



# relaxed *elegance*

At Barcelona's Disfrutar,  
three chefs rethink how  
refinement looks — and tastes

REVIEW **TOM SIETSEMA**





When I used Barcelona as a springboard to Lisbon in December, high-end dining wasn't part of my itinerary.

Off-duty, I hoped to leave the notebook at home and focus on the simple pleasures of places such as Cal Pep. ¶ Chef José Andrés had other plans for me. ¶ I had to find time, he told me, for Disfrutar, started four years ago by three of the best chefs to have worked at the late El Bulli in Roses, Spain. The trio had been trained by no less than Andrés's own friend and mentor Ferran Adrià, one of the most influential chefs in modern history, the man whose sleights of hand include foams, spheres and the much-imitated liquid olive. ¶ "It's the best restaurant in Europe right now," Andrés said. "One of the best restaurants in the world." It's also the recent recipient of two Michelin stars and a must-see for such trailblazing chefs as Daniel Humm of Eleven Madison Park in New York and Virgilio Martinez of Central in Lima, Peru. ¶ Andrés's guilt trip worked. I cut my time short in Lisbon to return to Barcelona for one last meal before flying home. ¶ News flash: Big-deal restaurants are starting to chillax. Leading the way are places such as Disfrutar, among the most inviting dining destinations in recent memory. The name of the restaurant implores customers "to enjoy," a sentiment expressed a hundred ways from the moment you depart reality — the neighborhood of Eixample, popular for shopping and nightlife — for fantasy. ¶ Arrivals are led past a long kitchen whose tunnel of ceramic tiles is the color of fire. "The kitchen is the oven of the restaurant, both real and metaphorical," one of the three chefs, Mateu Casañas, 41, says about the design. "It is from there that all activity emanates." ¶ The 50-seat main dining room, in contrast, is an embrace of soaring white walls, floors and ceiling, punctuated with pretend skylights that always reveal blue sky.



#### Previous pages

Chefs, from left, Oriol Castro, Mateu Casañas and Eduard Xatruch at their stylish restaurant Disfrutar in Barcelona.

#### This page

A "sandwich" made of frozen tomato water and a gazpacho filling.





delicate, yolk-filled fritter sits atop a haunting mushroom gelatin.

Some of the dishes put you in science class. Macaroni carbonara, among Disfrutar's signatures, features translucent "pasta" that resonates with meaty flavor, a trick achieved with gelatin and ham stock. A shaving of black truffles and a blizzard of Parmesan pile indulgence on marvel.

"Hare cold juice" sounds like grist for a food prank, but trust me when I tell you the elixir makes a lovely intermezzo. The drink came about by accident, when rabbit consommé was being prepared for another dish and the only vessel around was a glass. "It was not hot, it was room temperature, and we liked it," recalls chef Eduard Xatruch, 37. "And we wonder how it would taste with ice cubes. The color already looked like cognac or Armagnac, and we always liked to put cognac on the dishes with hare." Tarragon and orange peel join the broth, presented like a restorative cocktail.

The servers move about the room as if in a ballet and show no sign of having been here, done that. Your delight seems to be their reward, no matter how many times they may have served "The Beet That Comes Out of the Land," in which a big bowl of black sesame seeds is swirled several times so that button-size, beet-flavored meringues (where would fine dining be without meringue?) rise from the "soil."

Asked to explain the three chefs' division of labor and responsibility, Xatruch says, "We put everything in common and

Disfrutar's take on the Gilda (a popular Spanish bar snack of olive, anchovy and pepper) features mackerel and a faux olive.

More allure comes by way of displays of Mediterranean plants (palmetto and reed) and wicker panels dropping from on high — handsome, natural sound buffers. Disfrutar is the uncommon restaurant to make indoors feel like outside. "Basically, what we wanted to convey is happiness, joy, good atmosphere and relaxation," says Casañas of the dining room, inspired by fishing villages and including a luminous patio. "We wanted to avoid that people feel self-conscious about being in a haute cuisine restaurant." So they do without the usual trappings of luxury: linens, fancy silverware or servers in suits.

