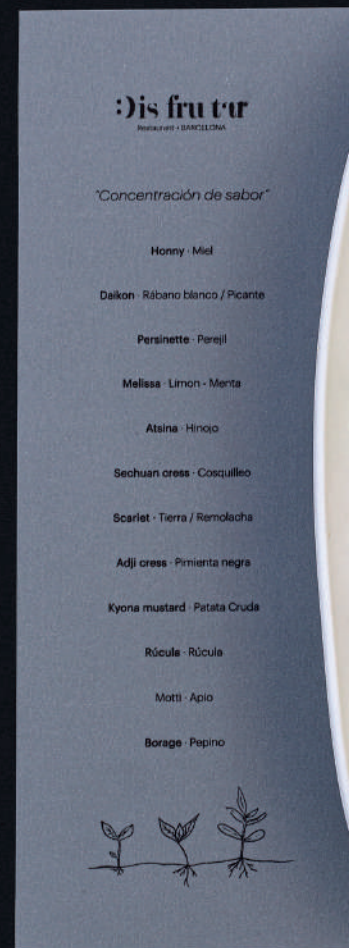




Deceptively simple in appearance, La Calçotada requires 12 preparatory steps including freeze drying and dehydration. The dish champions the humble *calçot* onion (traditionally flame barbequed), serving it with consommé and romesco miso.



Served early on the tasting menu, Flavour Concentration requires diners to taste 12 different sprouts, comparing each to a flavour essence proposed on an accompanying note. Borage, for example, matches with cucumber, while Atsina cress tastes like fennel.

Reigning In Spain

DINING AT DISFRUTAR, BARCELONA, THIS YEAR VOTED THE WORLD'S BEST RESTAURANT, PROMISES AN EXPERIENCE THAT DELIVERS CULINARY MASTERY, THEATRE AND ILLUSION TO ONE'S TABLE.

BY MARTIN JACOBS

'WHAT DO YOU MEAN 28 courses?!' I gulp, wondering whether the incredulity of that gulp constitutes the first of the many courses. I'm the last of the evening's 40 diners to arrive at Disfrutar, unaware – as I'm seated in an alcove with a view across the restaurant and into the open kitchen – that I shall also be the last to leave, in the early hours of a Thursday morning at the tail end of a sticky Barcelona summer.

With the calm, confidence and certainty of a front-of-house *maitre* who's worked at Disfrutar for the decade since its opening, and who's been asked this question on

repeat, restaurant director Vicente Lara takes my somewhat surprised reaction in his stride, assuring me that I'm welcome to ask for a pause at any point during the meal.

Nestling into my banquette, home for the next five hours, across a white-clothed but otherwise unadorned table, I survey the room. It's understated – unexpectedly so, given Disfrutar's reputation as *the* temple of creative gastronomic experimentation. Double volume in height, its white walls are roughly textured, suspended rattan screens hang from above, a patchwork airbrick wall abuts the kitchen and patron-filled chairs

occupy the spaces between tables. To my right and sharing my alcove, a surprisingly young American couple, a night-long tangle of limbs more engaged in petting and kissing than they are in the award-winning courses before them. So, this is what it's like to dine at the world's best restaurant, I think, as my evening begins.

For any diner who's made the pilgrimage to Disfrutar – whether that's waiting an average of eight months for a reservation, committing to the notable expense, or both – it's impossible to spend time in the restaurant without two names inevitably

COURSE
AFTER COURSE,
I'M STRUCK BY
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coming to mind: the first, a chef; the second, his restaurant. Unquestionably Spain's greatest chef, Ferrán Adrià, then at the restaurant elBulli, forever altered the course of Spanish cuisine and was a game-changer for global gastronomy. Shunning the term 'molecular gastronomy', Adrià would become, at the turn of this century, the face of (as he preferred to call it) 'deconstructivist' or modernist cuisine. Within the confines of elBulli's high-stakes kitchen, voted best in the world no fewer than five times, three head chefs – all mentored by

Adrià and all his right-hand men – were not only fast learning on the job but fast becoming lifelong friends. Oriol Castro, Eduard Xatruch and Mateu Casañas all served as head chefs at elBulli between 1996 and the restaurant's closure in 2011, thereafter working alongside one another at Adrià's elBulli Foundation.

