



DISFRUTAR'S OWNERS AND HEAD CHEFS MATEU CASAÑAS, ORIOL CASTRO, AND EDUARD XATRUCH.

The *new* 'world's best restaurant'

INSIDE BARCELONA'S DISFRUTAR, WHERE THREE SEASONED CHEFS, MATEU CASAÑAS, ORIOL CASTRO AND EDUARD XATRUCH, HAVE BEGUN CRAFTING DISHES THE WORLD HAS NEVER SEEN, AND MUST TRY

When the legendary restaurant elBulli, located in the out-of-the-way town of Roses,

Catalonia, Spain, shut its doors for the last time in 2011, *BBC News* ran the headline that the 'world's best restaurant' had closed.

This was no exaggeration—it was more or less settled fact. First opened in 1964, it was still considered by major publications



THE EXTERIOR OF DISFRUTAR IN BARCELONA.

to be one of the top one or two restaurants in the world when it shut its doors.

Though its head chef Ferran Adrià was oft given the lion's share of the credit, including being called the world's best chef, one man does not a restaurant make. In its kitchen was a host of brilliant chefs, including the trio of Mateu Casañas, Oriol Castro and Eduard Xatruch. They honed their skills for years as the restaurant accumulated Michelin star after Michelin star.

"We started to work together maybe 20 years ago in elBulli in Brussels. We worked there 18 years more or less. There are three of us, Mateo, Oriol and me," Eduard Xatruch tells me one afternoon.

The trio wasted little time after elBulli closed, opening their own restaurant, Compartir (Spanish for 'to share') in April 2012 in Cadaqués. Two and a half years later in December 2014, the three opened Disfrutar, which means 'to enjoy.'

It is there that he and I currently are standing, and it is there that the three have managed to build one of the most creative and enjoyable—as labeled—restaurants that haute cuisine has ever known.



A LOOK INSIDE THE RESTAURANT.

That's not to say that Compartir is not a restaurant the three are proud of. "We have Compartir. It's a very relaxing restaurant with modern cuisine, but it's not creative," says Xatruch.

A SPIRITUAL SEQUEL

With Disfrutar, Xatruch and his partners are able to achieve the dreams they began at elBulli—crafting a menu of dozens of dishes that diners do not choose for themselves—they wait to experience what the chefs have prepared that day.

"We want to make creative cuisine. The tasting menu is a way to cook like we did in elBulli. We like to make new things, to make a different cuisine. We started three and a half years ago here at Disfrutar, and at the beginning, it was not creative cuisine because to make creativity is very hard. You need a team, you need space to make new things. You can make new dishes, but the most difficult thing is to make new techniques or new concepts."

The way they approach making new things is basically the same as they did at the 'world's best restaurant.'

"It's similar as it was to elBulli. In the kitchen, the creative process was huge and had no limits."

How do they get their ideas? "Maybe now when we are talking, you'll tell me you're in New York and you tell me you loved to eat potatoes with chocolate. Maybe in six months we'll be making something with potatoes, and we'll remember what you said, and try it."

But it is not about just following every crazy idea—it has to be worthy of serving. "There is always one thing—when you have an idea, this is a restaurant. The point is not to make a book of ideas. You have to make these ideas work, and you have to work hard to do so. If you have an idea, it has to become a finished product. For instance, now we are testing a dish with fresh walnuts. Now the walnuts are very little and green. We are creating the product is the initial part to create, because it's new for us."

It is a long process before they actually finish a dish—partially because it can be hard to know if it is the fullest realization of the concept until you've tried it again and again, in different ways.

"If you eat a Spanish omelet you have eaten a lot, you can say 'this is good' or 'this is not good.' But today you ate something you'd never eaten before," Xatruch says to us. "It's your first—you cannot compare. So afterwards there is knowledge to be able to say, 'this is new, and this is good.' Of 2000 things that we'll make in the testing kitchen, maybe just 20 are good."

NO PRESSURE...

Finally out of the shadow of elBulli, Xatruch does not feel anxious about living up to the name of his old kitchen.

"We make what we like to make. For us there's no pressure. For us, we are very happy because we have a restaurant and people come to eat what we want. When we started we were very afraid because it's

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a big expensive restaurant in Barcelona, and you need a lot of people to make this type of kitchen and service because it's very elaborate and there are a lot of things to the table. It's not first dish, second dish, dessert and go. There are 30 times that you'll have to go to the table. Now we have 46 people working with 48 customers."

It's not just about crafting dishes—the presentation also has to be innovative and impeccable. To do this, they bring in collaborators.

"Here we are making a project with a design school. We bring in graphic designers, and we work together to make new ways of presenting the food," says Xatruch. "They will continually make different prototypes based around the food's concept until they finally have one that they feel perfectly captures the essence of the dish."

In the end, they make around 100 dishes per year. "That's huge," Xatrush says. In a normal restaurant, you may make 100 dishes to sustain the whole life of the restaurant."

To keep things fresh, they create a new menu once a week.

AN IMPRESSIVE PORTFOLIO

Xatruch and his partner Oriol Castro, not quoted in this article because he does not speak much English, walked us through the binders of each year, cataloguing all of their creations since Disfrutar's inception just a few years ago. In the binders, they will mark the dishes that they feel were the best, and mark in red the dishes that they didn't feel reached their standards.

