

# Destination Dining

## CATALAN COMEBACK

Disfrutar could well put Spanish cuisine back on the culinary map.

JAIME EE

MATEU CASAÑAS. Oriol Castro. Eduard Xatruch. They're the ex-elBulli chefs who should have been mentioned in the same breath as Ferran Adria, but never were. Yet without them, Adria couldn't have executed the ideas that made him the legend he was in his heyday. Now, without them, he's become a cliché, playing celebrity restaurateur and possibly the only one still interested in his yet-to-materialise elBulli Foundation.

But without him, this trio is growing from strength to strength, first with the restaurant *Compartir* in the holiday town of Cadaques and then *Disfrutar* in Barcelona, which opened in December 2014. *Disfrutar* is now the hottest table in Barcelona with one Michelin star and a 'Miele One to Watch' accolade from the World's 50 Best Restaurants list. To add to this, we would put our money on these three best friends finally putting Spanish cuisine – after a long dry spell – back into the international spotlight.

Enter the modest entrance of *Disfrutar* – Spanish for 'enjoy' – in the Eixample district and you are led into a Mediterranean wonderland that gets bigger and deeper the further you walk in. It's a giddy, colourful playground decorated with ceramic tiles that are on the one hand a nod to the artist Joan Miro and on the other, a tribute to the clay ovens and cooking vessels of old. You are led past the bar and the immense kitchen where the chefs are visible from wherever you sit, and into the white, brightly lit dining room inspired by fishing villages. You end your meal in the outdoor terrace, sipping coffee and nibbling cotton candy plucked off a cotton 'tree'.

The comparison with elBulli is inevitable, but it doesn't do justice to *Disfrutar*, which speaks a totally different language from the boundary-pushing theatrics of Ferran Adria. Yes, it is technique-driven but unlike Adria – who lost the plot of what food is supposed to be – there is heart and soul here. And above all, it's just crazy delicious.

From a sponge finger that melts in the mouth as a frozen passion fruit and rum cocktail, to a carbonara 'pasta' where gelatin tubes achieve the perfect al dente bite of the real thing, *Disfrutar* doesn't disappoint. The well-schooled staff effortlessly torch, swirl, smoke, siphon and just short of juggle teapots as they roll out over 30 different bites of every colour, flavour and persuasion, some to near applause-worthy effect. Such as a bed of black sesame seeds that is shaken to reveal puffs of beetroot meringue. Or smoked instant apple cider that's left to bubble and steep at the table before being poured in smoky glasses to go with a millefeuille of Idiazabal cheese – where cheese foam is fried to form a crispy wafer and sandwiched with light, foamy cream. And we almost cry when



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PHOTOS BY FRANCESC GUILLAMET & ADRIÀ GOULA FOR DISFRUTAR.

we bite into the most perfect Chinese mantou – a ball of feather-light fried dough gently moistened with a caviar cream filling.

The Spanish penchant for fried eggs and mushrooms is re-imagined as a tempura of egg yolk balanced over an eggshell filled with intense mushroom jelly, paired with Chinese-style 'dumplings' stuffed with mushroom confit, emitting dry-ice 'steam'. And the classic dessert of 'tarta al whisky' – a cake made with egg yolk, Chantilly cream and hazelnuts drizzled with a sprinkle of whisky – is presented as little bonbons made with the same ingredients, plus the extra step of having you rub your hands with a bit of whisky so you can sniff before you eat.

"What we make here is creativity," says the unassuming Chef Xatruch in his endearingly fractured English. "It's how we like to cook, to make new techniques." *Compartir*, which they opened in 2012, featured hearty Catalan home cooking but after one and a half years, they wanted to go back to their first love – progressive cooking. But he makes it very clear that technique is not the be all and end all.

"If you come and eat – if you have a lot of experience with gastronomy, you can know this is a new technique or not. But if here comes my mother, she only knows if it is good or bad. She doesn't mind if it is new.

"It's very important that everything has to be very very tasty. Like the (deconstructed) ceviche. If a Peruvian comes here to eat, he must say, 'yes, this is ceviche'. It is not enough for him to say it is 'similar'. It has to be perfect."

Without getting ahead of ourselves, we have to agree it very nearly is.

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## ONE TO WATCH



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(1) Multi-spherical tatin of foie gras and corn. (2) The main dining room is inspired by small fishing villages. (3) The restaurant is a colourful playground decorated with ceramic tiles. (4) Deconstructed ceviche is made up of monkfish cream and carrot sorbet. (5) The three best friends have been working together for more than 20 years.

WHILE NOT QUITE in the same league as *Disfrutar*, young chef Àlvar Ayuso is making waves with a menu that combines wholesome Catalan cooking with a Nordic sensibility. Throw in some Japanese touches and you have a tiny little eatery with a whole lot of upside.

Also in the Eixample district, *Alvart* is a simple operation with minimal staff. Oddly, we're the only table on the evening we're there, but we're also told that it's Chef Ayuso's day off. But the chef covering for him does a commendable job, delivering a menu that starts off with smoked or marinated raw seafood and then edges into heavier fare.

Smoky mackerel on dashi jelly; seaweed cracker and sea urchin; and marinated tuna slices have a bit of a Japanese wannabe feel to it. It gets more interesting when Spanish and Nordic influences kick in, as in a rich pigeon carpaccio and pickled pumpkin, and amazingly chewy, tender gnocchi in a sticky sauce given a gelatinous oomph with lovely cod belly that has

the texture of Chinese fish maw.

The food is extremely salty overall for Asian palates, but there's no denying Chef Ayuso's knack for mixing and matching different influences and flavours and coming up with a perfect balance. We'll be back, just to see how he ups his game in person.

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