

AFTER EL BULLI

From a taxi driver's point of view, El Bulli must have seemed like the best restaurant in the world long before it topped the critics' list. Approaching the seaside town of Roses near the Spanish-French border, the coastal road swoops up pine-covered hills with glimpses of the Med bursting through the trees on both sides. Then the road twists its way down to the hidden bay of Cala Monjoi.

Those happy days of ferrying wealthy gourmets, who might not realise that it's unusual to tip heavily in Spain, into Roses ended in 2011; this is when El Bulli's owner, Ferran Adria, decided to close. El Bulli will reopen as a "foundation" (a museum and research centre) in 2015. Dis-

appointingly for taxi drivers, however, the restaurant's last great creation, due out this month, is just a voluminous recipe book.

HOMEY AND SURREAL

However, taking the same coastal road in the opposite direction, from Roses to Cadaqués, you can get an equally spectacular reminder that the province of Girona had much to offer long before El Bulli arrived. Cut off from the rest of Catalonia by mountains, Cadaqués looks like an artist's rendering of a Mediterranean fishing village. The white houses cluster around narrow streets where you can lose yourself in minutes, giving the place the appropriately surreal impression of being much

bigger than it really is; it's hardly a surprise that its most famous resident was Salvador Dali.

This is where three ex-El Bulli chefs, Oriol Castro, Eduard Xatruch and Mateu Casañas, came when El Bulli closed. Their new restaurant, Compartir, mixes innovative new Catalan cooking with something more homely and family-oriented. There are dishes like a sorbet of *ajo blanco* (white garlic), and sardines so fresh that they could easily be waving their firm tails as they are brought to the table.

HAIL THE NEW RESTAURANT KING

But it's perhaps the capital, Girona, that offers this province's most authentic taste

of surrealism. On the surface it's much quieter than its big brother Barcelona, located about 100 kilometres to the south. The first sign of exoticism comes when you cross the slatted steel Eiffel Bridge (built before Gustave Eiffel's tower in Paris) and look out over the multicoloured buildings on either side of the gentle Onyar river.

This playfulness and love of spectacle is best experienced at the famous Celler Can Roca. In April of 2013 it took the top spot on the World's 50 Best Restaurants list, a crown once worn by El Bulli. The 14-course tasting menu starts with a bonsai tree with candied olives dangling from its branches ("to say 'welcome to the Mediterranean'" says Head Chef **Joan Roca**).



Other dishes are like treasures from a fairy tale forest: a consommé of root vegetables with a subtle, earthy quality; rich, sticky eels; a "flower" made from tender slivers of beef, arranged with "leaves" of beetroot and other bright vegetables.

It's not obviously Catalan food, and yet it couldn't have come from anywhere else. "There's always been a great tradition of food here," says Roca. "We just needed El Bulli to tell the rest of the world all about it."

El Bulli 2005–2011: Every recipe from the last seven years of the world's most creative restaurant is published by Phaidon this month.

FINNAIR FLIES to Barcelona daily, during summer season even twice daily on selected days.



El Celler de Can Roca
Kuvateksti, Kuvateksti, Kuvateksti



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Kuvateksti



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