

conversations with the world's top culinary artists

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THE ROCA BROTHERS:  
A FAMILY AFFAIR

DISFRUTAR:  
THE DNA OF ELBULLI

COREY LEE:  
FOOD IS A REFLECTION  
OF CULTURE



# EDUARD XATRUCH, ORIOI CASTRO, AND MATEU CASAÑAS OF DISFRUTAR THE DNA OF ELBULLI

BY GEETA BANSAL

**“We** were the DNA of elBulli,” chefs Oriol Castro and Eduard Xatruch proclaimed one afternoon as we sat in the basement and records office below their bustling restaurant, Disfrutar.

It is not a flippant statement, coming from chefs who spent years working alongside Ferran Adrià and his brother Albert Adrià in the kitchens of a restaurant that forever altered the course of international gastronomy.

The triumvirate of Mateu Casañas, Oriol Castro and Eduard Xatruch first met in the kitchens of elBulli, forming a lasting friendship as they refined their skills with Ferran and Albert Adrià at the restaurant overlooking Cala Montjoi, a bay in the small town of Roses on Catalonia’s Costa Brava. A venerated temple of contemporary haute cuisine, elBulli not only transformed the world of gastronomy but also the trajectory of many chefs’ careers, a number of whom have gone on to open some of the most influential restaurants in the world. Among the graduates of the prestigious establishment: René Redzepi (Noma), Massimo Bottura (Osteria Francescana), Joan Roca (El Celler de Can Roca), and Andoni Aduriz (Mugaritz).







The three friends have since struck out on their own, and say they are now fueled by their own creativity. Even though they were the force behind many of the techniques and ideas at elBulli, this time around they are working in their own space, for themselves. The three chefs first opened the doors to Compartir, a casual contemporary restaurant in Cadaqués, in 2012, not long after elBulli closed in 2011. The three split their time between their new project and working on compiling the Bullipedia, a definitive encyclopedia of gastronomy, at the elBulli Foundation in Barcelona. At the tail end of 2014, they opened the doors at Disfrutar in Barcelona, which has quickly become one of the top gastronomic experiences in Spain. It was then not surprising that Disfrutar won the Miele One To Watch 2017 award on the prestigious World's 50 Best Restaurants list.

The icing on the cake was the well-deserved

second Michelin star that rounded out the restaurant's stellar year. Then, at the 2018 awards held in Bilbao, Disfrutar ranked at number 18 in the top 50 restaurants, earning the "Highest New Entry" honor. The modern, playful plates predict an upward trajectory, both in the gastronomic universe and in all the other lists and awards that abound these days.

Two of the three hands-on partners, Eduard and Oriol, work in the kitchens of Disfrutar and live in the vicinity, while Mateu is at Compartir on the Costa Brava. They meet up every week, either in Barcelona or up the coast on their day off. They can also often be found on stage at congresses and chef conferences, sharing their techniques and dishes with fascinating videos that leave their audiences spellbound.

At Disfrutar ("enjoy" in Spanish) a colorful mosaic-lined corridor leads diners from the small bar through the bustling kitchen and



into the open, airy dining room. Cautionary note: once the imaginative and enjoyable plates hit the table, accompanied by the unpretentious but professional service (it does have two Michelin stars), the surroundings fade away. Think: an airy brioche filled with caviar, a riff on a corn cob made with foie gras, crispy egg yolk, a gelatin pasta with carbonara foam. Executed tableside are some of the drool-worthy bites on the three tasting menu options. Needless to say, reservations are hard to come by, and if you do snag one, you may recognize a well-known international chef or two at a table near you.

Albert Adrià, who worked closely with them during their time at elBulli, says, "We are like brothers, and I admire them and their work, as they are very creative and hardworking."

The three friends are humble and welcoming and enjoy sharing their creative techniques with their peers, setting an exam-

ple for others in the industry. Chefs have big hearts and these three exemplify that, not only in Spain but wherever they travel around the world.

All of these traits and more were on display during our recent talk.

