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Ferran Adrià's Disciples Put Their Spin On elBulli's Legacy

Clarissa Hyman 1.5.17

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Chefs Oriol Castro, Eduard Xatruch and Mateu Casañas worked in the famed elBulli kitchen and now own and operate multiple acclaimed restaurants in Spain. Credit: Copyright 2016 Maribel R. de Erenchun

As have other grand masters of the kitchen before him, Ferran Adrià has established a family of chef-disciples who have gone forth into the world to perpetuate his groundbreaking deconstructionist philosophy and aesthetics. The challenging, frequently surreal innovations that made his elBulli five-time winner of the best restaurant in the world and arguably the most influential restaurant of the last century did not become extinct with the closure of the legendary address in 2011; instead, the “school” of Adrià takes his legacy ever further into the future.

Three of those culinary crusaders rolled into my hometown of Manchester in northwest England with a roadshow of thrilling cooking that has won their Michelin-starred restaurant **Disfrutar** in Barcelona the title of Best New European Restaurant 2016. It was less a tribute act than a new band (or should I say brigade) arising phoenix-like from the shuttered halls of the fabled gastronomic laboratory. It was also a demonstration of how the elBulli influence will **shape the way we eat** and our sensor and cultural understanding of food for a long time to come.

Ibérica, a high-end chain of Spanish restaurants in the United Kingdom, played host to the trio — appearing for two nights only in London and Manchester. Oriol Castro, Eduar Xatruch and Mateu Casañas met each other more than 15 years ago in the elBulli kitchen, where they trained as **chefs** and went on to hold top positions. When the restaurant closed to metamorphose into the elBulli Foundation, they stayed on the team, actively working with Adrià to produce the immense **Bullipedia**.

Chefs put stamp on their food





Crispy egg yolk with mushroom jelly. Credit: Copyright 2016 Francesc Guillamet

In 2012 they decided to open their own restaurant, Compartir, in the idyllic village of Cadaqués, Spain, on the Costa Brava so closely associated — so appropriately — with Salvador Dalí. Two years later, they opened Disfrutar, more avant-garde in vision and style but still informed by the same deep knowledge of their home region, respect for ingredients and acutely intelligent use of techniques.

Adrià remains their close friend and mentor, but they are not prêt-à-porter versions to his couture. The trio speak as one: “When elBulli closed, we all needed time to rest, step back and think about which way was right for us. We can never replicate the elBulli kitchen, nor would we want to, but there is still so much more for us to discover.”

One of their hallmarks is attention to detail. Such was their concern, they even brought their own eggs to the UK from their farmer in Spain who raises poultry to their own demanding specifications. The result was the evening’s show-stopper: crispy egg yolk with mushroom jelly, a playful but perfect composition that somehow conjured a deep-fried runny yolk into a surgically sliced white eggshell containing a pool of intense jellied stock.

Deceptively simple food



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Red tuna Ibérico. Credit: Copyright 2016 Francesc Guillaumet