Like many noteworthy restaurants, this one offers multiple menus, some based on dishes that have already been deemed "classics," some featuring current creations, others a combination of old and new and of differing lengths. Suffice to say, no one should be expected to return to work after a lunch like mine, which began at 1 p.m. and ended, 30 courses or so later, after 5.

Excessive? The many plates tend to be small and presented in themed collections, like chapters in a novel, so you never

feel like you're partaking in the dining equivalent of Wagner's "Ring." The presentations, rooted in Mediterranean flavors but open to the world, come and go quickly, sometimes due to their fragility. But each has a story to tell, a novel way of being staged, or both.

Within the first 15 minutes, I encounter a frozen passion fruit ladyfinger laced with rum that dissolves on my tongue like cotton candy; a trio of rose petals capturing "dew drops" of gin and rose water, a bouquet whose garnish is a single white raspberry that smacks of litchi; and a ringer for a Chinese steamed bun filled with the surprise of caviar and crème fraîche — "the most expensive sandwich you'll ever eat," says a server. The joys continue with a wooden box lined with salt that supports a sliver of whiskey-tinged mango on a pandan leaf and a one-bite, see-through, semiliquid, sweet-salty packet of walnut praline.

Roll your eyes if you want, but this is how luxury dining is unfolding around the world these days. Taillevent makes you sit up because, well, it's Paris-fancy. At Disfrutar, you sit up because, among other details, the food is fantastic.

This being a Spanish restaurant, there's a spin on the popular bar snack of olive, anchovy and pepper, known as Gilda (pronounced HEEL-da). Instead of being threaded on a toothpick, the combination is served in parts on a plate, with aggressive mackerel and a faux olive that sends a rivulet of fruity oil down your throat. More magical is a light-as-air "sandwich" with frozen tomato water in the role of the bread and gazpacho sorbet as the vivid filling — soup rethought as finger food.

Some of the food makes you laugh, such as a tiny toy chicken on the base of a doll-size ladder that leads to an eggshell in which a

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**From top** In the 50-seat main dining room, the soaring white walls, floor and ceiling are punctuated with pretend skylights that always reveal blue sky; dessert with an infusion of pandan, coconut and mango.

we decide in common, which makes us surer of the steps we are taking.” His colleague, Oriol Castro, 44, says that in addition to being delicious, every dish has to add something special to their repertoire. “If a dish does not meet these premises, it does not come out.” It’s a high bar, given the 100 ideas in current circulation on the menus. Testing takes place in Disfrutar’s visible kitchen, but the chefs hope to finish a dedicated research area (“kitchen of creativity”) this year.

Meanwhile, the basement of the restaurant, where every step of every dish is catalogued and presentations are auditioned, pulls the curtain back on the thought process. The props for much of the food are created by students at Barcelona’s Escola Massana design school.

Desserts are as beautiful and quietly astonishing as anything that comes before them. (One confection is preceded by a few drops of aged whiskey, splashed on diners’ hands, which are rubbed together to heighten the sensory experience.) The pièce de résistance is a cotton branch to which cloudlike puffs cling. We’re encouraged to pluck them off and eat what goes down like air flavored with cocoa and mint.

Disfrutar’s edible wonders are made to be Instagrammed, #foodporn-ed and hearted. But flavor never takes a back seat to novelty or the chefs’ egos. This is food backed up with time-tested finesse.