#### WHAT IS MODERN SPANISH CUISINE?

**E:** *According to us, our cuisine at Disfrutar cannot be referred to as just creative or avant-garde. It is the kind of cuisine that is actually being cooked in our Spanish kitchens today. What is usually being referred to in this context are restaurants that are just using aesthetics, or where the intent of the cook is just to show his best. On the other hand, you can be categorized as a modern restaurant for making very "clean" cuisine that enhances the product. To be creative it is not necessary to use techniques or unfamiliar products, and, for example, you can even be creative with just one almond.*



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*In Spain, and in fact all over the world, people like to visit restaurants serving "creative cuisine," but people, when they go to such a restaurant, may experience something that was actually created 15 years ago. If they are not aware of this then they presume it*

*to be the creation of that restaurant. There are many such restaurants in Spain that do fall in this category, but not all of them are serious restaurants, even though these days, people know more about kitchens than they did a few years ago.*

**O:** *I would say that to be called a modern kitchen the chef has to first be looking for the best product before anything else, and then the best technique or way to cook it. In Barcelona there are restaurants with great products and their way of cooking them is modern. For example, Extbarri, in the Basque country, is modern cuisine because it has great products that are touched by magic in the kitchen. It is creative because they are constantly making new things but with very ancient techniques like la brasa, or cooking with fire. New things don't necessarily have to be complicated. On the other hand, there are restaurants that make, what we call, "creative cuisine" like us. Talking about creativity, what it means*

*is to make new things, and in order to do that you have to discover new products, new concepts, new techniques.*

*We all do that in our own way. Like Extbarri creates using fire, while Mugaritz uses different specialized techniques. In Spain, we have many exceptional restaurants cooking and creating on an elevated level. In fact, we have many magnificent restaurants in Barcelona, with their version of modern cuisine but in their own individual style.*

**E:** *It is hard to pinpoint what a modern restaurant is, and this is true of France or US or other parts of the world where there are a lot of different styles. In Spain, on the one hand, you have Paco Morales, who is very modern and creative but is focused on the region of Andalusia.*

**M:** *It's the maximum representation of a kitchen with well-established roots and traditions that has managed to grow from*

*these bases to create a new movement that has really spread throughout the world.*

#### ARE YOU COOKING REGIONAL CUISINE?

**E:** *We are not so regional, so to speak. Then, on the other hand, in some cases we are. For example, the nuts we use, like the pine nuts, are very Mediterranean, while the suquet is very Catalan, and then we might have laksa or pandan on the menu, products for which we have no regional reference. So, we are free, in that respect, from staying confined to one region. We are cooks and chefs from Catalunya and Spain, but we embrace all cuisines and cook in a very free style.*

#### YOUR MENUS INCORPORATE INTERNATIONAL FLAVORS: IS THAT WHAT YOU MEAN BY "FREE STYLE"?

**E:** *Yes, we have ceviche and laksa, a spicy noodle soup from Southeast Asia, so you can say we love the world. We can be in-*





*spired by, say, a ceviche from Peru to make a dish. If we come across any product that we like we try to incorporate it into our cuisine in our own way. For us, all that is good. Whether it is a product or technique, it can become a reference for us.*

#### **HAVE YOU FOLLOWED ELBULLI DOGMA OR ARE YOU ON YOUR OWN JOURNEY NOW?**

*E: When elBulli closed in 2011, we stayed with Ferran and started work on Bullipedia, and we worked there till November of 2014. Then a month later, on December 2014, we opened Disfrutar here in Barcelona. Compartir was opened in 2012 in Cadaqués while we were still with Ferran Adrià. We were there for 18, 16, and 15 years respectively, a long time, working every day, giving our mind and body to elBulli and our work. That is still our way of working, to always give it our all.*

#### **SO IS YOUR VISION SIMILAR TO ELBULLI?**

*E: No, no, absolutely not. We found our own way to make and create new things.*

*O: We were part of the DNA of elBulli, and we were part of that whole journey to getting the stars, all the way from two to three Michelin stars. We were the creatives at elBulli, but here in Disfrutar, there is no Ferran, no Juli Soler. Here, it's just us. We are at liberty to exercise our own creativity. Though we work the same way, this is our only focus and work now. We started the restaurant based on our own skills and creativity, while working from 9 AM every morning until close to get it going.*

