

Attain Culinary Nirvana at Barcelona's Michelin-Starred Restaurants

Casual dining might be the 'thing' right now, but sophisticated gastronomy will never go out of fashion. And with 22 Michelin-starred restaurants to choose from and some of the finest chefs on the planet, Barcelona is the perfect place to live out your wildest foodie fantasies.

But I'm not going to just list them all and leave you to it. Instead, I'd like to talk a little bit about the city's haute cuisine and highlight some of the restaurants and chefs that I believe best represent the Catalan capital's cultivated dining options. Shall we?



Art in a bowl at Moments restaurant, Barcelona.

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Creative Catalan Cuisine

Let me introduce you to the Roca brothers. Their culinary legacy started at their parents' restaurant in Girona, 45 minutes outside of Barcelona. Years later, they attained culinary stardom with their very own restaurant, El Celler de Can Roca, which won the title of world's best restaurant in 2015 (currently the second best restaurant in the world). Their creative Catalan cooking can now also be enjoyed in Barcelona at the Michelin-starred Roca Moo restaurant.

Gastronomic Gods

Of course, you can't talk about modern Catalan gastronomy and Michelin stars without mentioning Ferran Adrià, the local boy who became a gastronomic god by blurring the lines between art and science with his 'molecular cooking' and 'deconstructed dishes' at El Bulli. It was here that the young chef began to approach the kitchen with the same curiosity and creativity as a surrealist painter approaches his canvas. It was an iconoclastic and revolutionary approach to cooking and Adrià demolished preconceptions by playing with "unexpected contrasts of flavour, temperature and texture".

"Nothing is what it seems," Adrià proclaimed. "The idea is to provoke, surprise and delight the diner."

El Bulli was named best restaurant in the world for five years in a row (2002 – 2009), but despite its three Michelin-stars and proclaimed one million people on the waiting list, the venture was financially doomed and Adrià closed the restaurant in 2011 to team up with his brother Albert. Together, they dreamed of a sort of gastro amusement park, a neighbourhood of high-end but accessible restaurants in the heart of Barcelona. Today, El Barri Adrià, as it is now known, consists of six restaurants, the flagship being Tickets, a fun 'theatre-themed' tapas restaurant with one Michelin star. Pakta, the brothers' exciting Nikkei cuisine restaurant (Japanese and Peruvian fusion) was also awarded a Michelin star in 2015 and Hoja Santa is their Michelin-starred Mexican restaurant, which also boasts one star.



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Rooftop luxury after dining at the two-Michelin-starred Moments restaurant.

All the Young Dudes – The Legacy

But Ferran and Albert weren't the only chefs to enjoy fame and fortune after the closure of El Bulli. Barcelona is now awash with world-class restaurants run by the alumni who earned their stripes under Ferran Adrià's command. In fact, many have gone on to earn their very own Michelin stars.



Disfrutar's bright and crisp interior.

Vibrant, progressive and extraordinarily creative, Disfrutar ('Enjoy' in Spanish) is a Michelin-starred restaurant owned and run by Mateu Casañas, Oriol Castro and Eduard Xatruch, three chefs who met and trained at El Bulli. From the outside, this revered restaurant looks like a small cafe, but as you move through the entrance area, past the open kitchen, a vast and bright space opens up with lush plants and textured walls that hint at the beauty of the nearby Costa Brava. A team of calm-but-busy chefs can be seen in deep concentration, with head honcho Oriol Castro overseeing the service on my particular visit.

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It's a wonderful thing, this openness, and you can't help but feel part of the process, the process of creating mind-bogglingly inventive dishes that surprise and delight with every bite. We enjoyed the 31-dish tasting menu (that's not a typo!). I'm not going to list each dish, but let me paint a picture by talking of masterpieces such as rose petals with lychee and gin – you eat the lychee and gently suck the beads of gin from the delicate and fleshy rose petals – followed by tender walnuts and ratafia, a bold and herbaceous Catalan liquor.



Walnuts and ratafia liquor at Disfrutar.

Each mouthful is a voyage of discovery, a constant melange of new flavours and textures. It was like being at Willy Wonka's factory. And whilst flavours such as the 'Langoustine al ajillo' with black garlic and parsley foam, and smoked Idiazábal cheese biscuits with apple juice hint at the chefs' Spanish heritage, other delights such as the 'Dashi Yuba' with edamame, oysters and soy sauce wine pairing (you literally sip the artisanal soy sauce from a glass with each mouthful) and Moroccan-style pigeon demonstrate just how versatile they really are.

