

Restaurants

Disfrutar, Barcelona: Catalan creativity

‘We arrived “early”, at 8pm, so there was space for two right by the counter’

Nicholas Lander



The interior of Disfrutar © Adria Goula Sarda

8 HOURS AGO by: **Nicholas Lander**

My Barcelonista friend was quite adamant. If I wanted to eat at Disfrutar on a Saturday night without a reservation, then I had better meet him there at 8pm, the Spanish equivalent of 5pm elsewhere.

I arrived on the dot, to join a modest queue of two English women waiting patiently outside the restaurant’s glass frontage, which offered an excellent view of Francesca Gallardo, its talented pastry chef, hard at work. We decided to walk a few hundred metres to the Ninot market, where we listened to a band called Quartz and watched numerous under-fives dance to the music, before returning to Disfrutar.

Our luck was in. Because of our early arrival, there was space for two right by the counter and in between the front window and the front door, seats which offered us double the pleasure of the food and wines we were to enjoy. This was entirely due to the diligence of Huc Sanchón, Disfrutar's relaxed but extremely well organised maître d', and the creative use of a difficult space made by chefs Mateu Casañas, Oriol Castro and Eduard Xatruch.

From the restaurant's narrow frontage, diners walk past kitchens on either side, one where cold food is prepared, the other hot. Then the restaurant opens out into an area that has a full view of all the chefs. Beyond this, there is a spacious terrace where aperitifs and coffee are served.

The space has been designed so that wherever they are sitting, customers can watch the chefs in action. Past the pastry counter is the wine cellar, with tiles the blue of a Miró painting — and blue-painted walls to evoke the Cadaqués seaside where this trio of chefs opened their first restaurant together.

They met while cooking at El Bulli near Girona and then opened Compatir (meaning “to share” in Catalan) in Cadaqués. With Casañas still in charge there, Castro and Xatruch led the opening of Disfrutar, which means “to enjoy”, in December 2014.

We enjoyed everything that emerged from the kitchen but an added pleasure was watching Sanchón at work. He is a skilled linguist, switching easily from Catalan to English; and he is full of enthusiasm for all that Castro and Xatruch have created, never losing his smile as he

shows every customer to their table. In this city of plentiful chefs but an acute shortage of waiting staff, Sanchón and his gifted sommelier Rubén Pol lead an exemplary team.

Like many operators in Barcelona, which is seemingly overflowing with impressive restaurants, Disfrutar offers only a tasting menu. Well, two in fact: “Festival”, at €105, and “Grand Festival”, at €145. Partly owing to the weakening pound and partly because the former menu seemed to include several meat dishes, we chose the “Festival”.

Our meal got off to an impressive start that owed only its edible element to Catalonia. In a dish that resembled half a coconut came a local caviar topped with hot coconut water, served with a glass of Mád Furmint 2015, a dry, elegant white wine from Hungary.

The sequence of dishes then appeared at an impressive pace. A dish of mango, tonka beans and whisky topped with salted and candied wet walnuts arrived with the explanation that the walnuts hailed from the city of Tarragona, like the restaurant’s two chef-owners.



Corn tart with foie gras © Francesc Guillamet

There then followed three dramatic dishes. First, razor clams with seaweed: a tray with a dome of

sea salt encasing four razor clams that had been cooked 24 hours earlier with the seaweed and then covered in a plastic film to stop them getting too salty. They were sweet and delicious.

Next, a gazpacho sandwich: two halves of what looked like a cheddar filling inside slices of white bread that had taken on a pale pink hue. In fact, the bread was a meringue, with the same texture as bread but made from tomatoes around a solid gazpacho sorbet.

Finally, there was a “pasta” dish: ham stock had been made into tubes of macaroni, cooked very briefly and then brought to the table, where they were topped with a foam of carbonara sauce. We were instructed to mix the two together and enjoy the combination directly from the serving pan.

It is a risk for a restaurant to offer just a tasting menu. But it is a challenge that the whole team at Disfrutar admirably rises to.

Disfrutar

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Photographs: Adria Goula Sarda; Francesc Guillamet

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