

El Bulli by Nick

11 Oct 2008 by Nick Lander/ FT but this is a much longer version

Our party of eight, which included six first timers to [El Bulli](#), met up in the bar of the Hotel Terraza in the nearest town, Roses on the Costa Brava, for a glass of champagne before our taxis arrived to take us to the restaurant.

During that period two of the men, both in finance in Hong Kong, separately asked me the same question. Why, they wanted to know, had Ferran Adria, widely acknowledged as the world's most innovative chef, not opened more El Bullis elsewhere and particularly not in Asia, where, they assured me, numerous backers would be prepared to put up whatever was required? In both instances, I replied that part of the El Bulli experience is its location as well as the journey to and from the restaurant and that they should wait until our return to the hotel to see whether they could think of another location anywhere in the world that could match it.

In this instance, our journey along the twisting coast road that leads out of Roses along the headland with the vast Cap Creus nature reserve in the distance and the deep, blue Mediterranean off to the right was even more memorable than in the past – and not just for the brilliant evening sunshine. Our taxi driver had her left hand in a cast but that did not stop her using her right hand to wave bossily at any oncoming driver she thought was straying into our side of the road. Given the fact that the road is extremely narrow, it is virtually impossible to stay on one side – so on several occasions it did seem to me, sitting in the front seat, that the only thing keeping us on the road was one damaged driving hand and some obvious good fortune.

I am very, very glad we did make it safely. This was to prove the most sensational meal of the six I have been fortunate enough to eat here. And while I will mention some of the three dozen or more small dishes that we enjoyed over the next five hours, I do realise that it is invidious to describe in too much detail the kind of food that most readers will not be able to try for themselves simply because it is so difficult to get a reservation here. Instead, I will concentrate more on where I think Adria and El Bulli now stand in the restaurant world and why this establishment is like no other.

Ever since my last visit here three years ago I have maintained that El Bulli is not 'the best restaurant in the world' as the rather ridiculous listings make out. Rather it is 'hors concours', in a league of its own, so very different from any restaurant I have ever visited, although I believe Heston Blumenthal at The Fat Duck in Bray is also working on many different aspects of how the restaurant-goer experiences their food and wine. But to compare El Bulli with any other restaurant is not helpful to the consumer.

No other restaurant that I know of opens for such a short period, from end April to October, which allows their laboratory in Barcelona to create a vast number of new dishes over the winter for the following year. And during this short season, as demand for a table has increased from all over the world, El Bulli has gradually reduced its opening hours. It is now no longer open for lunch except on Sunday but then not even in July and August, the height of the tourist season, when one manager explained to me, 'it is just too hot'. It's dinner only, Wednesday to Sunday.

And then it is very small, seating anything from 45 to a maximum of 54 depending on the table arrangements. This number is constrained not just by what the kitchen (pictured above) feels comfortable with, but also by the fact that El Bulli has only ever comprised two whitewashed dining rooms both of which are comfortable but quite simple in design. There is an outdoor terrace for aperitifs, and to which all the smokers retreat for their coffee under the stars, and where some tables are served their food, such as a couple from Burgundy on the night we were there with their baby next to them in a pram. But this cannot be counted on all the time as squalls do blow in from the sea, forcing customers indoors, as once happened to us. This time we sat in the second dining room, where, with our table of eight, there were three other tables, one four and two two's, ie a total of 16 diners.

So far, so easy, some may think. But only when you take into consideration the fact that each winter they conjure up 120 new dishes, that each menu comprises more than 30 dishes per table, and that no table will be served the same menu, that the complexity of the operation becomes obvious. (The menus will not be the same to accommodate personal tastes and also because, as they know so clearly who their customers are because they have had to book so far in advance, they do tailor them accordingly. Our dinner, for example, was definitely the most Asian, if not Japanese, in texture and taste of all that I have eaten here so far, out of consideration I am sure, for our hosts. Also certain dishes are just too intricate to be served to the larger parties.)

Just for ease of the arithmetic, if a typical evening's work comprises 50 customers served 45 different dishes including all the appetisers and small desserts (and that is probably an under-estimate) then that makes a total of 2,250 dishes in an evening. I don't think that the size is important, and obviously each of these dishes is quite small, but they are all inherently intricate. A more mainstream restaurant of similar standing would serve perhaps 10 dishes as part of its dinner menu, including amuse bouches, pre-desserts, petits fours etc - so just to serve the same number of dishes they would have to serve in the region of 200 customers a night. Most restaurants, however, with ambitions of Michelin stars will seat no more than 60 with perhaps a small private dining room attached – so they probably serve no more than a maximum of 800 dishes. Thanks to the sheer, limited geography of its hillside location, the restaurant at El Bulli may remain small, sadly, but the logistical set up it requires to support it is truly complex.

