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Disfrutar, Barcelona: 31 Flavors of Surprise

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Liquified corn spherified and reassembled on foie gras.

Spanish restaurants are often renowned for dinners that stretch long into the night. Our ABaC experience was four hours spread throughout multiple areas of the restaurant. Disfrutar, on the other hand, promised variety packed into pure mass: 31 courses in one single dinner service. We spent a couple days around Barcelona in gastronomic training for this night, inhaling all variety of food in sight to ensure our insides were good and stretchy for this dinner. We were determined to vacation in Spain like some kind of

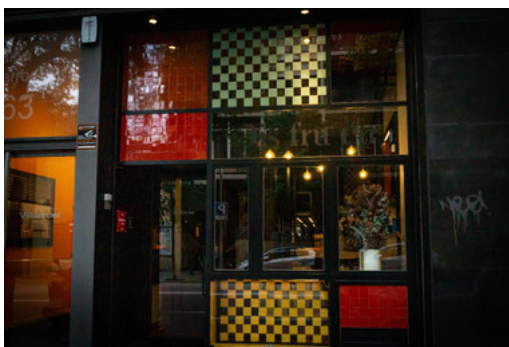
profligate prince, inhaling everything in sight with our aim set squarely on full-on gout.

Disfrutar, currently #9 on the San Pellegrino World's 50 Best Restaurant list, is a restaurant started by three former chefs from El Bulli. El Bulli is a likely contender for the title of world's most famous restaurant, despite the fact that it's been closed for nearly a decade. It was a temple to crazy science-fiction style food preparations, maintaining three Michelin stars despite throwing out their entire menu multiple times a year, and was so popular they instituted a lottery system to dole out reservations. Disfrutar, meaning "to enjoy" in Spanish, reportedly captures a lot of the magic about what made El Bulli so special.



This is a city restaurant through and through. It occupies a thin, partial slice of a building on a packed city block, between an herbalist and a high-end eyewear store. The restaurant's exterior is colorful and playful, overpowering the subtle logo. Whereas many restaurants are styled like barns or warehouses with airy, wide interiors, Disfrutar feels like someone extruded a single room along one long axis. Inside is a small seating area, followed by a lengthy walk down a hallway past the grand kitchen. The building then opens into a moderate dining room, with white tables, hanging wooden panels to break up the space, and a large patio available for sipping wine before or after dinner.

Disfrutar's menu organization mirrors that of many tasting menu restaurants in Spain. There is a "Classics" menu that is intended to be a sort of "Greatest Hits" list of courses from the restaurant's history. There's also a menu of mostly newly-developed items, called the "Festival" menu. The Classics menu is what is recommended to newcomers to get a sense of the place for diving into new creations. At a destination restaurant like this, Classics gets probably 90% of orders. Maybe one day I'll be in a position to come back in a week or a month and try the new stuff, but I'm not there yet.



A key part of the El Bulli experience was surprise. Some of their famous dishes include a perfectly-formed strawberry that revealed itself to be a frozen concoction of various fruit sorbets, and a dessert tray of oysters, each of which opened up to sumptuous scoops of ice cream. Disfrutar takes the notion of surprise straight from the El Bulli book, starting with a long ladyfinger cookie.



It's freezing to the touch when picked up, and biting into it reveals a passion fruit and rum sorbet. Another fruit

"Frozen passion fruit lady finger with rum"

placed on the table resembles a pale raspberry, beautifully presented in a deep red flower. Of course, it's not a raspberry but another frozen construction made from lychee and rose water with gin.

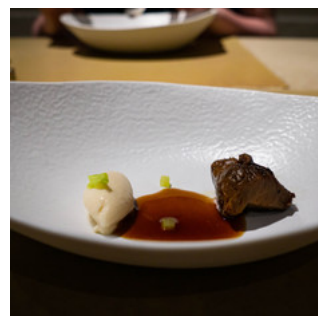


For the next course, the waiter placed a shallow tray filled with pebbles in the middle of the table. He gave it a few quick shakes, and a couple meringues made from beetroot jump to the top like something out of a pop-up book. They were light and airy with a mild sweet flavor. Thankfully, beetroots are totally different vegetables than beets, with a pleasant taste totally opposed to the bitter flavor of dirt offered up by the vile standard beet. You know it's true.

Surprise extends even to a course of bread. Out comes a large, round biscuit, described as containing cream and caviar. A single bite is all it takes to break through to the hollow interior, filled with a thick cream sauce and a metric ton of caviar floating within. It's sort of like the curry-filled bread from Japan, although this version is more like something created to meet the whimsical demands of a king or something. "This bread needs more caviar!"



