

# Creativity Lessons From A Global Number 1 Restaurant's Top 3 Chefs



**Michelle Greenwald**, CONTRIBUTOR

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For 5 years, El Bulli, in Rosas, Spain, northeast of Barcelona on the Coasts Brava was selected by San Pelegrino, the most esteemed arbiter, as the “Best Restaurant in The World”. Ferran Adrià was its visionary leader and chef. Behind Ferran, on his creative team in the workshop, and in charge of executing the novel, highly inventive and delicious new food concepts and presentations in the restaurant, were three amazingly talented individuals: Oriol Castro, Eduard Xatruch and Mateu Casañas. El Bulli closed in

2011 and Ferran has since found new outlets for his exceptional creativity and methodic innovation approaches. In 2012, Oriol, Eduard and Mateu formed a partnership and opened Compartir (to share) restaurant in Cadequés, Spain on the Costa Brava, based on a theme of shared dishes. In December 2014, the triumvirate opened Disfrutar (to enjoy) in Barcelona with an avant guard tasting menus of up to 32 different courses. Disfrutar had already been named the 55<sup>th</sup> best restaurant in the world, was selected as the Miele “One to watch” in March, 2017, and this past Wednesday, received its second Michelin Star.



Eating at the restaurant in October was for me, an emotional, exhilarating, multi-sensory experience because the *Harvard Business School Case El Bulli: A Taste of Innovation* I've been teaching to executives since it was written in 2008 about the innovation methods of El Bulli that executives can apply to improve their firms' innovation processes, transformed my life. It's the reason I developed a global, cross-sector, leading innovator benchmarking program, wrote a book to inspire more systematic and thorough brainstorming, speak on the subject, and why I'm now a Forbes contributor. Despite having viewed several documentaries, Anthony Bourdain videos, and read numerous articles and books about how Ferran and his team innovated, until

this October, I had never actually eaten the food.

The 32-course meal at Disfrutar is at the very pinnacle of Maslow's hierarchy of human needs for "self-actualization". All the attention to surprising and delighting customers with every single course, transforms what could be simply just a very good meal, into a memorable adventure, a unique form of entertainment, and an Instagram orgy. The unexpected, imaginative presentations make guests slow down, think about the analogies and cleverness, marvel at the unique tableware and serving pieces, and savor each bite of every dish.

The meal was joyous, thrilling, life-affirming, and to me and the group of executives I was with, highly instructional regarding ways to innovate in product and service features and customer touchpoints. What follows are key learnings gleaned from this exceptional chef-owner triumvirate and their highly motivated team. The results are the product of a love for what they do, excitement at discovering new food concepts, extraordinary creativity, and a shared vision by the entire organization.

Nearly every dish at Disfrutar can teach an innovation lesson. What follows are 24 illustrated examples of different types of creative thinking, and 8 key take-aways companies can apply from the innovation geniuses at Disfrutar.

## **Multi-perspective collaboration**

Disfrutar works with students from Barcelona's Escola Massana Design School who major in jewelery making, product design and graphic design, on the presentations and implements for dishes. One of the teams developed this delightful Tim Burtonesque pedestal for a nearly impossible liquid egg yolk contained in a light puff of fried dough. After taking a small bite, it's poured onto a mushroom gelatin in the bottom of the ceramic egg. The specially designed prop is charming, whimsical, and dramatically sets off the puff.



Michelle Greenwald

**Existing concepts are springboards for innovative variants, and failures are embraced as opportunities to learn.**

The "multispherification" concept in which an alginate membrane encapsulates a liquid, was subsequently applied to miniaturize and fuse very small spheres of condensed corn corn broth that delicately cover a rectangle of fois gras and a caterpillar-like, spherified parsley purée with successive, partially attached compartments. The parsley caterpillar concept with its incomplete spheres was an unintended consequence of playing with the technology. Trial and error, iteration and experimentation led to these new food presentation ideas.