And the experience is more attainable than you might think. A

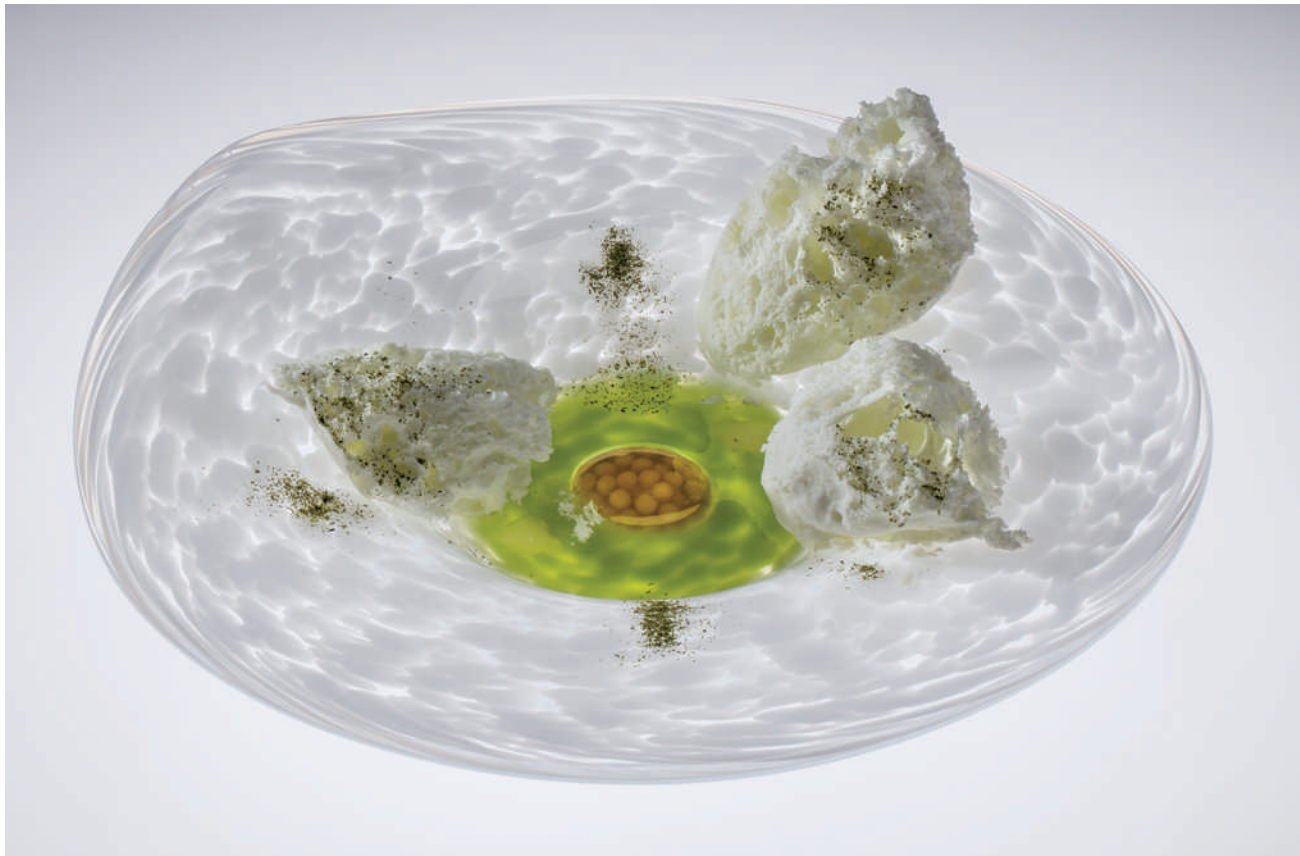
tip from Xatruch: If you can’t find a seat via Disfrutar’s website, call the restaurant directly, as “not all the seats are available online.” A waiting list is another option. So is a reservation at Minibar by José Andrés, for that matter, the closest comparison in the United States — whose cheapest option is almost twice the price of Disfrutar’s.

Back home, I ask Andrés to elaborate on his zeal for Disfrutar. “It’s a place you learn,” says the three-time customer, “a place you get motivated.”

Enjoyable? Disfrutar is the very definition.

📍 163 Carrer de Villarroel, Barcelona. 011-34-93-348-68-96. [disfrutarbarcelona.com](http://disfrutarbarcelona.com). Menus range from about \$150 to \$230 per person, excluding alcohol.

*Tom Sietsema is the food critic for The Washington Post. To comment on this story, email [wpmagazine@washpost.com](mailto:wpmagazine@washpost.com).*



Photos from top: Adrià Goula Sardà; Francesc Guillamet



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