It also works to a very particular financial model. The menu we were charged for was 225 euros per person excluding service for the evening, which makes it again comparable with many other restaurants of the same standing but the prices on its wine list are certainly far more reasonable than most, if not all in this category. That they receive so many applications each year from chefs from all over the world offering their services free of charge in return for a stage chez El Bulli on their CV (the current brigade includes Charlie Trotter's son from Chicago) must be a bonus, but the key members of the El Bulli staff will have to be paid for the whole year and this time I was struck by the number of familiar faces I recognised among the sommeliers and the managers from three years ago. I doubt very much that El Bulli is profitable per se, but it is the small, visible part of the iceberg which justifies all the books, products and commercial activities with which Adria is now associated. These in turn allow the restaurant and Ferran's culinary imagination, along with that of his younger brother Albert, who is in charge of the development of the new dishes in Barcelona, to flourish. And allows, in my opinion, for El Bulli to act as a lodestar for other chefs.

As well as over a dozen memorable dishes for which I would happily allow myself to be driven along a tortuous road by a one-handed taxi driver any night of the week, there was one other distinctive element of this meal which distinguished it from those of the past: the thoughtful and complementary way one dish followed another. It is always a risk with set menus that too many dishes have the same texture or lack any contrast in flavour (a definite fault at The French Laundry, for example). This was most obvious in the dish of lilywater with olives and petals – which did look like a Monet painting. This had a welcome cooling, calming effect after the lip-smacking richness of two strips of veal tendon served with a spoon of an equally rich bone marrow soup. There was also the almost mainstream salad of Roquefort, very young white walnuts and endive that was served after some strips of crackling from suckling pig with coriander with an Asian twist. Many of the dishes had a high salt content with plenty of umami, the fifth taste element – on top of acid, sweet, salty and bitter – which many now find particularly prevalent in Japanese food.

Other particularly extraordinary dishes included the mouth-sized roll of a firm beetroot mouse filled with yoghurt that started the meal; a bowl of buffalo milk with dried wild strawberries and dried basil with bitter honey from northern Italy underneath; an opened razor clam with one half holding the meat, the other a concentrated sauce of ponzu that just reeked of the sea; a white cube of tangerine flower ice cream topped with Austrian pumpkin seed oil; and an amber dish that contained half coconut milk and half coconut water topped with three tiny spoonfuls of caviar in the shape of blackberries.

The two dishes that most people found the weirdest were firstly one of Galician barnacles with a foie gras sauce and small plants from Holland that exploded in the mouth and generated a temporary 'high' reminiscent of Szechuan peppers, and secondly a beautiful looking dish that contained diced oysters, sea anemones and rabbit's brains – a first for many including chef Bruce Poole from Chez Bruce in south London who ate there in mid-July and told me that over the years he had prepared probably hundreds of rabbits but never come across a use for this particular organ. Of the three desserts, one called Autumn Landscape that looked just like a piece of autumnal undergrowth, but was made from chocolate, liquorice and eucalyptus, was sensational.

One of the biggest differences between this meal and those in the past was the complete absence of foams, those airy essences of flavours which so many other chefs have copied around the world thanks to the fact that many can now possess a Paco Jet, a fancy piece of kitchen equipment. Many detractors hold Adria entirely responsible for this phenomenon, but he has now moved on and 'pools' have become his culinary leitmotif. These may be easier, but again could easily look ridiculous in the hands of less accomplished followers.

Two final aspects of the meal revealed the puckish Adria's wit and then his pastry section's technique.

Our host had requested a birthday cake for his wife and when I heard this I did begin to wonder in what dimensions, let alone flavours, the El Bulli interpretation of this would manifest itself. It eventually appeared in three dimensions but none of them edible. Towards the end of the meal the manager appeared carrying what looked like a thin red folder and stood behind the birthday girl. Swiftly opening this on her place, he revealed a multi-layered birthday cake made of thin cardboard with a single candle on the top. Once the candle had been blown out, this 'cake' was left as a going-home present and in its place came a large wooden casket that opened out to reveal an extraordinary range of chocolates that at 1 o'clock in the morning few of us could do justice to.

Even the wait for our taxi was memorable as we sat on the low walls, still warm from the retained heat of the day, and looked up at the pine trees swaying in the breeze and a heavily starlit sky. For the best of reasons, but also equally disappointingly for the fact that it can excite no more than 7,000 customers a year, there is only one El Bulli.