

Nicholas Lander at Torre del Remei, Cerdanya, Spain

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Over a bottle of Catalan Vichy water in the early evening sunshine Josep Maria Boix revealed the obvious, but to me hitherto unappreciated, connection between breakfast in an hotel and a cup of coffee at the end of dinner in a restaurant.

'The majority of my guests check out after breakfast, so what we serve at 10am is invariably the lasting impression of their stay with us regardless of what they ate and drank at 10pm the night before. It has to be memorable,' Boix explained. 'More particularly breakfast, I feel, has become a sad and fairly predictable affair in hotels the world over, however grand the location, and it is time to rethink the whole meal.'

Boix, 53, speaks with conviction, confidence and considerable experience. His grandmother and mother were both chefs in the family restaurant in the village in Cerdanya, north-eastern Spain, where he was born and where he cooked until 12 years ago. Then he and his wife stumbled across Torre del Remei, a grand but run-down summer house built in 1910, and began the process of converting it into an ultra-comfortable hotel whose charms are a tribute to his family's good taste, his cooking skills and the bounty of the surrounding Pyrenean countryside. For decades the citizens of Barcelona have kept Cerdanya a closely guarded secret. They came, initially by train, for the summer but many now commute by motorway (it is about 130 kilometres away) to their second homes, and it is not difficult to appreciate why. There is golf, fishing, excellent summer walking in mountain country that rivals Scotland but is much, much warmer, and in the winter there is skiing on 17 pistes within 20 kilometres of the hotel. As a result, Boix explained, his hotel is open 365 days a year: the cause, he added with a smile, of his ample but unquestionably grey head of hair.

The happy combination of countryside and climate, warm in the summer and cold in the winter, provides Boix with the ingredients any city chef just dreams of. 'Between May and November 25 different varieties of wild mushroom come to my kitchen door and then from October onwards there is a fantastic amount of game,' he added.

And that was without taking into account the flourishing vegetable garden at the back of the hotel, fortunately unaffected by its proximity to the hotel's helicopter landing pad. Whilst its produce featured in each of the four meals we enjoyed there, one first course stood out: a plethora of different vegetables - thin leeks, cherry tomatoes, baby fennel, courgettes and onions - briefly sautéed with their inherent sweetness further accentuated by the addition of caramelised almonds.

Boix's calm command of his profession is obvious from just an initial reading of his menu. It is not every chef/ proprietor for example who is prepared to share the credit at the bottom of his menu with the head chef, pastry chef and restaurant manager, each part of an obviously young team that seems to thrive in the calm of the hotel and its grounds.

This combination of youth and experience allows the kitchen to produce a rack of Iberian suckling pig with crackling and a confit of leg of milk-fed lamb with wild mushrooms that would have delighted Boix's grandmother. But there is a succession of far more innovative dishes, a *vichysoise* with fresh clams and apple sorbet, a *millefeuilles* of courgettes and aubergines with fresh sardines and a tomato soup with water melon, langoustines and black olives, the soups dramatically poured at the table from teapots, which showed just how Boix is breaking new ground and why this region of Spain with Boix, Ferran Adrià at El Bulli near Rosas, Santi Santimaria at El Raco de Can Fabes in Sant Celoni and Carmen Ruscadella at Sant Pau in Sant Pol de Mar is rapidly emerging as possibly the most exciting restaurant region in Europe.

And so to Boix's breakfast. Alongside freshly squeezed orange juice came two other fruit drinks, a blend of kiwi fruit and apple on the first day and of pineapple and coconut on the second, each beautifully served in miniature glass pitchers. An offer of eggs resulted in not a plate but a small coddle dish with a screw lid that contained scrambled eggs together with finely diced pieces of the local, highly renowned ham which not only tasted delicious but resolved that age-old pitfall of eggs at breakfast - that they appear either greasy, cold or both.

Because Torre del Remei is small, with only 12 very comfortable bedrooms (all of which catch the baking aromas from the kitchen), the room rate is relatively high, but the prices in the restaurant are extremely good value not just for the expertise of the cooking on offer but also for the generosity of the portions.

And there are a number of French wine bargains to be had, notably Bordeaux from the early 1980s and Rhône from the excellent 1989 vintage, including a thoroughbred Côtes du Rhône Villages from Domaine Sainte Anne that was outrageously good for less than £10 a bottle.

Torre del Remei left strong impressions: of a highly professional yet personally run hotel; of a kitchen in touch with its surrounding countryside; and of just how exciting hotel breakfasts can be. But most resonant were Boix's final words, that if the summer sunshine made the Cerdanian countryside so appealing I ought to return in October when, according to this native expert, it changes colour every hour.

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