*E: There is no Juli Soler to manage the front, and it's us all the way, from the dining room to the kitchen, and in the management of the business. Our way of cooking, however, we must point out, has not changed.*

#### **DOES YOUR RANKING ON THE 50 BEST LIST OR THE MICHELIN STARS MEAN GUESTS HAVE HIGHER EXPECTATIONS**

#### **FROM YOU? IS THERE MORE PRESSURE NOW?**

*E: The difference is that during the time I was at elBulli, where I started in 2008, I went to London with Ferran Adrià to accept the award for elBulli for being the best in the world. It was the best, according to the 50 Best list or Michelin guide and all of that, and we were there, working every day, during that period. This time, however, it was for us and our own project.*

*When we were awarded the One To Watch by 50 Best and placed at #55 in the top 100, then the second star, and this year the #18, we were of course overjoyed, but for us nothing has changed in the way we work. We are of course happy for ourselves*

*and the team, but we don't dwell on it. It's all great, but we move on to the next stage of our work. We enjoy cooking, as the pressure of stars or lists is good for us, and we are happy in our work. We are very real and honest.*

#### **WHAT IS YOUR OPINION OF CHEFS BEING ON THE ROAD FOR COLLABORATIONS AND GETTING INVOLVED IN SOCIAL PROJECTS?**

*E: It's nice, but it all depends on the personality of a person. We do what we can but privately, and we have to work hard to pay off all the expenses and costs of establishing our business here. If we have an extra euro, we contribute to where it's needed.*

*O: We concentrate on using the best products possible and our creativity, never skimping on that, unlike many kitchens, to save money. We see where we can help to the best of our ability but don't make grand gestures. My brother has an NGO to provide assistance to the less fortunate, and we help in that and don't make it public.*

*E: We don't have a public platform for contributing or helping. It's a different level of contribution from those who are well established and been in the business for years. If you have patrons or investors and other businesses making money, then of course you contribute more. There are a lot of important projects that we would at some point like to get involved in. If the economics allow you, then it's good for chefs to become part of them.*

#### **WHAT ARE THE ELEMENTS YOU STRESS MOST IN THE KITCHEN AT DISFRUTAR?**

*O: We stress using the best products and relying on our creativity. We never ever compromise on the quality of products.*

*E: Taste, texture and good products are most important. I also think about when my mother comes to eat: she has to like it. That is a test for me.*

#### **HOW LONG DID IT TAKE TO BREAK EVEN HERE?**

*O: We opened and within a month we were very busy, but of course we had a lot of bills to pay and it was difficult. Within three months of opening the restaurant was stable and we broke even.*

*E: We didn't take out anything for us but just kept putting it back in the business, as we wanted to build a small cocktail bar in the private area downstairs. Then we changed our mind because we just wanted to focus on creating the best, and so instead of that we created this work area where, as you see, our library and other resources are around us. Now this is where we store*







*all the data of our investigations, our prototypes of plates, etc.*

**DO YOU REMEMBER THE DAYS WHEN GUESTS DID NOT TAKE PICTURES IN THE DINING ROOM?**

**O:** Yes, that was even the case at elBulli where they did not allow pictures.

**E:** In fact, until the last year in 2011, people had to come visit to find out what the cuisine was all about. The exceptions were at congresses like in San Sebastián Gastronomika, when they could watch a demonstration of a dish from elBulli. Now things are so different as we make a dish and the pictures are out all over instantly. If you are a creative person, then your idea is all over the world instantly.

**IS ALL THE ATTENTION WITH THE SECOND MICHELIN STAR AND THE 50 BEST RESTAURANTS AWARDS 2018 EVENT IN BILBAO GOOD FOR SPANISH CUISINE?**

**E:** It probably didn't, but it's good that they came to Bilbao, and it's a good opportunity for restaurant business. It was beneficial for 50 Best too because it's a great zone for dining, and it's always good for the restaurants of that region, as well as all of Spain. It's not just the well-known and established restaurants and the three- and two-stars, but all the local siderias and small restaurants that get exposure. As for impacting Spanish gastronomy, it's not going to change anything.

