

Albert Adrià



Air croissant



Cep oxidado y a la brasa con chalota

from Enigma

Spanish Superchefs

Meet Albert Adrià, Juan Mari and Elena Arzak, and Mateu Casañas, Oriol Castro and Eduard Xatruch, whose stars shine brightly among global culinary luminaries

Spain has drawn attention on the gastronomic radar with fantastic restaurants and creative chefs for decades. With copious accolades, Spanish chefs and their premises have led the culinary world into the 21st century with their modernist methods, ingenious flavour combinations and unusual surprises. After Ferran Adrià closing elBulli, one of the world's most awarded and significant

restaurants, classic and modernist places have gained high praises and prizes. Among them, Arzak (no. 31), Tickets (no. 32), and Disfrutar (no. 18) are listed in the World's 50 Best Restaurants 2018. In Barcelona, Albert Adrià, Ferran's younger brother, has built the elBarri Group, a gastronomic empire with multi restaurants: Tickets, Enigma (no. 95), Bodega 1900 for traditional tapas, Pakta for Nikkei cuisine, Hoja Santa and Niño Viejo for Mexican.

out in discotheques. I needed to work and my brother needed a cheap labour. I worked at different stations at elBulli. I had inclinations towards patisserie and desserts. So in 1987 and 1988 with the elBulli laboratory, I worked as pastry chef." In 1997 Albert set up elBullitaller, the elBulli workshop, as their conceptual and practical research and development section, which grew into a cornerstone of their cutting-edge culinary creations.

Albert reminisces, "In 1984 I was only 15 and hung

“elBarri’s concept is restaurants as gastronomic amusement parks. They are tools to express ourselves gastronomically. Surprises are very important. So I’m thinking about some changes for different experiences next year.

“I never thought that I would open something like Enigma after elBulli. We finally decided to build this from the ground up. Enigma takes elBulli’s spirit but it doesn’t pretend to be. We have 41 staff for 29 clients. It turned two years old in January and never stops growing. Each day, we develop further.

“At first we have some concepts for food and experiments. Now we have both concept and style. Each restaurant makes me question about their ideas and solutions. Food is neither art nor science. It’s not cerebral, but down-to-earth. We work with seasonal ingredients and a large recipe catalogue of Mexican, Peruvian and Japanese cuisines.”

At Enigma, guests move and dine through six spaces, from the Reception to the Lounge, the Seafood, the Table, A la Plancha, and the Bar for desserts. He explains, “It took a while to find the language or the style but I found it. We have different styles for each space. There’s no definition but the core is that the products and the results have more heart and lightness, with more freedom to create.

“We research and create dishes from ingredients with 16 specialty chefs. Each time it becomes clearer on how things work and which to serve where. These incredible chefs work on concepts, possibilities and excitement. They are the brain—the ‘Think Tank’ for the group.”

He enthuses, “I believe in my team of 41. Without them, my work is impossible. The first year is usually difficult. This investment is a dream. After Tickets, this is a high-level cuisine, the best in the world.



Elena Arzak and Juan Mari Arzak

“Spain has been in the forefront of gastronomic experiences with recipes, product quality, and good chefs. Food congress has helped share what we have learned. It’s one of the best places in the world to eat. In the end, cooking is an attitude and routine. Perfection doesn’t exist but it’s important to understand and strive for. Sometime I really don’t understand my madness for perfection. Perfection today will not be perfect in the future. The vanguards today will become the classics in 20 years—the modern classics.”

He concludes, “After 34 years, I have seen some toughest times. The most modern things can be in touch with ancestral legacy. Many times revolution means doing nothing and looking back. Good chefs combine traditional and modern techniques—good becomes spectacular. The idea is holding on to the tree of tradition with the other hand for innovation. Enigma is not the apex of my career. I’ve opened Cakes and Bubbles, a pastry shop in London. When I die, I could be famous for pastries if it’s successful. In the end, I’m the chef who learns from mistakes—but not too many. Otherwise, it will explode!”

Across to San Sebastián, the Basque Country, along the Atlantic coast, Juan Mari Arzak Arratibel and Elena Arzak Espina, the father-daughter duo have achieved fame and fortune at Arzak. Their family history started in 1897 when Juan Mari’s grandparents established a wine inn and tavern in Alza village. He recalls, “My first memories took place here. It was a tavern until my parents took over. Their skills and efforts were highly recognised. Soon their reputation started to spread. The restaurant became renowned and specialised in banquets for family celebration. My father died when I was young and my mother went on struggling and working on her own. She kept improving the banquets’ quality and attained local prestige. She became so popular for all kinds of celebrations from weddings to baptisms and communions.

