From progressive cuisine to traditional cooking, Catalan chefs stay true to their heritage while being in tune with the present.

**DISFRUTAR**

The last time we were at Disfrutar, it had one Michelin star and was still a bit of an outlier in the international dining scene as people hadn’t quite wrapped their heads around the energetic, boundary-pushing cuisine by trio of chefs who still always be associated with their previous employer, elBulli. But while elBulli is now a memory and museum, chefs Oriol Castro, Eduard Xatruch and Paco Casas are very much in the present and cooking on their own terms. It’s best to drop the elBulli connection because what they do now is completely different — it’s playful but always real, its sense of wonder and entertainment rooted in the chef’s Catalan heritage.

With two Michelin stars and 18th place on the World’s 50 Best Restaurants list, Disfrutar has raised its game in its spacious, Mediterranean-inspired dining room that runs on the kind of clockwork precision required to deliver anywhere from 25 to 30 courses over a lunch that takes four hours but feels like any more than paella did. Sure, we love a good bikini – gooey toasted cheese sandwich – but you haven’t been to Barcelona until you’ve tasted authentic Catalan cooking.

WE WONDER IF it pains a Barcelona native to be asked where to find good tapas. After all, tapas didn’t originate in the capital of Spain’s Catalonia region any more than paella did. Sure, we love a good bikini – quoquer toasted jamon and cheese sandwich – but you haven’t been to Barcelona until you’ve tasted authentic Catalan cooking.

Even, so, it’s too wide a topic to go into because there are so many elements that distinguish Catalan cuisine from the rest of Spain. Patatas bravas (fried oiled crisp toast smeared with crushed tomatoes that just can’t be replicated outside of Spain because of the tomato’s seasons), but also more subtle, thanks to the magical foundation of sofrito — slow-cooked tomatoes, garlic and onions — and assorted with salt and pine (their kind of peas), and the happy marriage of mar i montanya (aka surf ‘n’ turf) barely crack the surface of what Catalan cooking.

As much as a crusader as he is a chef, Sergi de MEIÀ worked around the world a decade before returning to Barcelona to focus purely on the food of his motherland. While he does bring some modern flourishes to his cozy, living room–like eatery in the Eixample area, the menu stays strictly Catalan, using ingredients sourced only from the region. This is chef who takes three days to cook down 50,000 tomatoes into an intense sofrito that he turns into some of the best risotto dishes you will ever have. Whether it’s done with clams, pigeon or every morning, every grain is tender yet with a good bite, glistening in the intense gray enriched with flavours of land and sea. Seasoned ingredients like amazingly sweet ‘pear’ peas are tender-crisp and served with pan-seared crisp butifarra sausage in a full-bodied broth. He even uses recipes from the 15th and 16th centuries in the form of a rich braised lamb with tomatoes, wine and whisky cake enjoyed with a spray of whisky.

**INFORMAL BY MARC GASCONS**

Marc Gascons hails from his family-run and Michelin-starred restaurant Els Tinars in Selva, but he is the brains behind the modern Catalan eatery Informal, located in the luxury boutique Serras Hotel. Although he handles the hotel’s entire F&B operations from breakfast to all-day dining, Informal is still a very good representation of traditional Catalan cooking.

There are some twists in the form of this version of paella brava — not specifically Catalan but no matter since this is seriously addictive stuff. Potatoes are sliced thinly and pressed into blocks before being cooked. They’re then cut into long strips and deep-fried in order — we don’t even need the spicy sauce it comes with.

Everything is well executed from the tender, mellow fried artichokes to the robust rice cooked paella-like in a metal pan with a crusty bottom – deliciously silly from having soaked up the rich seafood broth and studded with squid, artichokes and garlic shrooms. Even a simple sea bass is done perfectly with a crisp skin and buttery flesh glistening with garlic oil and chilli bits.

Don’t cross the dessert of tanja — Catalan French toast featuring thick bread soaked in egg and milk till heavy and soft, its puddinglike texture contrasted with a cinnamon sugar crust. Papad coffee cream and caramel ice cream finish off this hearty meal that sums up the appeal of Catalan cooking — honest, using the best of seasonal ingredients, full of flavour that is as once new yet familiar, drawing you in with a big, comforting hug.

Carrer de Villarroel 143, 08016, Barcelona. Tel: +34 93 223 85 00. restauranteinformal.com

**ARTHE OF BARCELONA**

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