**WHAT WAS THE FIRST PLATE YOU WORKED ON AT ELBULLI?**

**E:** I remember that the first thing I did when I arrived at elBulli was open mussels. It was not something I had not done before, how after I opened mussels, we put them to boil. At elBulli it was very different, and I was very surprised because all the mussels were selected by size, and we cooked them for eight, five to three seconds depending on the size. This was a very surprising thing

*for me to see, that for Ferran the precision of cooking and selection of product was an exacting step. The other surprise was to see so many chefs working together, and it was very impressive. When I arrived, we were thirty persons in the kitchen.*

**O:** When I arrived, they put me in a bakery. And the first thing I did was cut skewer sticks, and I cut myself. I still have the scar on my finger. I cut myself with the scissors and I wanted to die of shame because I had cut myself on my first day. And on top of that I had not cut myself by cooking, but by cutting skewers.

**M:** My first work assignment at elBulli was peel some plums, which almost cut me. I went as an assistant, in practice, and I was in the production kitchen of the restaurant, where we developed the tasks of food for staff, preparations for different parties.

**WHAT WAS THE ROUTINE AT ELBULLI AND WHO CAME UP WITH THE CONCEPTS, THE WHOLE TEAM OR ONE PERSON?**

**E:** At elBulli we worked like a team, but the final decision was always Ferran's. For example, Albert was director of the taller and he was brilliant. In the first few years he was in charge of the pastry kitchen and then he began to bring in ideas for the savory kitchen. He also had a say on if a test dish was good enough to pursue or not; however, the final decision was always made by Ferran. We lived at elBulli and worked long hours, but that was the life those days. When elBulli closed during winter we went to Barcelona and worked in the taller and often went on the road with Ferran for demonstrations and events.

**DO YOU ENJOY SHARING YOUR TECHNIQUES AND IDEAS WITH YOUR PEERS AT**





## CONGRESSES AND FOOD EVENTS?

**O:** Yes, I do. We enjoy creating new concepts and techniques, and the most important thing of that is to share it with our peers. And that is one of the differential facts of our gastronomy. It started in Spain, at the end of the 90's, during the first kitchen congresses. It's nice to do it and it gives value to everything.

## DO YOU ALL TAKE TURNS AT GOING TO EVENTS?

**O:** Yes, and it is very enriching because travel enriches and gives an option to know new cultures, as was my last trip to Turkey. There we learned about Turkish cuisine and, in fact, today in Disfrutar we have already made some dishes inspired by this trip. And it is also interesting to meet other chefs, who you obviously know, but with whom you don't get to spend time outside of work, and that is very important and very beautiful. We also get an opportunity to interact with other speakers and journalists from around the world, since it is also very important to be able to give visibility to our work.

## CUISINE HAS CHANGED SO MUCH IN THE LAST 20 YEARS. ARE THERE SOME INGREDIENTS OR DISHES THAT WERE BEYOND IMAGINATION EVEN FIVE YEARS AGO?

**E:** The cuisine and the ingredients we use have changed a lot and it's incredible when you stop to think about it. Recently during a conversation, I remembered that the last year of elBulli in 2011 was only seven years ago, but in that time, gastronomy changed in a huge way. It's mainly because of the internet, and when we were at elBulli in 2011, I don't remember being aware of Instagram, Twitter or Facebook. As a result, information about cooking was not so accessible and if you wanted to know what was happening in a certain restaurant you had to travel there, spend money and time, or go to a culinary congress to see a certain technique. Today what I made in Disfrutar

is seen by someone in Japan instantaneously. The fast communication in the last five years has changed everything. The level around the world has increased incredibly. Now people know so much about chefs and restaurants around the world. On one hand it's great for chefs, while at the same time we have to keep creating, because what you make today is the past the next day. So new creations have a very short life span, and it complicates things for cooks, while gourmets know a lot already about the food. The surprise is lost now, unlike ten years ago when you didn't see the pictures or read reviews.