As you might imagine for a 31 course menu, most of the plates are very small bites. They come out at a steady pace. In fact, the kitchen and service are coordinated so tightly that they ask you to notify them a course ahead of time if you need to use the restroom.



Surprises are core to the concept of most dishes. A small cheese sandwich turns out to be bread made from frozen tomato water with a filling of gazpacho. A mille-feuille

dessert cookie looks like it contains frosting, and ends up being idiazabal - a Spanish cheese. A small bite of what appears to be beef turns out to be a "pyrolized" celeriac. Apparently this preparation involves cooking the celeriac at high temperatures in an environment that contains no oxygen, so it can't catch fire. The result is something very different, not quite vegetable and not quite meat.



"Disfrutar's Gilda" - mackerel with liquid olive

As with ABaC, Disfrutar has their own take on *gilda*, the classic Spanish tapa where an olive, anchovy, and pepper are all speared by a toothpick. This is pronounced "HEEL-da" which you'll likely figure out after mispronouncing it and being corrected enough times, like me. The Disfrutar presentation has the component parts spread across the surface of a plate, with mackerel fish and a central olive all dressed in olive oil. Except, of course, it's not an olive. It's a concentration of olive-flavored liquid

encased in a gelatinous spherical container. This "liquid olive" was a famous dish from el Bulli, and you can find similar preparations in a number of modernist Spanish restaurants across the world, including many Jose Andres restaurants in the US.

Another trick is the "smoked at the moment" homemade cider. Cider is poured into a French press coffee maker with dry ice, and the resulting smoke pouring out provides a dramatic backdrop to several courses. Later, oak wood chips are set ablaze with a torch, and a glass is placed over them and allowed to fill up with smoke. The liquid is then poured into the smoked glass, resulting in a beverage lightly carbonated from the dry ice and featuring a lot of smoke flavor.



"Homemade cider smoked at the moment"



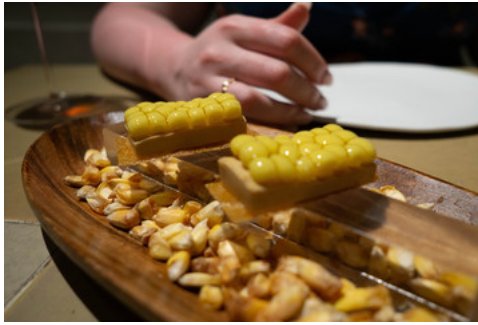
"Our macaroni alla carbonara" before it got covered in cheese.

One of the marquee dishes of the night is listed on the menu simply as "Our macaroni alla carbonara." This is a standard carbonara pasta dish with one major difference: The pasta here is transparent. Instead of a traditional wheat-based pasta, the chefs at Disfrutar asked what surely must be a common question - "How can we make pasta from ham stock?" The answer lies in gelatin, and this pasta is, in fact, carefully sculpted Jello. The texture isn't pure Jello but also isn't something you'll

mistake for pasta. It takes some getting used to. The rich flavor of the ham shines through everything, overshadowing any textural issues. And if all else fails, there's a generous shaving of truffles over top the entire thing.

The courses don't stop there: A green and pink liquid concoction is revealed to be a "liquid salad," with vegetal flavors in the green liquid and the tang of a caesar dressing in the foam. Another dish looks suspiciously like corn. But instead of solid corn, they somehow turned corn into liquid, encased the liquid in small spheres, and put them all back to look like corn again. Why? Because they can! If that weren't enough, the corn

concoction is placed atop a layer of foie gras on a thin cracker.



Just as our insides were fit to burst, we entered the dessert phase. The Japanese have a concept called “betsubara” - literally “second stomach.” The idea is that you switch over to a brand new reserve stomach when it comes time to eat desserts. Our betsubara was necessary as the dessert portion of the menu was seven courses on its own.

At Disfrutar, dessert starts strangely, with a red and green pepper on the plate. There's something off about the sheen though. Naturally you are not given spicy peppers for dessert. Instead, these are chocolate-filled chocolate peppers, coated in oil. They explode in your mouth with some kind of chocolate sauce, and are meant to recall an old tea snack where people would take chocolate on bread with oil.



"Chocolate peppers, oil and salt"

Is there any better dessert than a cotton plant?





"Cocoa and mint cotton"

This is probably the most creative presentation I've seen so far for what is essentially cotton candy. This variety was based on flavors of cocoa and mint. It dissolved away immediately in the mouth and left us with smiles.



"Tarta al whisky" presented on bits of barrel.

Disfrutar is as much of a performance as it is a dinner. It comes over the course of several movements, complete with crescendos and diminuendos, sections that felt more allegro and those that felt more adagio - even a spot of comedy and drama here and there. As it races up the ranks of culinary recognition, all 31 courses are easy recommendations.

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