Sitting pretty on Port Llan□□

2 Aug 2010 by Nick Lander/FT

Just off the motorway south of the French border around Figueres in Catalunya, north-east Spain, is the turning for Llançà and Puerto de la Selva. These villages turned small towns have been home to fishing fleets and, increasingly over the last few decades, to numerous holiday homes for many families who live in or around Barcelona.

Both places are the very opposite of flash. The beaches are free and open to the public; some of the boats moored in the port are large but nothing compared with what is on offer further down the coast; and while Llançà has some relatively tall buildings, Puerto de la Selva has none as the mayor has resolutely refused to give planning permission for them. Most of the businesses are still family owned and parking a car is invariably the most challenging part of any outing. A table outside on the terrace at Els Pescadors is well worth the effort, however.

Last year when we ate there on a Sunday lunch the place was packed, every table other than ours taken with Spanish families, who, naturally, sat down long after we did. This year there were only two other tables. When I asked our waiter, who had remembered us from our previous visits, how business was, he had the honesty to say 'quiet'. Their hotel above, La Goleta, was full he said and the restaurant was busy in the evening but at lunchtimes customers were choosing to economise by either staying on the beach or by eating at one of the less expensive restaurants along the beach.

There are numerous reasons why I like this restaurant so much and only part of it has to do with its setting on the port with the Pyrenees in the distance and the view of the bobbing boats in between.

I like the fact that it is generous from the outset, offering all its guests a bowl of delicious black olives and a glass of good quality Cava as they sit down. I like the fact that it specialises in the fish caught by the boats moored nearby but unlike many fish restaurants it offers quite a number of dishes for two or more to share. These range not just from John Dory, turbot or sea bass, grilled or roasted, but also dishes such as a 'suquet', which takes its name from the Catalan for juice, thick pieces of fish cooked with langoustines in a pungent red sauce, thickened by cubes of waxy potatoes and enlivened by some pungent aioli.

There are also as many enticing meat dishes although I have to confess that I have never managed to look beyond the fish section. But should another visit coincide with a drop in the temperature then I would have no hesitation in ordering the goat meat and bacon stew with rice, again for two.

I like the restaurant's wine list; the gentle pricing on both this and its menu (lunch for four with a lot of exceptional food and two bottles of wine was 280 euros excluding service); and most of all I like its lack of pretension. Els Pescadors makes its customers feel comfortable.

So we set down to do the restaurant justice. We began with large anchovies spilt down their middles, their oil soaked up by thin slices of bread steeped in tomato, and an even thinner version of whitebait fried in very clean, very crisp, well-seasoned batter. We all then shared a prawn carpaccio, very finely sliced layers of prawn laid across a large white plate topped with chopped chives and finely diced black truffle; and a bowl of quickly scrambled eggs mixed with wild mushrooms, baby garlic shoots, and thin slivers of botifarra local sausage.

Then two fish dishes, each for two. Two John Dory with fried potatoes, the fish expertly removed from the bone and then the heads put in the middle of the table so that I, and the other glutton present, could feast on the gelatinous bones and the meat of the cheeks. Then the suquet comprising hake, langoustines, rascasse, potatoes, an invigorating liquor, and an equally sobering aioli. Ginger ice cream was all we could manage afterwards (the only time I can recall declining the much richer crema Catalana) although their petits fours were so good we did finish these off.

To the right of the restaurant is a large bluff that naturally protects the fishing boats and the much larger number of pleasure boats. This is a steep but easy walk and rewards all those who reach the top with a clear view of the Mediterranean to the east and south to the headland of the Cap Creus nature park (with El Bulli just out of sight on the other side).

Back on the beach we walked past a host of children and several stalls of a food market that sold honey, salami, goats'

cheese and wild mushrooms in their many varied states. All of these brought a smile to our faces and to the many French tourists alongside us as prices here are considerably lower than in France.

We walked back to our car and past Els Pescadors once again, now temporarily closed between the end of the Spanish late lunch and the dinner service that begins at 8 pm (although I am sure that time is only for the northern Europeans). As I looked around at the beach, the fishing boats and the fish shop on the other side of the street I realised why the appeal of this particular restaurant is so strong: because what it serves and the manner in which it is served mirrors so precisely what is right outside on its front doorstep. A doorstep that is sandy, salty and wet.

www.restaurantelspescadors.com

www.hotellagoleta.com