

The fun of haute cuisine

After years spent in the kitchen of Ferran Adrià's El Bulli and six months preparing for their Barcelona debut, the trio of chefs have recently opened the Disfrutar restaurant



M. JOSEP JORDAN

As its name suggests, the Disfrutar restaurant, is all about enjoyment (*disfrutar* means 'to take pleasure' or 'to have fun' in English). That is the main objective that Mateu Casañas, Oriol Castro and Eduard Xatruch have for their restaurant located in front of Barcelona's Ninot market. With their *Compartir* restaurant now well-established in Cadaqués, the trio of chefs turned their attention to this new adventure some six months ago.

It all began when the world famous El Bulli closed its doors and the three chefs, who had worked in Ferran Adrià's high-class food laboratory together for 16 years, came up with the idea of offering informal *haute cuisine* designed for sharing. However, creativity, technique and innovation had become part of their DNA, which meant any project they undertook would inevitably include a certain amount of flair and originality.

Riding the wave of favourable reviews, the trio of chefs next decided to take things a step further and began looking towards Barcelona, albeit without any rush, as they were determined to take things easy, step-by-step: "Cadaqués taught us a lot about being businessmen and everything else. It was where Nil Duket, the head of the Disfrutar's kitchen, came from" they say.

For a number of months, rented premises in the Barcelona neighbourhood of Sant's became a test centre for their first haute cuisine menu, which they presented to the Catalan capital in December when they opened Disfrutar: "The best thing about those six months was how other cooks welcomed us, with great generosity, while word of mouth brought us an enthusiastic clientele keen to come back," says Oriol. An example is an older gentleman who has returned four times, turning down the alternatives proposed to him in favour of the same dishes.

More of the same

It is perhaps not so strange, as it is hard, once you have tasted them, to resist the likes of peppers that hide a delicious chocolate filling, or the curd dish, *recuit de drap*, made by hand with almonds. Nevertheless, Disfrutar is all about variety and adapting the menu to fit the season. What the dishes have in common, however, is that they are all fun, made with high-quality produce and featuring small touches of gastronomic magic, such as, for example, a liquid salad.

Not that the new restaurant is a low-rent Bulli. We are still talking about haute cuisine that uses technique and style, but at an accessible price that seems unlikely: 68 euros for the 19-dish set menu and 98 euros for the 27-dish menu (tax included but not beverages). The quality-price ratio is just about ideal: "It is our dream. We knew what we could achieve

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They currently have some 50 employees on the books between the two restaurants, which requires a large turnover of new customers. Reservations for Saturdays are in great demand, and they are attracting as many tourists as locals: "We just had a surprise avalanche of Irish people because it appears that a well-known chef over there, who they did not identify, publicly spoke about us."

In the kitchen of the Disfrutar restaurant there are some 30 agile souls in constant, busy movement. Together, they produce genuine culinary marvels, served up by waiters in modern zippered white shirts who interact with the customers ("in a natural way, without putting it on") and who always have a smile on their faces: "They are the first thing the customer sees of our work," they say. Such as Oscar, who explains carefully to some surprised Japanese people why he wants to pour a little bit of whisky over their hands.

This originality and care is even reflected in the decor, which features the white of Cadaqués alongside typical Barcelona tiles, a fun combination in keeping with the restaurant's philosophy. We have waited quite a while for the trio to get started, and now that they have they are far from disappointing us.

Everyday dishes made with a touch of magic

As with so much in Disfrutar, the olives are out of the ordinary. Covered in a film of cacao, they melt in the mouth with a blend of citrus and olive oil flavours. Another dish (above, top) is made with rose petals, a recipe that came from a chat with a customer on Sant Jordi's day. The *Pinyonada amb aigua de pi* has tender green pine nuts. The dish is blend of textures, at once tender and tepid. The *Macarroons* (above, bottom) have proved a success. Made with gelatine of Iberian pork stock, the transparent pasta is smothered in a *carbonara* foam. The *Tarta al whisky* (above, middle) plays with aromas, topped with a hazelnut that looks like amber and an egg yolk. Yet, the most unusual thing about the dish is the malt whisky sprayed onto the hands to deliver an intense experience for the senses.