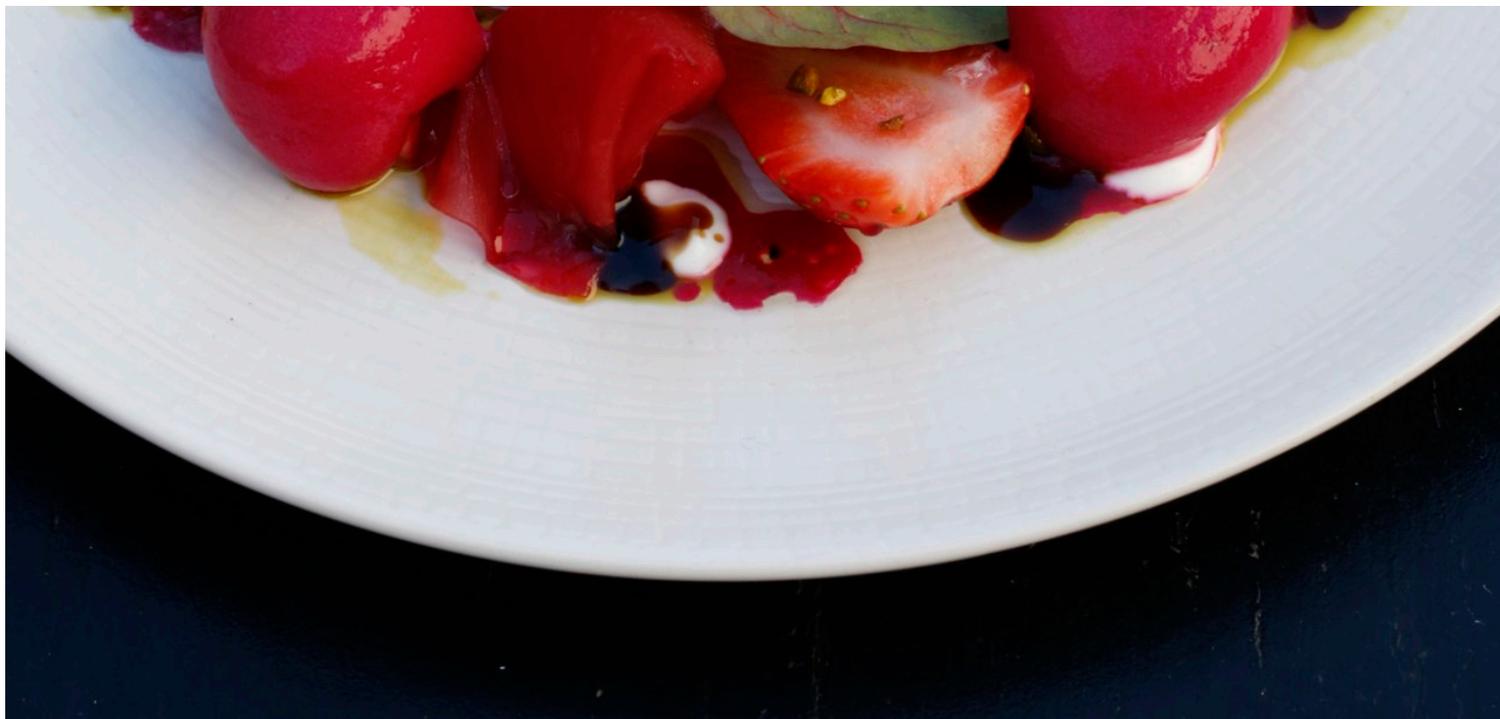
One of their signature dishes, red tuna **Ibérico** (using sustainable fish from **Balfegó**), showed their characteristic deceptive simplicity. An immense amount of work had gone on behind the scenes into rendering Ibérico ham fat, making the most perfect tomato sauce and dipping sauce to pair with the sweet thickness of 0.2 centimeter thick slices of tuna.

puree and slicing raw tuna loin to the exact thickness of 0.2 centimeters before combining the elements and topping the fish with fresh chervil and pearls of Arbequina **Caviaroli**, encapsulated extra virgin olive oil produced by an innovative family-run company in Spain.

Other standout dishes included a beetroot and fruit salad with *ajoblanco* sorbet — a clever and ravishingly pretty reinterpretation of the cold Andalusian summer almond soup — and a sweet-but-tangy, rich-but-light cheesecake with raspberry sorbet.

'Don't live in the past'





Beetroot and fruit salad with ajoblanco sorbet Credit: Copyright 2016 Francesc Guillamet

What was the essence of their experience with Adrià?

“Work, work, work! Just try and get better all the time. Keep your foot on the pedal. Get the best products possible. Be happy for five minutes when you do something new but don’t stop there. Keep on trying. Don’t live in the past.”

ElBulli was about much more than food on a plate; it involved the impact on the senses; mind games; the conceptual links between the arts and the kitchen; the time, the place and all the indefinable other factors that went into the magic that was wrought on a Spanish mountain overlooking the Mediterranean.

But nothing lasts forever, and although I might only have had a brief sample of that experience years later on a rainy night in a cold industrial city in Northern England, it was good to learn the elBulli dynasty is keeping the flame alive.



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Zester Daily contributor **Clarissa Hyman** is an award-winning food and travel writer. She is twice winner of the prestigious **Glenfiddich** award among others. A former television producer, she now contributes to a wide range of publications and has written four books: "Cucina Siciliana," "The Jewish Kitchen," "The Spanish Kitchen" and "Oranges: A Global History." She is based in