Eating out in Barcelona

10 May 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

When I met an old Catalan friend in the lobby of the Ohla Hotel in Barcelona, we promptly made a pact: with our respective teams due to meet shortly in the final of the Champions League, there would be no mention of football at all. The next few hours would be devoted to researching the most recent developments in the city's vibrant restaurant scene.

This was to include lunch in Ohla's relaxed 'non-stop kitchen', a term currently in vogue here to describe anywhere open from breakfast until late; a glass of wine in Monvínic and a cocktail in 41 Degrees, unmissable for the wine and cocktail enthusiast respectively; and a great-value dinner in the second branch of Pura Brasa, which has just opened on the ground floor of Las Arenas, the former bull ring turned shopping centre.

41 Degrees, Pura Brasa and Ohla's non-stop kitchen also share one striking physical characteristic: each occupies a corner site.

41 Degrees shares the site of an old car showroom with Tickets, a tapas bar also owned by El Bulli chef's brother Albert Adrià which boasts a set of windows that will bring a smile to anyone's face, even if, as in our case, we could not get a table. At Ohla, incredibly once a police station given its current luxurious fit out, the bar and kitchen are clearly visible from the outside, making it so much more attractive for non-residents. Tall, majestic windows allow the sunshine to stream in.

This is just as well because the kitchen, tall bar stools and and even the chef's uniforms are in what seems to be every designer's favourite colour today, black. Xavi Franco, head chef here and at Saüc, the smaller, more expensive restaurant on the mezzanine floor above, also conforms to stereotype in that he boasts a broad girth, a jolly smile and a vice-like grip when we shook hands after lunch.

He should be happy with the quality of what his chefs are producing after only three months, as small portions of salmon marinated with ginger, roasted mussels with a tomato sauce and a confited neck of lamb whetted our appetites for one shared main course, a baked rice dish infused with octopus and thyme. As with any dish cooked like this, a spoon probing the burnt corners paid the most delicious dividends. This is classic cooking in a modern setting.

Monvínic is ultra-modern in every sense other than it has been the dream of Sergi Ferrer-Salat for the past 15 years. A successful businessman turned wine lover, he opened this wine haven three years ago without any hope of making a financial return, according to one of the no fewer than seven sommeliers he employs in this wine bar-cum-restaurant.

It is an indication of quite how altruistic Monvínic is that what could be an extra seating area for customers by the front door is in fact the office for the sommeliers who spend the day patrolling cyberspace for the world's best wines. The current list includes 3,500 wines from 23 different countries and, in each instance, invariably the best producers. The list even includes three English sparkling wines from Ridgeview and Nyetimber.

The wine bar at the front opens out to an informal restaurant, where the menu is projected on to the wall adjacent to the kitchen. Our tapas selection included octopus with paprika; marinated cod; and freshly caught red prawns with rice. A ringing endorsement came from Monvínic's wine director, Isabelle Brunet, a French sommelier whom I had met at El Bulli and Galvin's Bistrot in London, who exclaimed, 'For me, it's a dream to work here'.

For any wine and food enthusiast the choice and low prices make Monvínic a dream to visit.

There is definitely a dream, or fantasy fairground, element to the interior of bright, busy Tickets, as seems the norm with anything connected with the Adrià brothers, although this initially seems to make the darkness and bare concrete walls of 41 Degrees, on which are simply mounted several multi-coloured bulls' heads, seem quite tame. Its name, I learnt as we pondered the drinks list, derives from the confluence of the parallel on which Barcelona sits; the age of the partners when they conceived it; and the alcoholic strength of most of the spirits served.

The magic here is supplied by a troupe of young bartenders who seem to enjoy defying gravity as they pour their concoctions from one container to another, and a small corner kitchen that dispenses oysters and more esoteric Adrià food. The stoned, green olives that had been marinated to take on a liquid centre are unmissable. The music is what I imagine my parents enjoyed with their cocktails 50 years ago.

Music is the only link to Pura Brasa, or pure embers, the new restaurant branch of the company that manufactures Josper grills, now top of every chef's wish list, although here it is supplied by a DJ.

As gamekeeper turned poacher, Josper have sensibly decided to attack a market that their normal customers eschew. Drawing inspiration from London's wagamama and Busaba Eathai, which have introduced so many to inexpensive Asian food, they want to do the same for Mediterranean cooking from a long, open kitchen that comprises two Josper grills, a wok station and the word *Compartir* (to share) emblazoned on the back kitchen wall and the back of the waiters' T shirts.

This we duly did via a salad of burrata cheese, cherry tomatoes and pine nuts; roasted aubergine puree with red peppers; tagliatelle with prawns and chili; grilled chicken wings; and a flash-seared piece of tip-top steak tartare that they choose not to call a hamburger. Lights inside cheese graters; a wine list printed on the outside of an empty magnum bottle; and average spends of under 20 euros a head all contribute to the fact that Pura Brasa is already serving 600 a day. There will be more, I hope.

Ohla Hotel, www.ohlahotel.com
Monvínic, www.monvinic.com
41 Degrees, www.ticketsbar.es
Pura Brasa, www.purabrasa.com