And the dish I'll remember for a lifetime? The whisky tartare, which requires you rub a fine, 16-year-old Scotch whisky into your hands so that you can sense the subtle aroma as you use your fingers to nibble on an amber-coated hazelnut with vanilla ice-cream. Decadence defined.

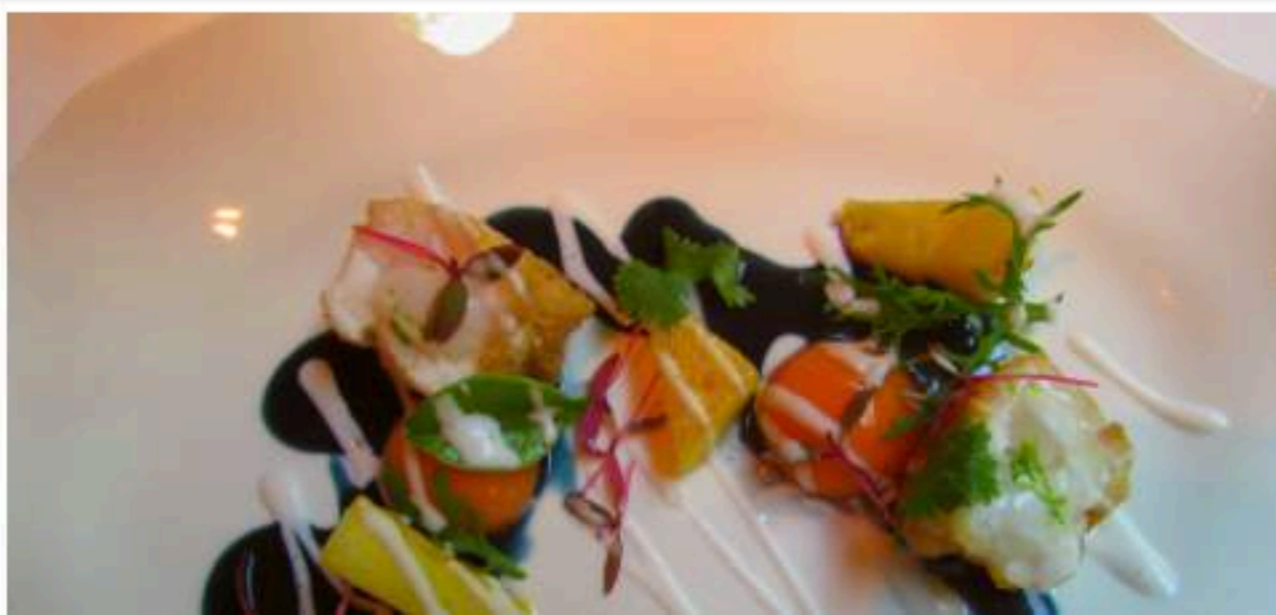


Amber and hazelnut, and there's 16-year-old whisky on my hands.

Double Trouble

At the other end of the specialist dining spectrum is Moments, one of only three two-Michelin-starred restaurants in Barcelona. Housed in the belly of the luxury (5*) Mandarin Hotel – think gold on black, smooth tones and sultry lighting – this is the epitome of luxury living.

I opted once again for the tasting menu, which comes in the form of a passport (they even stamp it for you at the end of the meal) and is playfully named 'The Trip'. The experience takes you on a culinary tour through 14 different dishes, each representing a different country. Beginning in Barcelona, we started our gastronomic voyage with a creative version of 'pa amb tomaquet', a signature local dish, with strawberries instead of tomatoes, anchovies and wine from the D.O. Alella. Salty and sweet and just... "Wow!".



Picking up the pace, the tour took us to Hong Kong, where we enjoyed duroc pork dim sum, before heading back to Europe for a Parisian feast of foie, green celery, apple and armagnac, and then to Madrid for chorizo and cod. I really can't express how beautiful the presentation was, how elegantly it was delivered and described by our waiter. Yes, it will look good on your Instagram feed, but this is all about flavour and texture.

The New York mini burger and french fry added an extra dimension to the adventurous spirit of 'The Trip', but it was the fresh and zesty Bangkok monkfish with coconut that captured my imagination, presented like an abstract Joan Miró painting on the plate.



The starter and passport at Moments restaurant.

Retire to the rooftop 'Terrat' terrace for a coffee or cocktail and reflect on your culinary world tour whilst watching the sun set over Barcelona's most exclusive boulevard.

This is living.

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By Ben Holbrook

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BARCELONA CITY DIARIES FOOD

