

FROM EL BULLI TO DISFRUTAR: THE NEW WAVE IN AVANT GARDE COOKING

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Eduard Xatruch, one of the former head chefs of El Bulli, talks to Jack Southan about the innovations behind his new venture Disfrutar, the Barcelona restaurant tipped to be one of the best in the world.

Xatruch opened Disfrutar at the end of 2014 with his former colleagues Mateu Casanas and Oriol Castro, both of whom worked alongside him as head chefs at Ferran Adria's three Michelin-starred Spanish restaurant El Bulli.

Operating until 2011, El Bulli was widely considered to be the most inventive server of contemporary cuisine on the planet, with people booking months in advance to taste it. After closing five years ago, Adria turned his attentions to setting up gastro laboratory the El Bulli Foundation, and his chefs found new paths.


Disfrutar (<http://en.disfrutarbarcelona.com/>) is located in the heart of Barcelona's bustling L'Antiga Esquerra de L'Eixample district and has quietly been building a reputation for greatness.

The three maestros – Xatruch, Casanas and Castro – first joined forces after the closure of elBulli and decided to put their years of head-chef experience and molecular wizardry learnt from Adria to good use, launching their first restaurant, Compartir Cadaqués, in the Spanish province of Girona, in 2012.

Xatruch says: "In Compartir, we wanted to define our own style, based on a cuisine with strong modern touches, but without losing traditional dishes such as rice. The cuisine was presented on central plates with the idea of sharing. We wanted a very personal restaurant in a relaxed setting."

In almost no time at all the restaurant was recommended in the Michelin Guide and, to this day, continues to receive consistent four and five-star reviews.

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111 Me gusta 3 comentarios

"With Ferran we learnt how to think freely"

The success of their first venture gave them the fire to develop new ideas: "In 2014, after reaffirming the work done at Compartir and gaining confidence, we decided to take a step forward and open Disfrutar," says Xatruch.

"At Disfrutar we wanted a restaurant which was clearly avant garde, which is the cuisine that we bear inside and we are passionate about. And the city of Barcelona was the most suitable place to accomplish this. Disfrutar is a restaurant based on creative cuisine; it's very personal, and with a strong Mediterranean character."

The new restaurant took the idea of molecular gastronomy and tasting menus to a whole new level and, week by week, the chefs developed a selection of dishes that continue to inspire and delight at every turn. Their skills in achieving this they attribute to their friend and mentor, Ferran.

Xatruch says: "In cuisine, the inspiration could arrive at any moment or any situation. We are inspired by classic gastronomy and modern cuisine. We can find inspiration in a dish created centuries ago or in a recently invented utensil.

"We learnt determination [from Adrial, hard work, spirit of sacrifice and culinary rigour. With Ferran we learnt how to think freely, but always with a solid base, and pragmatism. He showed us how to become better day-by-day and that self-improvement must be our main premise.

"Ferran is the greatest cook that we have ever met, but also, from our point of view the person that knows more about eating than anyone else in the world."

"The creative process is infinite"

Disfrutar is at the forefront of this wave of science dining, creating some of the most exciting and diverse dishes around today. But the inspiration behind them can come from many places.

Xatruch says: "The creative process in gastronomy has infinite starting points. We can be inspired by visiting a market, on a trip, eating in a restaurant, reading a book. After an idea appears, comes the most important part: the testing and the development of the idea.



"Many times these ideas which seem fantastic at the beginning, are discarded when we start to try them, and others come out well and we are able to do a recipe. But the creative process is infinite. A dish can happen in a second or on the other hand, you can spend your whole life working on an idea that never comes into being.

"The importance of any creative process is efficiency; in cookery the ideas have to become a reality so that the customer can enjoy and value them."

