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Bullfighting in Spain Is Stumbling

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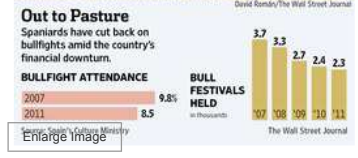
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By DAVID ROMÁN

EL CASTILLO DE LAS GUARDAS, Spain—Not many years ago, Juan Pedro Domecq's ranch was struggling to keep up with the soaring demand of Spain's bullfighting industry.

Today the industry's most prominent breeder is shedding his stock as recession, animal-rights activism and regional nationalism chip away at a 300-year-old national institution.



Promoters preparing for Spain's high season this month expect the number of corridas, the bloody showdowns in which bulls nearly always die at the hands of matadors, to be about half the 1,011 registered in 2007, the year before the economy went into a dive.

Since then, Mr. Domecq said, the number of bulls and cows on his 7,400-acre property, Lo Alvaro, had fallen apace, down roughly to 500 from 1,000.

Crisis Hits the Bullring

Recession, animal-rights activism and regional nationalism are chipping away at Spain's 300-year-old bullfighting industry.



The 44-year-old breeder said he had reduced his staff to 10 from 18, a setback to the economy of El Castillo de las Guardas, the nearby town whose economy depends largely on him.

Similar troubles for other ranchers are having a wider impact on this bull-breeding region 30 miles northwest of Seville, the largest city in southern Spain. Five other ranches within 12 miles of Lo Alvaro breed fighting bulls.

"The crisis here is huge," said Mr. Domecq, whose family has owned Lo

Alvaro for eight decades. "The bad economy is killing us. Available income from spectators is way down...Lots of the smaller breeders won't make it."

Bullfighting is a €2.5 billion (\$3.3 billion) industry, employing more than 10,000 people across Spain, including matadors and assistants, managers, breeders, bullring workers and promoters. The corrida is a ritual long embedded in Spain's culture, but contemporary ethical concerns and political controversy are starting to take a toll.

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A 2010 ban on bullfights in Spain's Catalonia region came into force last year. Weeks ago the government of San Sebastián, a seaside city and popular tourist destination in the Basque country that held seven corridas in 2012, said no bullfights will be allowed there at least until 2016.

In both cases, opposition to bullfighting grew over years of campaigning by animal-rights groups and by Catalanian and Basque pro-independence groups that reject the corrida as a quintessential Spanish tradition.

The animal-rights cause has been led by Partido Animalista, a political party founded in 2003. Silvia Barquero, a party spokeswoman, said the ban in Catalonia was in part a result of an Animalista campaign targeting Spain's northern regions, where bullfighting was never as popular as in the south.

These setbacks to the industry, while significant, are minor compared with the collapse of Spain's property boom.

Juan Medina, a professor of economic theory at the University of Cáceres who moonlights as a bullfighting blogger, has compiled data showing how steep declines in housing sales and new zoning plans have dried up the coffers of town halls, which relied heavily on revenue from construction licenses and real-estate taxes to pay for annual celebrations for the town's patron saint.

These fiestas often involve bulls; the bigger towns hold corridas and the smaller ones hold bull runs along the lines of the internationally known San Fermin festival in Pamplona. The recession has hit the entire bullfighting revenue chain.

A common complaint, echoed by Mr. Domecq, is that corrida promoters are paying less for the bulls, while matadors and their large retinues are taking pay cuts.

Like every other professional matador in Spain, Alberto Aguilar is legally mandated to employ at least six assistants.

One of them is Raúl Ruiz, a 32-year-old banderillero. Near the end of each fight, he sticks arrow-like banderillas into the back of the charging bull to weaken it before the kill.

On a bright morning in April, Mr. Ruiz stood just behind Mr. Aguilar as the matador fought a cow in a small ring at Mr. Domecq's ranch—a preseason training routine and a way for breeders to select the healthiest and most aggressive cows to breed future bulls.

"The economy is just terrible, but we have to get by," Mr. Ruiz said. "We just hope this will turn around soon."

Seconds after Mr. Aguilar took a break in his shiny, expensive matador costume, Jesús Bayort, a red-haired 20-year-old from Seville, jumped in the ring in jeans and a long-sleeved shirt. He took some passes at the same cow, with somewhat less style, but came out smiling and unhurt.

Mr. Bayort is a novillero, a matador-in-training with a degree from one of Seville's bullfight schools. His worry is that the government in September raised the sales tax on tickets to novilladas, fights between trainees and young bulls, to the same level of that of corridas, which feature the top bullfighters.

As a result, promoters have reduced the number of novilladas planned this year, to less than one-third of the 667 held in 2007, dimming the prospects of aspiring matadors, banderillos and other paid assistants.

Mr. Bayort, who dropped out of school at age 17, said he is studying on his own to get a high-school diploma, just in case bullfighting doesn't pan out.

"This was never an easy career to start with," Mr. Bayort said. "The rule of thumb is that out of 50 guys starting in bullfighting school, 10 will become professionals, with only one at best becoming a matador."

Write to David Román at david.roman@dowjones.com

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