

El Bulli's legacy

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El Bulli, just outside Roses on the Costa Brava, has been the world's most influential restaurant for the past decade. On 30 July it will close its doors to the public for ever although the intention, still somewhat vague it strikes me, is that it will reopen as the elBulliFoundation in 2014 to train the chefs of the next decade.

It seems somewhat invidious to write even an appreciation, let alone an obituary, of somewhere that has given so much pleasure, and will continue to do so for at least a month. But before my memories even begin to fade of the 10 meals I have enjoyed there over the past 15 years, I thought it opportune to pay tribute now to the Adria brothers, Ferran and Albert, its culinary lights, and to Juli Soler, the quintessential restaurateur.

This seems particularly appropriate as the waves this talented trio have set in motion continue to reverberate around kitchens and restaurants across the world, even in the most unlikely circumstances.

At the end of a recent conversation with Jason Atherton, who has just opened [Pollen Street Social](#) in London but was, in 1999, the first British chef to work at El Bulli, he remarked on a management principle that had been inculcated into him then but has resurfaced now that he is own boss. 'It was Ferran who taught me quite how important it is, when you are running a very busy kitchen with a constant demand for clean pans and plates and the need for the strictest hygiene, to look after and nurture your kitchen porters', Atherton explained. 'I've never forgotten this instruction. Kitchen porters have to be as much a part of my team as anyone else.'

As I stood outside the large window that looks into the main kitchen at El Bulli in late April (see above left and [this video](#)), both before we went in to eat and for the very last time at midnight, I watched Ferran in action. And I began to think of him less as a chef and more as a sports coach.

Every service is certainly a finely balanced engagement. From his meticulously designed, spacious kitchen Ferran runs a team of 48 chefs aided by 28 waiting staff, who deliver the menu - an average of 40 different dishes in about four hours - to 50 customers. The menu costs 290 euros and the prices on the wine list are reasonable (with significant bargains on the reds for anyone lucky enough to be going there in the next month!).

The immediate consequences of these numbers are that El Bulli could never prosper financially even before its six-month season was curtailed to only five nights a week. And the reported annual trading loss of €500,000 will almost certainly be even bigger this season as Adria and Soler bid their magnanimous farewells.

But, ironically, El Bulli's self-imposed farewell in 2011 is for Heston Blumenthal of The Fat Duck at Bray and Dinner at The Mandarin Oriental, Knightsbridge, proof that restaurants at this level, where they are the equivalents of haute couture labels or Formula One cars, can at least survive. He once feared that this was going to be impossible.

'In 2004 we were within weeks way of having to close The Duck. Customers weren't coming and the bank wouldn't lend. Then two things happened almost simultaneously. Michelin gave us our third star and I gave a demonstration at Madrid Fusion that initiated my friendship with Albert and Ferran. I learnt how they had struggled to survive financially, how close to the wire we had both been, and that was tremendously encouraging. We may have been very different restaurants in very different locations but we were both confronting the same issue, the fear of the new. Knowing what they had gone through gave me the confidence to carry on. Their support has been absolutely massive', he enthused.

And with this friendship has come the ongoing opportunity to collaborate. Blumenthal recalled a week shortly after this first encounter when Albert had come to stay with him and they had gone off to visit Professor Andy Taylor at Nottingham University, who works on flavour release, and Charles Spence, Professor of Experimental Psychology at Oxford University. The consequences of this co-operation have been the appearance of Blumenthal's name on the El Bulli menu as Adria has adapted his research with liquid nitrogen, as well as professional demonstrations side by side in Chicago, Sydney and Tokyo to rapt audiences.

The manner in which the El Bulli ethos has traversed the world over the past decade is most obvious in the two menus from the restaurant that hang framed close to our kitchen.

The first, dated April 2000, comprising 27 small, savoury dishes and three desserts, began with his deconstruction of a gin fizz but took the customer only to Mexico, via trout caviar in a taco, and the Japanese technique of tempura. Eleven years later in a menu that stretched to 53 small dishes, but which we asked to be reduced by a dozen, there were diversions to Thailand, for a langoustine head in Thai sauce; to China for rose-petal wontons in a dim-sum basket; and eight dishes inspired by Japan including what looked like a large olive served on a spoon but was the purest concentration of miso that erupted in the mouth. Inspiration came too from Colombia and Mexico along with one visual trick: hare ravioli, served with a hare bolognaise came with a large wine glass supposedly containing hare blood (see above right). This was, in fact, the juice of beetroot, citronelle and ginger with pepper oil.

When the waiter presented our menu (shown, framed, below), I appreciated two other facets of this extraordinary restaurant.

The first was a rendition on the reverse of its most unlikely origins in 1963 as a combination of grill room, bar, apartments and mini-golf along a then uncrowded coast. The second was that, having completed three years working at the most inspirational level, our waiter would be heading back to his native Mexico City. El Bulli may close but its influence is here to stay.

www.elbulli.com