

Great places to eat in Barcelona

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Barcelona has long captured the imagination of those in the restaurant world, as it has more recently done for those in the football world. There are few among my professional peers who do not think that their idea of 'restaurant heaven' is to finally make it through the queue to the counter at Cal Pep to gorge themselves forever on their fish and shellfish delicacies.

The city has achieved this fortunate position thanks to a combination of geography which gives it access to wonderful produce all year round; a body politic that certainly enjoys eating and drinking; and a directness of approach combined with a seriousness, endemic to the Catalan character, that ensures that even the simplest foodstuff is handled with respect.

Watching an elderly woman cut, weigh and then wrap three pieces of salt cod on her stand in the splendid El Boqueria food market was a tribute to all these characteristics while the seriousness of approach to this foodstuff which has fed millions over the centuries is exemplified in her company's website, <http://www.bacalla.com/>. As far as she was concerned the inexpensive cod could have been a far more costly beauty or clothing item as it was wrapped lovingly three times before being handed over to her lucky customer.

There is no doubt that this highly atmospheric food market is the place to start any tour of Barcelona's numerous places to eat, taste or buy food. But if you can manage to curtail your appetite even temporarily a more exciting place to sit down and let the city's heady food atmosphere waft over you is Cuines Santa Caterina, the restaurant in the Santa Caterina food market no more than a mile away.

Designed by the same architectural firm as the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh, the actual food market is definitely less bountiful than El Boqueria but the modern restaurant is a tribute to the simple charms of all the produce on sale. One side is a vast open kitchen while the other comprises floor to ceiling shelving which stores the wine, dry goods and the odd motorcycle helmet belonging to one of the staff. In between are long wooden tables, and some smaller ones, with the menus printed on disposable paper on the tables.

With the orders taken by young waiters using hand-held terminals there is a definite debt to wagamama in the set up but the menu is much broader. Broken down into categories such as meat, fish, pasta and eggs across the top and styles of cooking down the left hand side, such as light and healthy, Oriental and Mediterranean, the boxes underneath contain a whole range of dishes guaranteed in our case to satisfy two families totalling seven with almost a forty year age gap. Best of all were a fried egg with baby squid, a terracotta dish of roast clams, and grilled asparagus with a pungent romesco sauce served in an artistic comma. If only Borough Market had the same instead of the disappointing Roast.

Two subsequent dinners at comerc 24, one of this trendy city's most trendiest restaurants, and Cinc Sentits (five senses), a little gem of a restaurant, led me to thinking just how significantly this new and exciting wave of Catalan chefs have benefited from the centuries-old tradition of tapas, a style of snacking which originated hundreds of miles away in southern Spain. By picking up on this, these chefs have not only been able to fashion an entire menu around tapas— as in the case of chef/ proprietor Carles Abellan at comerc24 – but also to create with ease tasting menus devolved from their a la carte menu, as Jordi Artal, one third of the unusual Canadian- Catalan team does at Cinc Sentits. Chefs outside Spain simply don't have this facility and it always strikes me as rather incongruous to see the phrase 'tapas style' on an increasingly number of British menus replete with British ingredients.

comerc 24's sense of style is immediate: the open kitchen; the elegant but casually dressed waiting staff; music from Pink Martini via the sound system and the ceiling lights made from a collection of drum cymbals. The same refinement is carried through into the cooking where particularly exciting dishes included what they referred to as 'tuna pizza', very fresh slices of raw tuna on crispbread with wasabe, circles of tuna sushi with salmon eggs; salt cod with artichoke cream, pinenuts and raisins and crab claws alongside a crab shell filled with rice cooked in a rich crab stock. Best of all was Abellan's rendition of a kinder egg, commonly known as a cheap childrens' sweet, but here a hollowed out egg filled with egg yolk, creamy mashed potato and black truffle.

Where comerc 24 disappointed, however, was in its delivery. The restaurant is an awkward-to-manage U shaped room and with one maitre'd only empowered to take food orders there were unnecessary delays before ordering and between courses. As ever it was down to an amateur, on this occasion a Barcelona habitué, to describe this and her previous meals at comerc 24 succinctly, by referring to them as 'delicious but slow'.

That particular sense of impotence that comes from failing to attract a waiter's attention is unlikely to befall any visitor to Cinc Sentits, a long thin dining room of 14 tables seemingly continually patrolled by Amelia Artal and her mother, Roser, while brother and son Jordi leads the kitchen brigade behind the glass window at the far end of the room.

How the Artals came to open this restaurant is almost as intriguing as Jordi's food. The parents initially emigrated from Barcelona to Toronto, Canada, where Jordi was first inspired to cook from watching his mother while a subsequent onward journey took the siblings to an initial career in IT in Silicon Valley in California, an episode which introduced Amelia to the world of wine.

IT initially brought them back to Barcelona but the call of the stove seems, fortunately, to have been too strong for Jordi to resist and after two years he is cooking with considerable verve and confidence. The tapas that introduced the tasting menu included a shot of maple syrup, cava foam and sea salt which was obviously inspired by their time in Canada while more Catalan dishes included a diver scallop, all of two inches tall, with a Jerusalem artichoke puree, suckling pig slowly cooked for 16 hours with apple, and a welcomingly refreshing dessert which included five variations on lemon, cream, ice-cream, cake, foam and dust.

Only one thing bothered me during the evening and that was whether working in such close proximity for so long put a strain on what seemed to be, at least from the outside, a harmonious family set-up. "Not yet," Ame<grave>lia replied when I called her from London. "I think the pressure of working in a restaurant means that we have to speak our mind whenever something crops up and so nobody broods on anything." Unlikely as this particular solution may be, I hope Cinc Sentits prospers for many years to come.

Cuines Santa Caterina, Meract Santa Caterina, www.cuinessantacaterina.com 25/30 euros per person. No bookings.
comerc 24, carrer comerc<cidilla>24, 34. 93.319.21.02, 60 euros per person, www.carlesabellan.com
Cinc Sentits, Aribau 58, 34.93.323.94.90, <http://www.cincsentits.com/>
Tasting menu 50 euros.