47, of the new law. "I think they should provide separate smoking zones."

Another customer, French tourist Lionel Roesel, said he thought Spaniards would have harder time accepting the new restrictions than French citizens when a similar law took effect there two years ago.

"In France, we all complained at the beginning, but now we can go into bars with children," said the 47-year-old financial director from

Montpellier.

"But I think that for Spain it will be much harder. In Spain there is a stronger culture of bars and cigarettes. It is a question of conviviality."

At the nearby El Cantalejo cafe, a barman Camilo, said he had noticed few customers coming in for breakfast.

"People want to come in to smoke a cigarette," he said.

Working at the door of central Madrid's Capucho cocktail bar, 60-year-old Juan Manuel Casado, a former smoker, predicted a slight drop in business at the start of the ban.

"But then people will get used to it as they have done in Italy, Greece, Ireland, every country. When you want to go out with friends to have a few drinks you will have to go to a bar, and when you want to smoke you will have to go out to the street."

None of the cocktail bar's staff smoked, Casado said. "It is going to be great."

Anti-smoking campaigners in Spain, where there are an estimated 50,000 smoking related deaths each year, were overjoyed.

"This year, 2011, I can say the Three Wise Men have brought a great gift for [Spain](#): the publication of this new law," said Jose Luis Diaz-Maroto Munoz, a family doctor and expert on the effects of smoking.

He said it would discourage children taking up the habit, encourage smokers to quit and "allow us all to breathe air that is not polluted by smoke".

But the catering industry worries it will take a hit.

Jose Luis Guerra, vice president of the Spanish Hotel and Catering Association, said bars and restaurants had taken a beating for the past 31 months because of the economic crisis.

He estimated the ban could lead to a further 5.0-percent drop in sales in restaurants, about 10 percent in bars and 15 percent in night clubs.

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