**Multi-sensory involvement makes experiences more intensely felt and remembered.**

Two courses at Disfrutar exemplified multi-sensory innovation. We watched as apple wood was first burned in a small little pile on a dish. A brandy sniffer glass was then inverted over it to absorb the smokey essence. Next the liquid was combined with dry ice to make the alcohol smoother and then it was poured into the glass. Guests inhale the smoky essence, and then imbibe.

For one of the 7 desserts we tried, several drops of 16-year-old whiskey were poured on guests hands, to be rubbed together and inhaled, before biting into a hazelnut covered with a clear, amber-like shell that contains a liquid burst of rum, and another sweet that was a crunchy, vanilla meringue- covered almond.



**Great service involves servers' cultivated ability to sense customers' wants and needs and surprise them with thoughtfulness and perceptivity, to support excellence in all aspects of the experience.**

When I accidentally dropped my napkin, my server noticed and insisted in a very pleasant way that I accept a fresh one. When someone in our party accidentally crushed an impossibly thin mango cone containing a curry purée, the server kindly insisted on replacing it with a newly made one, so it could be enjoyed exactly as it was meant to be eaten.



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**A sense of humor makes people smile, engage, and more likely become fans. It's particularly refreshing and appreciated when a high-end brand/restaurant is playful, and doesn't itself too seriously.**

When you bite into the glossy looking peppers pictured below, the rich chocolate ganache-like pudding is an unexpected revelation. In another example, taking a much loved food everyone can relate to, like a sandwich, and adding surprise and humor is smile-inducing. Disfrutar amazingly recreated mini bread loaves that are really large meringues that melt in your mouth with a filling of mango sorbet... a fun and unexpected take on an ice cream sandwich.

Disfrutar

**Combining high end luxury with universally known and loved mass items**



Francesc Guillaumet  
*Panchino filled with caviar beluga*

**Changing the normally expected form of a product is another way to innovate.** This gazpacho sandwich is a good example. Disfrutar took a liquid soup, normally eaten with a spoon, and turned the flavor and smooth texture into a portable finger food.





## **Presentation Matters.**

Adding a little surprise and magic adds to an experience. These beetroot puffs were hidden in a bed of sesame seeds and

miraculously rose to the top when shaken by the server at the table.



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**Watching preparation before your eyes adds intrigue, anticipation and entertainment value.** Prawn flavored rice soufflé puffs, that emerged from the dried rice when shaken, had drops of garlic oil and chili pepper gently added to each puff for extra flavor by the server, right in front of us.





