

## Eating out in Mallorca

17 Jan 2009 by Nicholas Lander/ FT

Mallorca rarely seems to get the coverage it deserves. Far too many column inches tend to be devoted to what happens in the relatively small area given over to the tourist resorts, neglecting the rest of the island that is far wilder and far more beautiful. [See, for example, the Tramuntana mountains caught at sunset below by the owner of Willi's Wine Bar in Paris Mark Williamson, whose holiday apartments in the village of Fornalutx, with this view, I will be writing about very soon - JR]



Its food, too, tends to have a reputation for being reasonably good but not too varied. But this judgement overlooks one particularly distinctive quality that was only too obvious from just a few days at the turn of the year around Palma and in the mountains around Soller, Fornalutx and Deia: that perhaps nowhere else can offer such stunning and very different locations in which to enjoy good food and the local wine, now vastly improved since my last visit nine years ago, in such close proximity.

The weather had played its part. Torrential rain (three years' rainfall in 48 hours in some places) had left the valleys looking unusually verdant. This was followed by a very heavy, and equally rare, fall of snow that left the Tramuntana mountain tops looking distinctly Swiss, while in the valleys below were groves of trees heavily laden with oranges and lemons.

The constant drizzle we walked through on the way to eat at Ca N'Antuna in Fornalutx (justifiably considered one of the prettiest villages in Spain) reminded me more of a Scottish glen, however, despite the groves of olive trees just visible across the valley. We felt in need of warming comfort food.

It arrived promptly and authentically, first of all in a bowl of *sopa mallorquina*, a thick stew served all over the island, of cabbage and bread in equal measure in a rich stock topped with a large, green chili. Another successful first course was a spicier than normal rendition of *sobrasado*, the ubiquitous sausage, here served more like a chorizo. Best of all the main courses was a vast pile of simply grilled lamb cutlets. With wine, dessert and considerate service from the owner and his family, the bill came to 25 euros per person.

From here it was barely a 15- minute drive down to the broad bay of Port Soller, home to a large number of tapas bars, restaurants and hotels, including the Hotel Los Genarios at the southern end of the bay. A lift sped us to the fourth floor and the ultra- modern restaurant, S'Atic.

The contrast between here and Ca N'Antuna could not have been greater. Instead of being tucked away in a valley we were perched looking out across the bay; instead of a traditional Mallorcan menu there was on offer a series of enticing and unusual combinations more reminiscent of modern Catalan cuisine, some of which incorporated that often fateful ingredient, foam; and our waitress was a perky young American woman who appeared full of enthusiasm for her food, wine list and customers.

So charming did she prove, in fact, that she managed after taking our order to explain the 14 different types of salt on offer (including several they mix themselves, one of which incorporates gold flakes) without making this performance appear either too ridiculous or pretentious. In this she was helped by the fact that what S'Atic offers is commendably all of a piece.

The food we ate was first class. Creamy rice with octopus and scallops, and lobster claws with a soup of young almonds were two excellent starters. Main courses of roasted lobster with homemade spaghetti; thick slices of Iberian pork with glazed shallots; and glazed oxtail with braised endives and cauliflower were their match - as was the one dessert we could manage, an excellent rendition of an individual molten chocolate cake with milk ice cream.

Equally modern was the wine list, which included several of the island's top wines from its best producers. With a bottle of Toni Gelabert's Torre des Canonge 2007 Mallorcan white [100% Giro grapes and not unlike a white Châteauneuf, don't you know - JR] and the second wine of Anima Negra red, the bill came to 60 euros per person. This was unquestionably the best meal of our stay and the restaurant I would eagerly head straight back to when it re- opens in early March.

This may seem a somewhat controversial comment given that dinner the following evening was in the Bacchus restaurant at Read's Hotel, set just north of Palma in the open countryside outside Santa Maria del Cami, where chef Marc Fosh is considered by many, with some justification on the basis of what we ate at least, to be the finest on the island.

Yet an excellent meal has to be more than a sequence of good dishes. Our dinner was certainly well executed, and included an almost translucent rectangle of salt cod covered in the thinnest skin of beetroot followed by two plump fillets of hare with rice and quince puree. But there were, sadly, several instances where Fosh's kitchen was let down by the hotel management.

These began with a strict note in our room which informed us that to ensure a smooth service in the restaurant, guests must be at their table at the time they had reserved for and that if a pre- dinner drink were required then they had to come to the bar at least 30 minutes in advance. This stricture, reminiscent of British boarding houses of yore, seemed out of keeping with the relaxed nature of the rest of the hotel and, in fact, of the rest of the island.

It was certainly not in keeping with the restaurant's own attempts at providing smooth service. No sooner had we placed our order at 8.30pm in a dining room where there were only five other tables than the restaurant manager, who had initially taken our order, was back to apologise. The kitchen had just run out of the only first course on the set dinner menu (otherwise good value at 36 euros per person) and we would have to re- order. This was not in itself a calamity but in a restaurant where the lighting could be more friendly and the wine list far more exciting and less rapaciously priced, there were enough reasons not to recall this meal with too much pleasure. Especially as we had arrived for our booking precisely on time, as requested.

But this location did provide a good base to descend into Palma and to discover, only 10 minutes' drive from the cathedral, the ideal seaside location for lunch.

The small suburb of Portixol was presumably once a fishing village, but is now home to a hotel and a string of bars and restaurants facing its sandy beach and a front that attracts many local cyclists, runners and skateboarders.

We ate there twice, initially a tapas lunch at Enco, which describes itself as serving 'gastronomy with love' and then a more Asian meal at Bar.Co, which occupies a splendid corner site (pictured above). Both were fun and good value, the former 20 euros a head, the latter 25.

These four settings - high up in Fornalutx, overlooking Port Soller, looking down at Santa Maria dei Cami and down by the sea at Portixol - are separated by a drive of no more than 45 minutes. In each instance, the location was as exciting as the food.

**Ca N'Antuna**, C/ Arbona Colom.7, Fornalutx, 971.63.30.68

**S'Atic**, Hotel Los Genarios, Port Soller, [www.hotel-losgeranios.com](http://www.hotel-losgeranios.com) Closed until early March.

**Read's Hotel and Restaurant**, [www.readshotel.com](http://www.readshotel.com)

**Enco**, [www.enco.eu.com](http://www.enco.eu.com)

**Bar.Co**, [www.grupo-barco.com](http://www.grupo-barco.com)