

“Ten years ago the English said that all we had to offer was paella”

The man who brought us foaming gazpacho and deconstructed tortilla explains why haute cuisine is not about tradition cooking

STEPHEN BURGEN

Lunatic or genius, Ferrán Adrià has changed the face of haute-cuisine forever. He is a true original: an inventive eccentric. “In Figueres they compare me to Dali. In Barcelona its Gaudi and in New York they call me Picasso,” he laughs.

He claims it was purely by chance that he became a chef, but by the age of 22 he was head chef at El Bulli, the now world-famous restaurant at Cala Monjoi near Roses on the Costa Brava, and is among the elite of chefs who have been awarded three Michelin stars.

His international fame was sealed last year when *The New York Times* hailed him as the greatest chef in the world and pronounced French cuisine if not dead, then moribund.

There has always been a rich tradition of cooking here, but what has changed, he says, is that haute cuisine was not home-grown, but borrowed, mainly from France and Italy. “Ten years ago the English said that all we had to offer was paella, and it was true.”

Before presenting us with our 28-

course dinner which, for an experience of a lifetime, was a steal at 135 euros, he said: “What you will eat tonight is made in Catalunya by Catalans. It is truly Catalan.”

Actually it was out of this world and the only thing that was recognisably Catalan about it was a distinctive blend of eccentricity and craftsmanship.

“All the world thinks that contemporary cuisine comes from the traditional cuisine of the country, but this is not true,” he says. Haute cuisine is a thing apart. “No one said it was a threat to traditional cooking when haute cuisine here was French. Only when Adrià started messing with pan con tomate did it become a threat,” he says, referring to his notorious “deconstruction” of the traditional dish.

Unlike other three-star chefs, he doesn't use expensive ingredients: there are no lobsters, no faux filet. The caviare, when it arrived sometime between the deep-fried rabbit's ear and the golden egg, turned out to be miniature frozen melon balls. As for the truffles, which appeared

after the mango ravioli and were served with lemon foam, they were the very essence of truffle, except they weren't truffle at all but something Adrià and his colleagues concocted in the laboratory.

What other three-star chef would sink to offering the humble sardine, cuttlefish or rabbit, all of which made their appearance. To Adrià, every ingredient is judged by its own lights: a great sardine is a great sardine and need not be compared to a turbot. However, he sees things in a fish that others do not. Not many, for example, would dare to serve mussel sorbet, but why not?

One of the delights of his cuisine is the way he surprises you with temperature, texture and the juxtaposition of sweet and salt. Much of this is devised between September and March, when the restaurant closes and the team retire to their food laboratory in Carrer Portaferrià in Barcelona.

“In the laboratory we talk a lot, we look for the spark. I want to create a dish that will change the world, the question is how?”



Adrià claims it was only by chance that he became a chef./FRANCESC GUILLAMET

Cooking is about more than feeding the customer and making the chef rich, he says, it's understanding that it's an art form, and this is what is driving the best chefs now. “Were living the revolution that happened

in France in the 1980s,” he says. “It never happened here, but it's happening now. Keep your eyes open. This is the most important moment of the past ten years. We're in the vanguard.”

l'Empordà has distilled 2,000 years of tradition into making some of the finest wines in the world

Jordi Urpi

Today we begin a journey through the different wine-producing areas of Catalonia in search of the best that Catalan soil can offer. Let's start with an area that more than 2,000 years ago was the first on the Iberian Peninsula to cultivate vines: l'Empordà.

We visited two vineyards in this region: the Celler Oliver Conti in Campany, and the Celler Masia Serra in Cantallops.

The Celler Oliver Conti was set up by two brothers, Xavier and Jordi. While neither had any experience but, after Jordi trained in France, it took them only five years before their labours bore fruit in 1997. The Oliver Conti Blanc 1999 (13 euros) and the Oliver Conti Red 1999 (18 euros) were warmly received by experts for their complexity and strong character. Their 15 hectares are planted with a number of interna-

tional varieties, including Cabernet Franc, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot and Gewürztraminer. It is a small bodega, with an annual production of 35,000 bottles of red and 10 thousand of white. With their curiosity and love of innovation, they are sure to produce yet more marvels.

Not far from Campany is the village of Cantallops. Jaume Serra, heart and soul of the Celler Masia Serra, comes from a family with a long wine-producing history. The enterprising Jaume decided early on to produce wines of singular quality and character, although it was his father who started emphasising quality over quantity and joined the historic bodega of Castillo de Perelada. Jaume built on this and to the land given over to traditional varieties such as garnatxa, Jaume added international varieties. He takes great care in choosing the moment to harvest

the grapes and in the way that his wines are crafted.

The carefully produced wine he obtains is a tribute to the land from which it comes. His red is called Gneis (32 euros), named after the granite of the land and his white Ctònia (22 euros) after the soil of his vineyard. Both wines have found their place among the most select of Catalonia and have attracted international acclaim.

Jaume's restlessness didn't allow him to stop there and he went on to produce a sweet wine based on the few garnatxa vines that were left. By adding a small amount of an 1860 wine inherited from his grandfather he achieved an extraordinary sweet wine he called Ino (42 euros) that had an immediate international impact.

Jordi Urpi Ribas is chef and coproprietor of the country hotel Hostal del Castell de Gimennes (Baix Penedès). info@gimennes.com

Let's do lunch: Peixerot in Vilanova i La Geltrú

The Vilanova fishing fleet is moored 50m from Peixerot, which tells you something about the freshness of the food in this family restaurant which serves some of the best fish and rice dishes in the country.

It opened in 1918 and has been run by successive generations of the Mestres family and is currently in the hands of Jordi, with Josep in charge of the kitchen. The restaurant is large and light but this is a place you go for the food, not the design. This is authentic Catalan seafood at its best, whether you order a suquet, sipia a la bruta (cuttlefish cooked with tomato, onion and chocolate) or popetes amb patates i allioli (octopus with potatoes and garlic mayonnaise). The fideua is superb, as are the rice dishes, in particular the arròs negre (black rice). For starters they offer, among other traditional dishes, esqueixada (salt cod salad) and xató (tuna and salt cod salad with a romesco sauce).



Peixerot also has a branch in the Sants area of Barcelona in the Carrer Tarragona. The average price of lunch or dinner is 30-35 euros.

Closed: Sunday nights except in summer

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