In conversation with Emilio Molines of *Tapas Magazine*, Xatruch recalls how, in 2012, the three chefs had a frank discussion about their future. 'We asked ourselves what would happen if we took a step forward and set up

our own business, since, professionally, we were rowing in the same direction,' he explains.

That same year, with financing from a local bank, Castro, Xatruch and Casañas founded restaurant Compartir in Costa Brava's Cadaqués, followed two years later, in 2014, by Disfrutar in Barcelona's Eixample neighbourhood. The trio's first Michelin star followed a year later, with a second in 2017, and Disfrutar's third late in 2023. Year on year since its launch, Disfrutar's awards and recognitions have been too plentiful to mention; this year, it topped The World's 50 Best Restaurants list after placing second in 2023.

Underpinning everything Disfrutar-related is the trio's insatiable desire to encourage fun and promote the unexpected. It begins with the restaurant's name (Spanish for 'enjoy'), extends to the typographic emoji in its logo, and unfolds within the space itself. The interior architecture is such that patrons have no choice but to pass the open kitchen en route to their tables. Look up in the dining room and skylights with trompe l'oeil blue skies and clouds foster a disorienting sense of timelessness, especially for those dining at night. Ask politely and one may be escorted into the subterranean creativity kitchen (complete with private dining lounge), a room that's equal parts Wonka laboratory and futuristic test kitchen in which dishes are conceived, shelves crammed with Laura Roig's prototypes for Disfrutar's conceptual cutlery and crockery.

Protégés of Adrià that they are, nowhere is Castro, Xatruch and Casañas's appreciation of the unexpected more apparent than in their culinary offering. Across two tasting menus – one classic, the other seasonal, each with 28 courses and an optional wine pairing, and each available to diners five days a week at lunch and dinner – their ingenuity shines. It's in their food that they explore and develop concepts, and hammer like battering rams at the limits of techniques. Course after course, I'm struck by the extent to which Disfrutar's chefs conjure multisensory magic and illusion.



ABOVE Diners must pass Disfrutar's open kitchen to access the understated dining room. Kitchen walls are clad in terracotta and white airbricks, chosen for their evocation of traditional brick ovens. OPPOSITE One of Disfrutar's signature dishes, the Panchino doughnut – filled with caviar and crème fraîche – is fried for 20 seconds to give it a brioche-like texture. Wanting to democratise their techniques, the chefs have filmed this technique and shared it on social media.

This is not a meal for a lazy diner; all five of my senses are called upon and concentration is required. Waiter Adrián Abella serves as my guide for the evening, fluently navigating me through the repertoire of dishes. All require his explanation, some his instruction ('eat this in three bites' or 'smell this before tasting that'), and a handful his assembly, like a cider decanted and instantly smoked at my table. In moments when I'm slow to follow (I suspect nixtamalization is a process confusing to even the most seasoned gourmet), his assistant Miguel Martínez graciously recaps techniques.

These are of great importance at Disfrutar, and when Xatruch takes me on a tour of the wine cellar and test kitchen, he explains that all recipes are documented. Two volumes of work have been published by the restaurant, with a decade's worth of processes available for all to discover. Equally important to the trio are emotions and sensations, and many of the courses force one to confront these. Fear is seldom an emotion I associate with fine dining, but when presented with a wooden box little larger than two fists, into which I cannot see and am asked to place my hands to identify

my next course, fear and apprehension immediately present. As does uncertainty, as I'm quick to discover that not all is as it may seem. A crustless sandwich triangle, when bitten, is solid gazpacho with tomato-flavoured meringue disguised as bread. What resembles a deep-fried puri ball atop a hollowed eggshell turns out to be a tempura egg yolk, runny within. Paying homage to their mentor, the chefs have reimaged the traditional Basque *pintxo 'gilda'* (an olive, anchovy and peppers skewered on a cocktail stick) as a marinated mackerel dish that includes their interpretation of Adrià's famous 'liquid olive'.