"But maybe next year we will take one of these and work on it to make a good one out of it," says Xatrush.

The chefs also work to craft a meal from beginning to end—not just each dish. How the dishes are sequenced is an essential part of their process.

"We always say that a testing menu is like a song—you listen to a song and it's fantastic. But a song has notes. If you have the same notes again and again, it's not good. It's the same with a testing menu."



THESE "PEPPERS" ARE NOT WHAT MEETS THE EYE.

"It's important because if you eat something very fatty like a macaroni carbonara, you follow that with a liquid caprese to clean the palette," Xatrush says, referring specifically to the menu *WEALTH Arabia* tasted. "You have an egg yolk, and then you have a ceviche. That way you can have a large menu and not feel too full, because it's important that you finish and say that you ate a lot but not that you feel bad."

Creativity is not just a matter of putting a new spin on an old thing. It is essential to the three chefs to do things that have never been done before. In one dish during our meal, we smelled—only smelled—a certain vinegar before tasting the rest of the dish.

"This is huge because this is the first time in a restaurant you only smell a vinegar," Xatrush stressed.

As he walks around the back area, where images of each dish are on display on the wall for them to peruse, he points out some of the dishes I had sampled.

"Look at this! This is new!"

GOING WITH YOUR GUT

How do they know what things will work in combination?

"You're a journalist—when you sit down to write, you know what words will go well together. For one dish, we combined horchatta and black truffle. It's not common,

but we know certain elements balance well together, so we try to combine them. If you are creative, you think in a creative way. I don't sit down and say, 'oh, it's 9 o'clock! It's time to think creatively!' says Xatrush.

The creative process doesn't always work quickly.

"Maybe you'll have an idea, and you'll start to create and in two seconds you'll have it. Sometimes you'll think of a dish and in your brain it's very simple, but when you get to the kitchen and you taste it, it doesn't work. To make magic things is not easy."

It is not enough for the dish to just be 'new' however. It also has to live up to the standards they hold the restaurant to—dishes that may be good enough for other restaurants, but aren't good enough for Disfrutar. For this, Xatrush makes a football analogy, "Sometimes someone is good enough to make the team, but if you want to be in the Champion's League, they're not good enough. If you want to win a championship, the degree of difficulty goes up."

MEASURING SUCCESS

Do they worry about Michelin stars? Simply, "No."

"This year, we were put in the top 50 of the world, and were called 'one to watch'. In another list, we are in the top 26 of the world."



DISFRUTAR'S SIGNATURE CARBONARA WITH BEEF BACON.



CASAÑAS AND XATRUCH IN FRONT OF THEIR LATEST CREATIONS.



AN INTRICATE SALMON DISH WITH MANY FACETS TO DISCOVER.



XATRUCH GIVES A TOUR THROUGH THEIR PAST RECIPES.

This is not the essential part—it is only necessary that the restaurant has found its audience.

“The important thing for us is that the restaurant is fully booked. That means that people like it. I don’t want to have a restaurant with three Michelin stars and you go to the restaurant and it’s half empty,” says Xatrush.

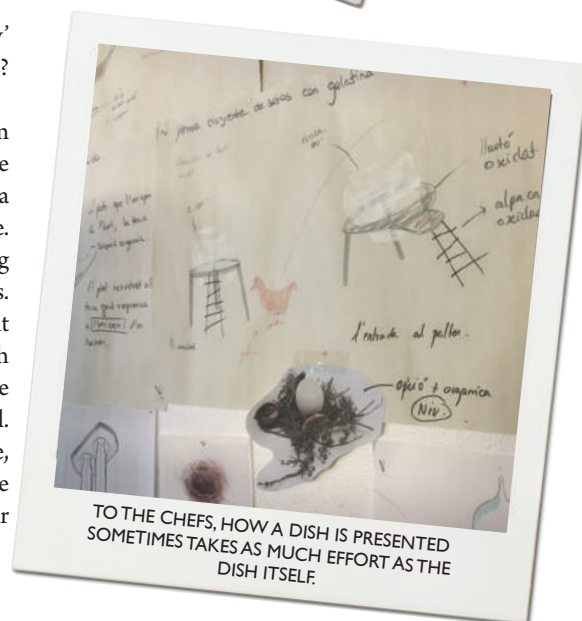
If you can’t tell already, Xatrush is not shy about stating how different they are.

“There are not many chefs in the world that can make new things in a real way,” he says.

While elBulli may have put the concept of ‘molecular gastronomy’ on the map, that is not one that these chefs hold themselves to.

“Now, the world ‘molecular gastronomy’ is regular. For us it’s irregular—‘molecular’? I don’t know what that means!”

Whatever they call it, we can confirm that they are not merely boastful—the three hours we spent eating at Disfrutar were a joy, with each dish providing a new surprise. With unexpected flavors and surprising textures, each dish was playful and delicious. And even after dozens of courses, we felt satisfied, but not overstuffed, just as Xatrush promised. elBulli may have only been gone for a short while, but it has a worthy sequel. Disfrutar is an unforgettable experience, and, for our money, the best restaurant we’ve visited in our long memory. Go out of your way to try it—it’s worth every penny. ▣



TO THE CHEFS, HOW A DISH IS PRESENTED SOMETIMES TAKES AS MUCH EFFORT AS THE DISH ITSELF.