He continues, “In 1966, after my studies in the School of Hosteleria, the military service and practices abroad, I started working here. In the beginning I specialised in roasted meat on charcoal. My mother was a patient and constant teacher who revealed all the gastronomic secrets. With curiosity and will, I learned and worked on new creations.”



Curry verde de pistacho, pomelo y papaya

Ostras a la brasa



Lenguado en Caña

Carabineros con krill



from Arzak

In 1967 Juan Mari met Maite Espina who became his wife and a part of the restaurant. He says, “She brought her talent in service, style, decoration and administration. Together we continue to improve and progress. I’ve evolved within the Basque cuisine, adding new elements. It has been an adventure in renewing and actualising the cuisine without forgetting the tradition.”

In the mid-1970s Juan Mari was in the nouvelle vague of the New Basque Cuisine movement and received many awards and honours, including the first Michelin star in 1974 and the second in 1977. Arzak became the point of reference for Spain and international gastronomy and in 1989 earned the third star. Yet his pride and joy are also his daughters, Marta and Elena, who works alongside him.

He enthuses, “Elena is completely involved in the management and still widens her professional knowledge. She also runs the restaurant and continues this tough task. I appreciate the changes that she brings.

My family’s fourth generation devotes to the catering business and enthusiasm for fine cuisine. Without Elena, this cuisine would be impossible.”

Elena, a polyglot, studied and interned in Switzerland, England, and France, had short stints at elBulli and Pierre Gagnaire. In 2001 she was first bestowed Chef de l’avenir 2000 and continues to receive many awards including Best Female Chef in the World Veuve Clicquot 2012.

She states, “My father leads the kitchen with the team’s collaboration and mine. We work in tandem. We describe Arzak’s food as a cuisine with a distinct Basque identity, both contemporary and research-based.”

Back in Catalonia, three elBulli alumni, Mateu Casañas, Oriol Castro and Eduard Xatruch opened Compartir in Cadaqués in 2012. In 2014 they created Disfrutar with avant-garde cuisine and strong Mediterranean roots and signature dishes like macaroni carbonara with transparent pasta. Their modernist magic attained The Miele One to Watch Award 2017.

The three chefs’ families inspire them to become chefs. Their grandmothers, mothers and fathers can cook very well. In high school, Oriol thought of studying Marine Cultivation but he chose cooking because he always saw his mother and grandmother preparing traditional dishes. As an excellent student, Eduard’s family wanted him to study law or medicine but he wanted to be a farmer. Loving the land and working with his hands, he decided to learn to be a chef. Mateu’s parents have a restaurant in Roses, Costa Brava, where elBulli was. So he started working there at first.

They met at elBulli where Oriol started in 1996, Mateu in 1997 and Eduard in 1999, and worked until the closing where they learned two lessons: the importance of respect within the team and the daily improvement—to be self-critical and to progress day by day.

The trio muse, “All things can inspire us. Our aim is to create new things—concepts, techniques and new flavour combinations with seasonal products. We have a creative space to arrange or to store information we generate but we test things in the main kitchen. Sometime out of 20 combinations, only two work. Under our judgement, a dish is perfect when it has excellent flavours and great textures. But then, you have to taste it in the menu because it could taste different on its own or as a part of a tasting menu. We offer creative cuisine with taste as the main proposition. If a dish has an amazing presentation but it doesn’t taste good, then it isn’t good. It won’t be a good memory for diners.”

They clarify, “When we work, we are one person—with three brains, six eyes, and six hands! Our culinary philosophy and creative approach is a result of working together for many years. We discuss on what works,

Eduard Xatruch, Mateu Casañas and Oriol Castro



what doesn’t, and how to move forward. We have quite honest opinions and sincerity is vital. We have different strengths—Mateu is very organised; Oriol has a gift of gap; and Eduard excels at execution. But we change roles frequently and we develop different tasks randomly. The most of important thing is that we are a team—we and the rest of the team. Unity creates force.”

On success, they declare, “We are totally satisfied to see guests feel happy after the meal. That’s the most important. Obviously, it’s nice that our works are recognised by experts with all the prizes and awards. It helps us go on and gives us more confidence. As business owners, we’ve learned from our enterprise and teambuilding. We have a lot to reflect. So with three heads, we can make decisions with more conviction.”

They conclude, “Our plans are to keep improving creatively and to have a solid business and a united team. If people talk about Disfrutar in the future, we hope that it will be with excitement and respect for our cooking. It will be interesting to see others



Black cauliflower with coconut and lime bechamel



Macaroni carbonara from Disfrutar



Multi-spherical tatin of corn and foie

use our techniques like multi-spherification and “panchino” or flour-free mille-feuille. If this helps them, we will be happy.” These

superchefs have certainly made their marks by bringing Spanish cuisine into global gastronomic legacy. ■



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