

# AUTHENTIC FLAVOURS OF BARCELONA

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

JAIME EE

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 – gooey toasted *jamón* 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. *Pa amb tomàquet* (olive oil-drenched crisp toast smeared with crushed tomatoes that just can't be replicated outside of Spain because of the tomatoes used); rice and stews cooked with the magical foundation of *sofrito* – slow-cooked tomatoes, garlic and onions – and accented with aioli and *picada* (their kind of pesto); and the happy marriage of *mar y muntanya* (aka surf 'n' turf) barely crack the surface of what Catalan cuisine is, so we won't even try.

Suffice to say that anything outside of Catalonia is a pale shadow of the real thing. Even as Barcelona's cosmopolitan nature demands that it caters to all styles of Spanish and international cuisine, there are enough restaurants around that still hold fast to the cooking traditions of old. What is new is how it's presented - in trendy surroundings or modern plates – by chefs who are clearly in tune with the flavours of the past, but are determined to bring them into the present and future.



## 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 this energetic, boundary-pushing cuisine by a trio of chefs who will always be associated with their previous employer, elBulli. But while elBulli is now a memory and museum, chefs Oriol Castro, Eduard Xatruch and Mateu Casañas 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 chefs' Catalan heritage.

With two Michelin stars and 18th position 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 just two, thanks to the pace, entertainment value and sheer deliciousness of your meal.

From a welcome Americano cocktail of frozen shards of vermouth and Campari; a tin of 'anchovies' that turn out to be tender slices of pigeon breast in a visual trick; spring peas lined up with spherification pea 'pearls' and dehydrated bacon; a Salvador Dali-inspired 'painting' made of a glass-like sugar sheet; right down to a whisky cake enjoyed with a spray of whisky on your hands to sniff – every single dish has a link to Catalonian culinary history. But the chefs turn tradition on its head, creating an edible fairy tale that you just want to keep immersing yourself into.

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PHOTOS: JAIME EE

## SERGI DE MEIÀ

As much of a crusader as he is a chef, Sergi de Meià worked around the world before returning to Barcelona to focus purely on the food of his motherland. While he does bring some modern flourishes to his cosy, living room-like eatery in the L'Eixample area, the menu stays strictly Catalan, using ingredients sourced only from the region.

This is a chef who takes three days to cook down 50 kilos of tomatoes into an intense *sofrito* that he turns into some of the best rice dishes you will ever have. Whether it's done with clams, pigeon or *mar y muntanya*, every grain is tender yet with a good bite, glistening in the intense gravy enriched with flavours of land and sea. Seasonal ingredients like amazingly sweet 'tear' peas are tender-crisp and served with pan-seared crisp butifarra sausages in a full-bodied broth.

He even revives recipes from the 15th and 16th centuries in the form of a rich braised lamb with tomatoes, wine and

figs that represent the tomato's first appearance in Spain, as well as a dessert of fluffy, almost churro-like chickpea fritters served with vanilla cream.



Carrer d'Aribau, 106, 08036, Barcelona. Tel: +34 931255710. restaurantsergidemeia.cat



## INFORMAL BY MARC GASCONS

Marc Gascons hails from his family-run and Michelin-starred restaurant Els Tinars in Girona, 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 his version of patatas bravas - 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 to 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 oily from having soaked up the rich seafood broth and studded with squid, artichokes and garlic shoots. Even a simple sea bass is done perfectly with a crisp skin and buttery flesh glistening with garlic oil and chilli bits.

Don't miss the dessert of *torrija* – Catalan French toast featuring thick bread soaked in egg and milk till heavy and soft, its pudding-like texture contrasted with a pan-fried sugary crust. Piped 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 at once new yet familiar, drawing you in with a big, comforting hug.

The Serras Hotel, Carrer de la Plata 4, 08002, Barcelona. Tel: +34 93 1691869. restaurantinformal.com/en