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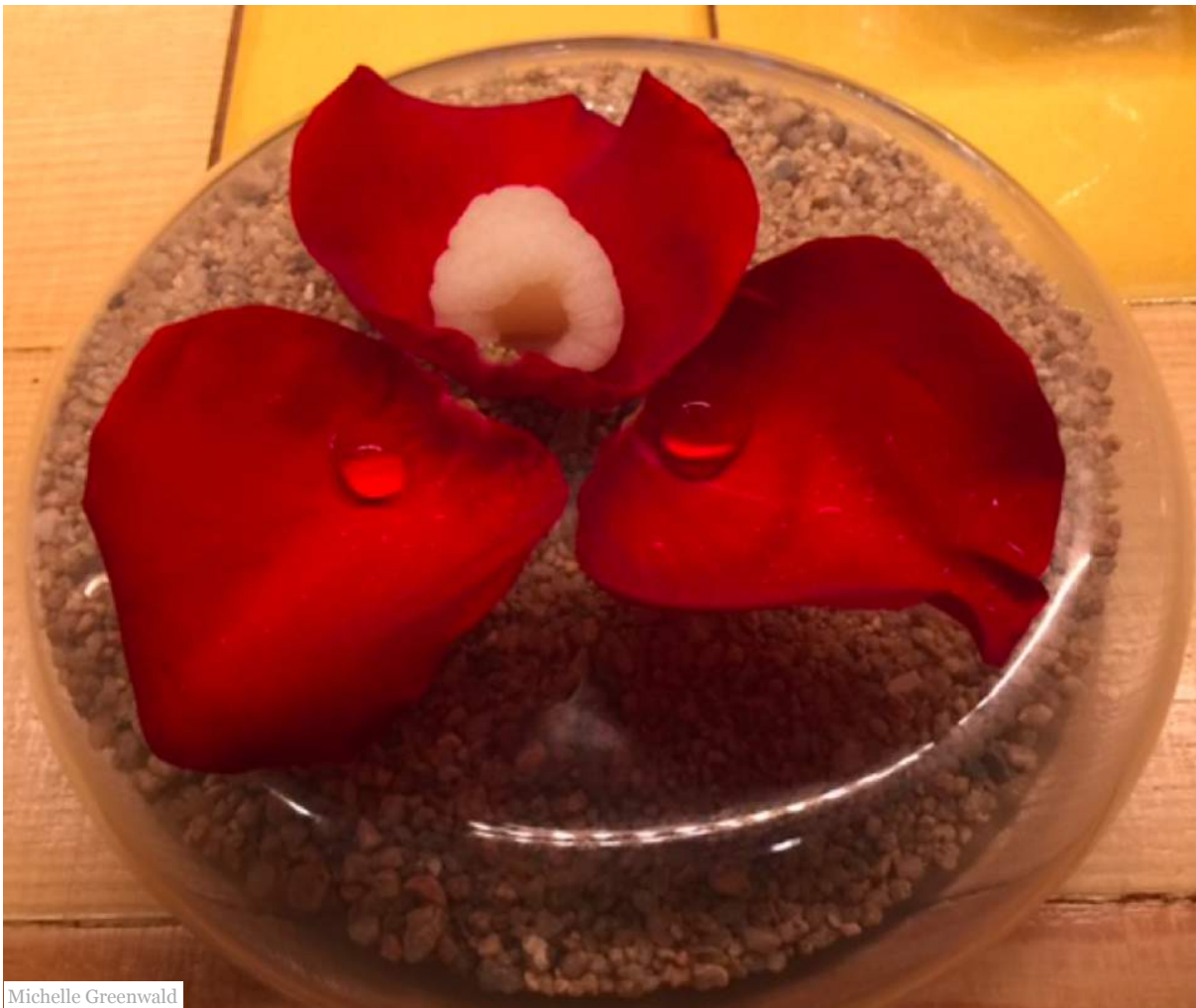
**Interactivity engages consumers.** Walnuts, cracked open by customers, magically gave way to nut meat that had been previously smoked and put back in the shell.



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**Beauty and Design Matter. Placing characteristics of one item into another yields unexpected and often delightful results.**

The presentation of these fresh rose petals was magnificent and awe-inspiring. The white raspberry was unexpectedly infused with lychee flavor rather than raspberry. The drops of what look like dew, were little encapsulated bursts of rose petal flavor.



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**Changing expected temperatures yields novel results.**

This frothy, cold cocktail is eaten with a spoon, creating a new type of drink more likely to be savored, sip by sip.





© Francesco Guillamet

Disfrutar

*Frozen cocktail with passion fruit, rum and coffee*

**Making the ordinary special can add value to something often overlooked**

Taking an item not normally the hero of a dish or product and making it special or treated like a luxury item, can create a new invention. Rich pigeon broth was infused with orange peel and fresh tarragon and served over a large ice cube in a large wine glass to be swirled before drinking. It made the wonderfully liquid seem like a fine wine or cocktail.



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**Packaging, presentation, or serving dishes can create context and associations and change perceptions of what a dish or product is.**

This espresso looking beverage is actually a savory seafood based sauce from the region known as Suquet. By serving it in an espresso cup, what was a light sauce, becomes an intense beverage to be enjoyed in small sips. The light, frothy gazpacho served in a champagne flute is now perceived as a savory cocktail, largely by virtue of the glass it's served in.



**Analogies with new component substitutions lead to new ideas.**

This fried egg white is filled with a condensed broth of salmon eggs in what would normally be the yolk. Tiny fried anchovies and small mounds of salmon caviar decorate around the center. It's beautiful looking, tastes amazing, and is a new way to utilize the most common of ingredients, egg whites. This mini ice cream sundae is really Parmesan foam with Parmesan sorbet, mini spheres of egg yolks, crunchy Parmesan and black truffle. The ice cream sundae analogy combined with savory flavors are a



delightful surprise.



