A gem on the Costa Brava

2 May 2011 by Nick Lander

We decided to take our training for our last meal at El Bulli very seriously indeed. Well, at least by our standards.

We had set off from Barcelona at 11.30 am and by 1.30 pm were driving through the Costa Brava resort of Roses with the Mediterranean on our right. Rather than stopping at the Terrazas hotel, the approved El Bulli staging post where we had stayed on every occasion beforehand, we tried somewhere new that we had found online. We drove on for what felt like several miles, with a succession of cafés and hotels dusting off the cobwebs for the summer season to our left and the large fishing port to the right. Numerous bends and sleeping policemen later we took a steep right-hand curve down into the then empty car park of the Almadraba Park Hotel.

The sun was out, the sea glistening and the garden in immaculate condition, all encouraging ingredients. These vibrant factors were immediately offset when we walked into a cool, dark hotel lobby where two men were behind the reception desk dressed in immaculate but sober suits. A sign on one wall advertised the fact that this particular hotel was a sister of our old friend the Hotel Empordà , 20 kilometres away on the Avenue Salvador Dali in Figueres. With that came the realisation that we were in the most professional hands.

Fifty years ago the restaurant at what was then known as the Motel Empordà, chef Josep Mercader was one of the first to initiate the changes that have revolutionised Spanish cooking. Both hotels are now run by the founding chef's son-in-law, Jaume Subiros Mercader, ably assisted by his son, Jordi.

The Almadraba was built in 1969 at a time when concrete was very much in fashion. Inside the hotel this is softened by a lot of light, and dark wood that is polished to such a degree that it would be eminently possible to use one of the wooden stairs as a mirror to shave in. Externally, the building may be no beauty (top right below), but Nature kindly provides non-stop magic.

The hotel is located on a rocky promontory on to which the waves break continuously. Beyond, fishing boats sail in and out of Roses harbour; sailing boats meander; small cruise boats take visitors to Cadaques round the next headland; and at the end of April one brave man was even water skiing. The views from every aspect of the hotel are majestic and this hotel certainly deserves its place within the small hotel marketing group known as Relais du Silence (although I was told that in August it is overrun with children, mainly French and Spanish).

After unpacking we embarked on a brief, pre-lunch exercise regime. We walked down through the garden to the enormous swimming pool, filled with seawater we were to learn, and then to the steps that lead down to a sandy curved beach on which mainly Spanish and French families were obviously having a very good time. We headed back past the sauna and tennis courts – it was time for lunch.

The garden was filling up with families almost as quickly as the car park was with cars. The management had warned us that the hotel had been booked for the wedding of the daughter of a local fisherman that would go on from 3 pm to midnight and there were already several footballs being kicked around. So that day lunch was not served in the main restaurant with its balcony, which was the following morning to serve as the breakfast room, but in a small conference room on the first floor, a room that again boasted great views of the crescent sandy beach beyond.

But a change of location and a wedding party were not going to let this team drop their professional guard. As we were shown to a window table, we passed a portable flambé trolley which was to be used to serve the couple next to us with a steak tartare made tableside, complete with a dash of armagnac, as well as their speciality of rigatoni flambés, a pasta dish that seemed to involve quite a lot of butter before it got under way.

We eschewed the long tapas menu for a dance around their à la carte menu. Preliminaries included a small dish of garum, a dark anchovy paste; rings of squid cooked in the lightest of batters; and then their house speciality, anchovy skeletons that took me back to being a little boy watching *Boss Cat*/*Top Cat* cartoons. These, it was explained to us, were the skeletons of anchovies that, once marinated, had had their flesh removed. The skeletons were then soaked in milk and deep-fried. The dish was created 40 years ago in the kitchen of the Hotel Empordà and has been served ever since –

with some justification.

As we really wanted only three light dishes before our dinner at El Bulli that evening, we ordered a plate of the very best Joselito ham; a dish of young broad beans; and a morel mushroom combination with shrimps, as it is the height of the season for these mushrooms, which European chefs make such a fuss over, again with complete justification, but British chefs seem inexplicably to ignore. We also ordered a bottle of crisp and fruity **Satirs Macabeo 2009 Empordà** from Arché Pagès – for €10.50 (we asked Antonio, the restaurant manager who has worked here since beginning as a bell boy 35 years ago, to recommend the best local Macabeo and he pointed us to the least expensive!).

Rather than making us share, the hotel served each of us with a half-portion of each dish, the ham coming with the most delicious pan y tomat, the ubiquitous Catalan tomato-soaked bread, but here raised to the highest level as the bread had obviously been allowed to soak in the tomato juices for some time. The young, raw, tiny, tender broad beans came in an upended cylinder laced with shredded lettuce and diced ham and dressed in olive oil and mint; the morels and small red shrimps were scented by sticks of aromatic lemongrass. Our indulgence was only outdone by the man on his own close by who polished off a beer, a bottle of white wine, a plate of ham, four large red prawns, followed by a rice dish with smaller prawns served from a paella dish that could have certainly fed two. Whether his siesta was as recuperative as ours, I cannot say.

The following morning (reports on El Bulli to come) the restaurant had been put back together after the wedding party and a succession of small buffet tables were on display. These held fruit, including ripe, diced mango; excellent ham and croissants; a range of marmalades and jams from the local Museo collection; and some delicious local yoghurt and honey. But, in keeping with this hotel's high standards, there were no chafing dishes that overcook eggs and leave a smell of paraffin everywhere. Fluffy eggs scrambled to order did soon appear served in a deep white bowl but did not last too long as the sun cast its rays across the sea and through the pine trees and on to our table. A very good brunch had sadly come to an end.

The Almadraba Park Hotel is a gem on the Costa Brava that manages to retain its stature despite the plethora of recent less attractive building that has followed in its wake, much of which is now sadly for sale. Location and the highest standards of hospitality are equally responsible.

www.almadrabapark.com Open from April to October only.