## DOES THAT MAKE IT MORE DIFFICULT TO PERFORM UP TO THESE DINERS' EXPECTATIONS?

**E:** As chefs we prefer that they come with a blank state of mind, without knowing too much about the dishes. That makes for a better experience for them, and, on the other hand, there are people who come after reading reviews. But thankfully the pictures do not relay the taste or the smell. The day that becomes possible, it's over for restaurants. Until you taste a dish you cannot realize an experience just from a picture, because you need to feel the sensations of the texture, the taste and the flavor.

## WHY IS PLATING IMPORTANT? MANY OF YOUR DISHES ARE PLAYFUL: IS THAT SOMETHING YOU AIM FOR?

**E:** We want people to relax and have fun with food, but for us gastronomy is very very serious, and when we put some fun element in a dish it has to make sense in the dish. For example, in one course we put a little vinegar in a glass that you smell before eating our gazpacho, but it is not just a fun element. We believe that the taste of the gazpacho changes after you smell the vinegar.

When we put drops of whiskey in your hands it's another perception of the ingredient. We don't do these things for effect. That is not







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*our aim because in our culinary work we are very serious about what we do. If we make something that can make people smile it's okay, but it has to make sense in a culinary manner. If an element does not make sense, then we don't use it. We are very real and honest in our work and approach.*

**FINE DINING SERVICE CONCEPTS ARE UNDERGOING AN EVOLUTION AND WHILE YOU DON'T HAVE LINENS ON THE TABLE, THE SERVICE IS VERY PROFESSIONAL. ARE YOU PLANNING TO CHANGE THIS IN THE NEAR FUTURE?**

**E:** *No, we are not, because we think each restaurant has its own style and it goes*

*with the style of the kitchen, with the place of business and the design of the restaurant. What we want at Disfrutar is that the experience is relaxing and enjoyable and not overly serious. I think service is the face of the restaurant and is the value of the restaurant for the guests. For example, if I am going to Louis XV, Alain Ducasse's three-Michelin-starred restaurant in Monte Carlo, I will expect to have a fine dining experience in the extreme sense.*

*However, if I am going to a sushi bar, then I am expecting a different experience*



*that require a jacket and I respect that because perhaps the chef or restaurant owner are aiming for a certain experience and atmosphere.*

*altogether. All styles of service are valid, just like styles of kitchen. A Chinese kitchen or a traditional Spanish kitchen can be very good or very bad depending on the service.*

*We believe service is very important and should be professional but also very personable. We cannot speak of service in just one way, as it can have variations in style and level and depending on the chef, the style of the kitchen and the atmosphere you are aiming for. There are restaurants*

**O:** *The service and restaurants style are in constant evolution, just like the kitchen of 50 years ago. I think that the future of fine dining is that it's open, as now there are sushi bars in Tokyo that have three stars. Michelin has realized that it's a global experience and varies with the place, cuisine and culture. When people finish a meal, pay the bill, either they are happy or not, and it does not have anything to do with tablecloths, tableware. As the kitchens, styles, ways of life are changing, the guides are changing too.*





## ARE YOU PLANNING ANOTHER RESTAURANT?

**E:** No, we are busy with Compartir, and it's over three and half years since we opened Disfrutar, and we have a great team and are happy with the quality of food and the great service. We are not businessmen but the kind of chefs who need to be in the restaurant, in our kitchen, cooking for our customers. There is much we can work on right here and we have a lot of projects in the restaurant itself. You have seen our creative space downstairs that we want to finish this year, and we are also making a new wine cellar. That is our main project for now and every day we try to take one step forward. Maybe in the future we can open more restaurants.

## DO THE THREE OF YOU WORK ON BOTH RESTAURANTS AS A TEAM?

**E:** Mateu lives in Roses and Oriol lives in Sitges, while I live in Barcelona, so it's convenient if Mateu is in Compartir while the two of us are in Disfrutar. Every week we get together for at least one day and every two weeks Oriol and I go to Compartir while Mateu comes here. Every week when we make a dish, we are all involved.