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**Opposites can yield new concepts.** What if pasta rather than being opaque, was clear and translucent, like this pasta made of congealed ham stock with pancetta and Parmesan, as a play on pasta carbonara.



Disfrutar

**Varying similar looking items that are expected to be the same, evokes wow reactions.** Both realistic looking cherries are made with a thin layer of cocoa butter on the outside. When you bite into one you get a burst of cherry liquor. Bite into the other and you get the full mouthfeel sensation of cherry ganache.





**Applying a familiar process to different ingredients or components can yield great results.** These razor clams were baked in salt, a customary preparation of certain types of fish in Italy. The clam flavor was rich and delicious and the presentation, all the more special because of the substitution of ingredients.



**Brands/firms/organizations that look to differentiate in ingredients, components, serving pieces and implements, can create virtuous cycle ecosystems that support local, small scale, high quality vendors, foragers, and artisans.**

Utilizing high quality local ingredients and artisanal tableware can enrich communities by giving creative individuals another commercial outlet, increased awareness, and help them survive financially so they can continue to do their exceptional work. Disfrutar seeks out beautiful, unexpected tableware that adds drama and a design aesthetic to each course, like this wooden box that reveals a crunchy candy inside made of mango, whisky and tonka beans, or this wooden engraved platform that rests on a piece of natural wood. One Michelin criteria for awarding stars to restaurants is the presentation and tableware. Disfrutar is helping pave the way for elegant dining to encompass a different, in some ways more rustic and natural design aesthetic than previously valued, fancy, fussy porcelain and silver tableware.



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**Treating employees well and making them know they're an integral part of the entire customer experience** makes them enjoy their jobs more and interact better with guests. The servers' sense of pride and pleasure at the joy they know they were bestowing was palpable. It was clear Disfrutar's leadership motivated employees, who completely understood the mission and were cognizant of the importance of their role. Servers were empowered to add extra dimensions of kindness and information, to the guest experience.





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**There is no substitute for brilliant ideas that wow with creativity!**

One of the desserts that blew my mind with cleverness and I will NEVER forget was white cotton candy balls covered with a dusting of mint flavored chocolate powder served on a real branch of cotton. The edible and delicious cotton candy puffs were interspersed with real cotton balls on the branch. Servers gently dislodged them from the base of the buds for guests.



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**Designing dishes, products or services to make people smile is a great goal.**

This dessert includes walnut meat, a cream made of walnut puree, and whole nut made in a way so you eat the entire nut. The shell is pulverized and miraculously combined with the nut meat so it's soft and you are actually eating the shell. There is a drop of walnut oil in the cream that turns the circle into a smiley face!



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**Changing eating instructions or product delivery can make a dish memorable.**

These bits of salmon were skewered with large bones and topped with a purée of fresh tarragon and caviar. They slid gently off of the bones into your mouth.





**Doubling a reference is another way to innovate and make people stop for a minute to take notice.**

These sesame cones filled with sesame ice cream were served resting in a bed of sesame seeds. The Malaysian seafood noodle soup-like dish laksa was served in a clam shell resting in a larger clam-shaped dish.



## **Creativity Take-Aways For Businesses**

While many of these inspiring innovation concepts (what I call innovation "lines of thinking" in my book about different types of global, cross-sector creativity) seem to relate to food, nearly all are directly applicable to a wide variety of products and services. Key learnings for all types of businesses include how to:



- Motivate, align and empower employees dealing with customers so they do their part in optimizing the entire brand experience and delivering on the mission
- Keep customer "end benefits" in mind when developing product and service attributes (surprising & delighting, making customers comfortable, happy, more productive, confident, or successful)
- Engage multiple senses for more memorable and immersive experiences
- Add interactivity and a little magic to capture customers' imaginations
- Think about presentation, packaging, context, and Instagram potential, almost as much as the product
- Create an ecosystem that supports a community trying to bring quality products and services to market
- Dispel pretension as a part of luxury products and services
- Pay attention to all the little details that individually make an experience great and when strung together, create undying loyalty and turn customers into advocates who will spread the word

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