FOOD
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ONER TO WATCH

Disfrutar could well put Spanish cuisine back on the culinary map.

MATÉU CASAÑAS · Oriol Castro · Eduard Xamart. They’re the ex-elBulli chefs who should have been mentioned in the same breath as Ferran Adrià, but never were. Yet without them, Adrià couldn’t have succeeded: the ideas that made him the legend he is today are as much his as theirs. Now, without them, he’s become a chef, playing celebrity restaurateur and possibly the only one still interested in his yet-to-materialise elBulli Foundation. But without him, this trio is growing from strength to strength, first with the restaurant Compartir in the holiday town of Cadaqués and then Disfrutar in Barcelona, which opened in December 2016. Disfrutar is now the hottest table in Barcelona with one Michelin star and a ‘One to Watch’ accolade from the World’s 50 Best Restaurants list. To add to this, we would put our money on these three best friends finally putting Spanish cuisine – after a long, dry spell – back into the international spotlight.

Enter the modest entrance of Disfrutar – Spanish for ‘joy’ – in the Eixample district and you are led into a Mediterranean wonderland that gets bigger and deeper the further you walk in. It’s a giddy, colourful playground decorated with ceramic tiles that are on the one hand a nod to the artist Joan Miro and on the other, a tribute to the clay ovens and cooking vessels of old. You are led past the bar and the immense kitchen where the chefs are visible from wherever you sit, and into the white, brightly lit dining room inspired by the (deconstructed) ceviche.

The three best friends finally putting Spanish cuisine back on the culinary map.

The comparison with elBulli is inevitable, but it doesn’t do justice to Disfrutar, which speaks a totally different language from the boundary-pushing shamess of Ferran Adrià. Yes, it is technique-driven but unlike Adrià – who lost the plot of what food is supposed to be – there is heart and soul here. And above all, it’s just crazy delicious.

From a sponge finger that melts in the mouth as a frozen passion fruit and rosé cocktail, to a carbonara ‘yum-yum’ where gelato tubs achieve the perfect at-dome bite of the real thing, Disfrutar doesn’t disappoint. The well-choreographed staff effortlessly torches, smoke, siphon and just short of jagging narguiles as they roll out over 30 different bites of every colour, flavour and persuasion, some to near applause-worthy effect. Such as a bed of black sauce seeds that is shaken to reveal pools of salmon mousse. Or smoked instant apple cider that’s left to bubble and snap at the table before being poured in smoky glasses to go with a mikado of luscious cheese – whose cream is fused to form a crispy wafer and sandwiched with light, foamy cream. And we almost cry when

ONE TO WATCH

A 国 MULTI-RELIGIOUS BAKERY becomes a culinary melting pot

We hit into the most perfect Chinese mami – a ball of feather-light fried dough gently seasoned with a citrus cream filling. The Spanish pecuah for fried eggs and mushrooms is re-imagined as a tumor of egg yolk balanced on an eggshell filled with smoky mushroom jelly, paired with Chinese-style ‘dumplings’ enfolded with mushroom conte, amusing dry-ice ‘steam’. And the iconic dessert of ‘taura al whisky’ – a cake made with egg yolk, Chantilly cream and hand-drawn drizzle with a sprinkle of whisky – is presented as little bonbons made with the same ingredients, plus the extra step of having you rub your hands with a bit of whisky so you can still enjoy it.

“Why do we make here is creativity,” says the unassuming Chef Xamart in his endearingly fractured English. “It’s how we like to cook, to make new techniques.” Compartir, which they opened in 2012, featured hearty Catalan home cooking but after one and a half years, they wanted to go back to their first love – progressive cooking. But he makes it very clear that technique is not the be all and end all.

If you come and eat – if you have a lot of experience with gastronomy, you can know that’s a new technique or not. But if here comes my mother, she only knows if it is good or bad. She doesn’t mind if it is new.

“It’s very important that everything has to very very tasty. Like a Peruvian comes here to eat, he must say, ‘yes, this is ceviche’. It is not enough for him to say it is ‘similar.’ It has to be perfect.”

Without getting ahead of ourselves, we have to agree it very much is.

Disfrutar, 08036, Carrer de Villarroel, 163, 08036 Barcelona. Tel. (+34) 933 46 69 96

WHILE NOT QUITE in the same league as Disfrutar, young chef Àlvar Ayuso is making waves with a menu that combines wholesome Catalan cooking with a Nordic sensibility. Throw in some Japanese touches and you have a tiny little eatery with a whole lot of upside.

Also in the Eixample district, Álvar is a simple operation with minimal staff. Giddily, we’re the only table on the evening we’re there, but we’re also told that it’s Chef Ayuso’s day off. But the chef covering for him does a commendable job, delivering a menu that starts off with smoked so marinated raw seafood and then edges into heavier fare.

Smoky macarons on dash jelly; seaweed cracker and tea and, marinated tufo slices have a bit of a Japanese wannabe feel to it. It gets more interesting when Spanish and Nordic influences kick in, as in a rich pigeon confit with a Nordic twist, a crispy potato and smoked salmon that has

the texture of Chinese fish man. The food is extremely salty overall for Asian palates, but there’s no denying Chef Ayuso’s knack for mixing and matching different influences and flavours and coming up with a perfect balance. We’ll be back, just to see how he ups his game in person.

Àlvar, Carrer Arboçú 141, 08036 Barcelona. T: (+34) 934 30 5758

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