Associations, too, are explored in the tasting menus, often in deceptively simple form. Early in the evening, I delight in a liquid salad, a tasting of 12 sprouts atop a tomato-water jelly. Given tweezers to taste each sprout, I'm asked to compare them to their flavour essences as proposed on an accompanying note. And, indeed, a borage sprout does taste like cucumber, and that of *kyona* mustard like raw potato. The humblest of ingredients here presented as champions. Ahead of the dessert courses, Abella presents



cuisine

me with a tray of chocolate engagement rings and encourages me to pop one on my finger and eat it. Immediately, it calls to mind the oversized candy and marshmallow rings often present at childhood birthday parties. Memory is integral to savouring La Calçotada, a newly added dish that celebrates the elongated calçot onion, traditionally flame barbequed, wrapped in newspaper to retain its heat and enjoyed by Spaniards in winter months. To look at the restaurant's reinvention is to consider it easy enough to replicate at home – it's even served with a newspaper detailing the recipe. But to read this is to realise that Disfrutar's freeze-dried calçot, with its consommé and romesco miso, requires 12 preparations, each with multiple steps, and a freeze dryer and dehydrator on hand.

As I bid the team an appreciative farewell shortly after midnight, I can't help but feel I've witnessed a magic performance – except with illusions far trickier to decipher. I opt to

TOP Dishes are seldom what they seem, and Pearl Necklace with Lychee is no different. This approach to fine dining stems from the chefs' appreciation of the unexpected. BOTTOM Founding chefs Oriol Castro, Eduard Xatruch and Mateu Casañas are the faces behind the world's best restaurant.



