

Pedals and Passports

Summer Abroad 2015

El Bulli Lives On

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A group of eighteen American 20-some-year-olds are not the typical guests at Disfrutar. When the “economic” version of the meal costs seventy-two U.S. dollars with a substantial additional cost for wine, most people who fill the restaurant are wearing Prada and have pocketbooks fuller than mine will ever be. Needless to say, these people opt instead for the more expensive version and pay \$109.25 (this is the conversion from Euros to dollars). Occasionally, less wealthy guests will splurge on this meal, but even those guests are preparing for retirement, not preparing for graduation.

So when our class entered the Barcelona restaurant wearing whatever somewhat elegant clothes we could put together from our suitcases, we were a rare breed. I have never stepped foot in a restaurant of this caliber before, and unless I have abundant success in whatever career I end up at, I don't know if I ever will again.

Disfrutar was established just a year ago, in 2014, by the former apprentices of the great Ferran Adrià in what was arguably the most innovative and experimental restaurant that has ever existed – El Bulli, which was rated the number one restaurant in the world for seven consecutive years. Now closed for good, El Bulli once received over 1,000,000 reservation requests per year and it was only able to accommodate 8,000 of those. If you were one of the lucky ones to snatch a table at the restaurant, you could expect to pay a pretty penny (\$321 to be exact) to have the chance to experience the sheer delight of the 49-course tasting menu. Often portrayed in photographs as a mad scientist, Ferran Adrià's passion was to create completely new experiences through food. He would insert air through a bike pump into fruits and vegetables. He would use “spherification” to create just about anything into a little tiny sphere. By doing this, he could make anything into what looked like caviare. He wanted his unsuspecting guests to take a bite of what they thought was caviare and be utterly surprised.

Despite his absolute success, Ferran Adrià decided to close the restaurant forever in 2011. As an innovator, he decided he had reached his limit in innovation in the restaurant setting. Instead, he decided to establish El Bulli Lab which exists first to decompose what it means to be creative, then to apply the knowledge from this process. We visited this white-walled loft space in downtown Barcelona on Thursday, the 25th of June. Unfortunately, Ferran himself was out of the country, but he sent his regards and apologies (which I'm certain were genuine, since our professor spent a year at his former restaurant when she wrote her book, *The Sorcerer's Apprentices*, which I intend to read and maybe all of you would want to check out too!). Instead, his colleague who once had an important role at the restaurant as well and today works at the lab showed us around. I was fascinated by the kind of research done in this lab, although I struggled to wrap my mind around it. I think that only proves the kind of genius work that is going on there.

Although the world-famous restaurant no longer exists, the legend of El Bulli lives on, both in the lab and in the work of its former employees. Mateu Casañas, Oriol Castro and Eduard Xatruch, who all learned from Ferran himself, went on to joint together to create their own restaurants. First, they opened *Compartir*, and then, in 2014, *Disfrutar*, like I mentioned before.

Disfrutar literally translates as “to enjoy,” and that is the goal that all of the people at Disfrutar have for each and every guest that walks in the door. And that includes my class.

And we certainly did enjoy each and every one of our twenty-four courses. I don't think I could put words to all of the emotions I experienced when tasting this food. I've never had anything like it. The flavors were exquisite. The textures were magical. But most of all, nothing was what you expected it to be.

The prime example is the olives, named after the restaurant itself. It was called "disfruta de la aceituna," or, "enjoy the olive." And boy, did I enjoy it. I bit through the outside shell to discover a juicy, tangy filling. It was not at all what I expected when I placed an olive in my mouth. I literally laughed out loud at the sheer delight I experienced.

And there were twenty-three other courses that gave me that same feeling.

At Disfrutar, just as it was at El Bulli, everything is about innovation. It is all about what is new and exciting. It is all about looking towards the future.

I was worried that our presence might be a disruption at this high end restaurant, but it turns out, it was quite the opposite. One middle-aged man came up to me, obviously overhearing us speaking in English, and asked us where we were from. A man from Arizona himself, he came to Barcelona strictly for the food. We told him about our class and said that apparently we did too. He genuinely enjoyed seeing the joy that arose from our table.

And he wasn't the only one.

It's a rare occasion for a group like this to step foot in a restaurant like this. When we walked through the kitchen after our meal and met the cooks behind it, they were delighted. One of them said that it was a blast having us as guests. As a comparable age to us, he noted that his own friends would never be able to afford the food, and serving us was just like serving them. It was like he got the chance to witness his own friends' joy.



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