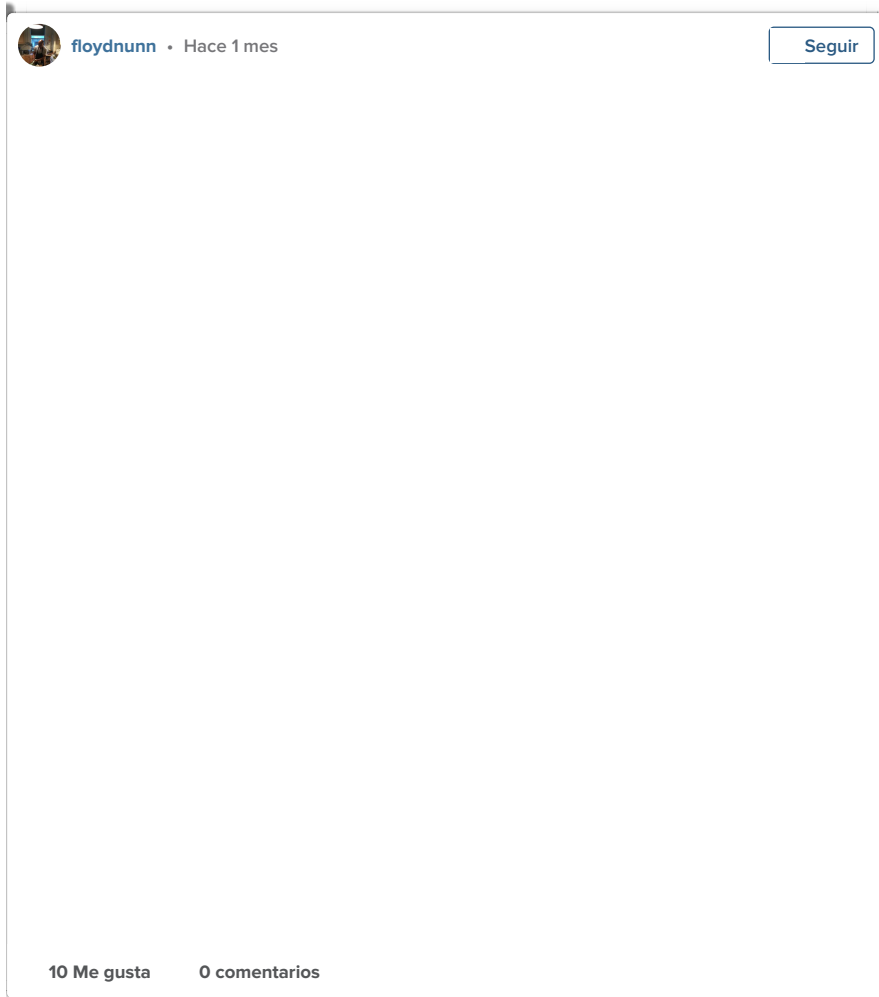
The molecular gastronomy trend has been around for a good few years now but the chefs at Disfrutar want diners to smile, to be excited, to be surprised – no mean feat among jaded gourmards of the 21st century.

"Every dish is a musical note from a song and the tasting menu is the whole song"

Xatruch says: "Our cuisine, expressed in a [19- or 25-course] tasting menu, tries to arouse emotion in the customers. It is not simply to satisfy their hunger or offer them dishes that they like, which is our main objective, but to find happiness. For this there is an important element in our cuisine, which is always present: sensitivity.

"To understand our cuisine you need a tasting menu. It's like a song. Every dish is a musical note from a song and the tasting menu is the whole song. If we take the musical notes separately, the end result is not what is expected by the cook and the customers."

However, each of these musical notes has to be painstakingly created from scratch, and then tweaked over time to create a single perfect dish which can compete individually as the best in the world. Some are futuristic, some are alternate takes on old dishes and some are simply indescribable. But the criterion for making one of these dishes legitimate to sell is rigorous to say the least.



Xatruch says: "As of today we have done more than 140 dishes, but we have dismissed many more. All the dishes to be served at our restaurant are subjected to an exhaustive evaluation rule. In creativity you have to be demanding and self-critical. Not everything is ok. We prefer to achieve one excellent dish before 100 mediocre ones."

"There are some dishes riskier and provocative than the others. For example, we prepare a whisky cake in which the whisky is poured directly on to the customer's hands - in that way, when the customer is eating the different cake parts with his hands, they smell the whisky scent permanently."

"In a conceptual way, the most noted thing that we have done at Disfrutar is our work with kappa gelatine. [But also] we have used it to create a new pasta - we've done macaroni, tacos and gelatine julienne strips. We've made a gelatine semolina, which has allowed us have a maize semolina texture with the ingredients and the flavours that we want."



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27 Me gusta 4 comentarios

"We've also done frozen meringues in a vacuum, which have a very light and icy texture; and then there is the concept to freshen the customers hands with aromatic elements, spherical aspics, and other things."

It is these revolutionary innovations which have really changed the fine-dining game. Every sense has been thought about in the design process of each dish: sight, sound, touch, smell and taste. It is for this reason that they describe themselves as a "sensory dining experience", rather than a traditional restaurant.

"For customers who come often, we offer dishes which are not on the menu"

Xatruch says: "Daily, our cuisine is alive. The changes are defined by the creative process; when we produce new dishes, we change the menu. Likewise, when products come into season. Today, for example, we produced a dish with tender green almonds which will not be on the menu for more than two weeks, even though it's excellent, because they won't be in season after that time."

He adds: "For us it's extremely important to choose quality products. Of course, we always try to source local and ecological produce, but we don't have any problem using products from from Japan, China or Peru, for example, as long as they are of quality. At Disfrutar it is normal to use products from the Mediterranean alongside others from the rest of the world.

"We also have to change the menu depending on the customer. For a customer who has never come to the restaurant before we try to offer a menu with the classic dishes, such as the olives and our macaroni carbonara. But for customers who come often we offer dishes which are not on the menu."



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108 Me gusta 0 comentarios

The idea of combining local and fusion foods with molecular gastronomy has taken off around the world. With chefs such as Heston Blumenthal bringing it on to the culinary main stage and pushing the limits of what is possible to create with food, it has created a market in the industry and that market is thriving.

With each passing year, Disfrutar cements itself as one of the finest places to eat on the planet. The culinary trends around the world are ever changing but Disfrutar is unique in that rather than following or adapting to current trends, its chefs forge their own way into unknown territory and come out the other end on top.

The best new restaurant in the world? Probably. The best dining "experience" in the world. Almost certainly.

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