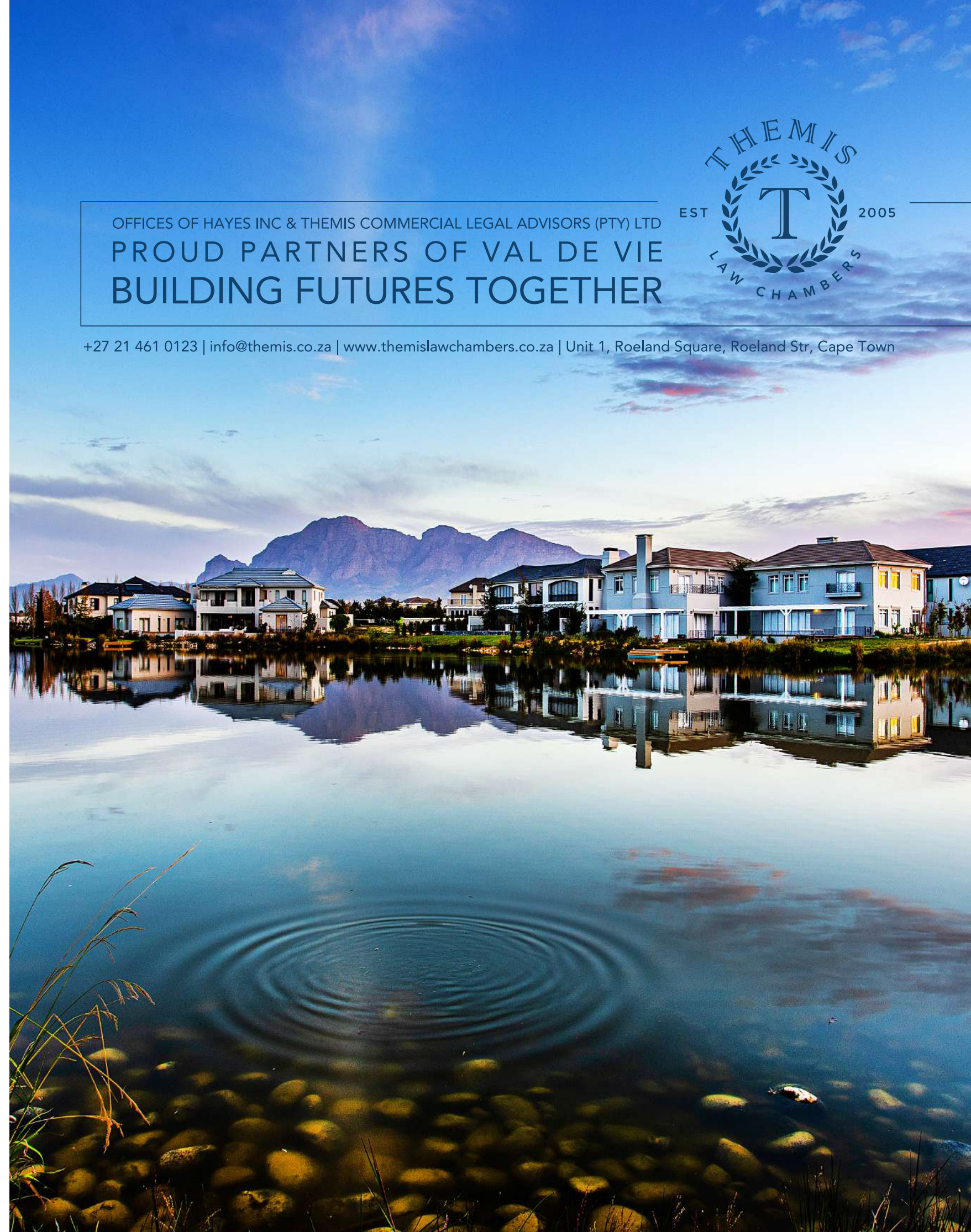
AS I BID THE TEAM AN APPRECIATIVE FAREWELL SHORTLY AFTER MIDNIGHT, I CAN'T HELP BUT FEEL I'VE WITNESSED A MAGIC PERFORMANCE...

return to my hotel on foot; the exercise will aid digestion (yes, a brief pause was needed midway through my evening), and the balmy air the opportunity to reflect on my meal. It's been an all-encompassing night, in many senses of the word. Certainly, from an emotional and sensory perspective. And while proudly and undeniably Spanish, it has included ingredients and techniques as exotic as confit pinecone, lulo fruit, oxidised walnut shell, amazake and the always contentious foie gras, and wine pairings from boutique wineries in Sweden, Japan and the Canary Islands. The insatiable drive that compels Disfrutar's chefs to act as creators of new concepts and techniques is the same drive that's established Castro, Xatruch and Casañas as icons of the culinary kingdom. But this is to suggest they're unapproachable when, in fact, the opposite is true. Here are three masters, humble, tireless and eager to democratise their culinary advancements. ▽ disfrutarbarcelona.com

PHOTOGRAPHS: JOAN VALERA (PORTRAITS AND INTERIORS), FRANCESC GUILLAMET AND ERNEST ABEITIN (FOOD)

WHERE TO STAY

Located in the heart of Barcelona, Hotel Midmost is less than a 10-minute walk from Disfrutar. The four-star boutique property is housed in a charming building between Plaça de Catalunya and Plaça de la Universitat, so it's conveniently close to both subway stations, making navigating the city easy. With four elegant room types on offer, those overlooking Carrer de Gravina get my vote, not only because many include charming French balconies but equally because they're the quieter rooms, Carrer del Pelai being a busier thoroughfare. Not to be missed is the hotel's rooftop terrace, complete with pool, loungers and cocktail bar, all with snappable views across the city. majestichotelgroup.com/en/barcelona/hotel-midmost



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