## HOW HAS COMPARTIR EVOLVED SINCE 2012?

**M:** Compartir has evolved being faithful to the philosophy and principles that we consecrated when we opened, which were to be a restaurant of food to share in the center of the table—a restaurant with a dynamic offering, and a very affable room team that is open to deal with the customer. We have aimed to achieve maximum

perfection within our limits, in the service and in the quality of the products used in our elaborations.

## HOW IS SERVICE AT COMPARTIR DIFFERENT FROM DISFRUTAR?

**M:** Compartir is an à la carte restaurant where the first and second dishes probably determine how we impress the customer. Our philosophy of customer service and being aware that we are providing a service, is undeniably the same in both of our restaurants. It is true that at the two places, the

customers are different, and we adapt our philosophy of service based on the clients, but the basics do not differ much because we all have the same approach in both restaurants.

## DO YOU THREE HAVE DISAGREEMENTS?

**E:** Not really, because this is not new for us, since we worked together for a very long time at elBulli. What has changed is that at elBulli we only had to worry about the kitchen but now we have to worry about the whole enterprise. It's the same

in some ways, like how we worked together on projects at elBulli where Ferran was the boss. However, now there is no boss, but we still work in essentially a similar manner. We don't think we are bosses but just the ones responsible for everything and have to run the team. We are lucky that we are three of us, and as I like to say, we each have two hands, one brain, and then four hands, and two brains more. We are three people thinking like one and the result is great. When you work alone it's hard to make decisions, but all three of us have input into decisions, which are more balanced as a result.

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THE MOST DIFFICULT LESSONS IN OWNING YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

*E: It was difficult starting from zero to come where we are now. The economic risk was substantial since we don't have investors. We are all chefs and had to make sure our restaurants were sustainable, and the good thing is, we all had the desire or illusion to reach farther and do better.*

HAVE THE POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CRISES OR INCREASING COMPETITION FROM NEW RESTAURANTS IMPACTED YOUR BOTTOM LINE THIS YEAR?

*O: Last winter the political problem or the crisis in Spain was something that happened and passed. As for more restaurants every year and the competition they bring, we think it's healthy and good for our industry. It's not really a competition, since it brings in more people to eat in Barcelona.*







#### WHAT DO YOU DO ON YOUR DAY OFF IN BARCELONA?

**E:** I am from Tarragona so on my day off or during summer break I head back there with the kids. We usually go to the beach there but in the winter we are here in Barcelona where there is always a lot going on. There are museums, theaters and good food. I have two small kids, so we head to casual restaurants to eat paella or something simple, and for special occasions there are many special places.

#### WHAT ARE YOUR FAVORITE PLACES TO EAT ON YOUR DAY OFF?

**M:** Restaurant Cal Campaner in Roses and Alkimia in Barcelona.

**O:** I like to eat in some traditional restaurant with my children. I want that them to learn about the different bases and kitchens and let them get an opinion. They have to learn about the diversity of the kitchen. Quimet i Quimet, by the way, is my favorite restaurant in Barcelona.

#### BEST DINING EXPERIENCE THIS YEAR FOR YOU?

**E:** Tickets, Hoja Santa and Estimar. Tickets is modern cuisine, as is Hoja Santa.

#### WHAT IS THE LATEST DISH YOU ARE ALL EXCITED ABOUT?

**O:** Dishes inspired by and made using Iberian ham. We are now making a cheese from ham. It's not really a cheese but more like a fresh cheese. We are constantly creating new dishes and this year we have 65 new recipes on the menu.

#### WHAT IS THE NEW DISH YOU ARE MOST EXCITED ABOUT AT COMPARTIR?

**M:** The egg carbonara with mushrooms. It's a dish that is 100% Mediterranean, made with products found in close proximity, with amazing organic chick eggs and with our reinterpretation of the classic and traditional Italian sauce, carbonara. It also includes a seasonal product from here, the rovellon mushrooms.

#### WHO IS THE MOST SERIOUS AMONGST THE THREE OF YOU? WHO IS THE FUNNY GUY?

**O:** We all have different personalities and it depends on the moment. At work we are strict and serious, but on the other hand, we are open and loving with our employees and guests. We do have fun, as you know.

