

Costa Brava to Languedoc

27 Apr 2012 by Scott Bailey

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Not all of this region's cooking is straight out of a chemistry set or a laboratory. A recent food and wine trip through French and Spanish Catalonia showcased excellent, innovative cuisine ranging from traditional preparations to molecular-to-the-max offerings. What follows are my comments and highlights from the three best dining experiences encountered in this nine-day Catalan trip.

Sant Pol de Mar is a one-hour drive north east of Barcelona and the home of **Carme Ruscalleda / Restaurant Sant Pau**. The tranquil dining room overlooks a formal garden, with the beach and sea beyond. A refreshing aperitif of the chef's signature Brut Cava 2006 set the pace for the cuisine and paired wines to follow.

Chef Ruscalleda is a master at combining seasonal, local ingredients - from land and sea - with classic techniques and, where warranted, certain oriental accents and accoutrements. She varies her menus monthly, and also features set 'micro-menus' of *aperitivos*, *quesos* and *divertimientos de pasteleria* based on a monthly theme. For October, the theme/colour was chestnut (*marron*). We did not sample cheeses, but the *amuse-bouches* and the *mignardises* were superb.

Entrées were a delicious, local *dorado* (firm white fish) baked in fig leaves and served with a saffron sauce and a local rice dish, *llamantol*, with lobster. The rice is best described as a combination of the best elements of both risotto (creaminess) and paella (a bottom crust) that was cooked with an intense shellfish broth/reduction to a coral-hued brilliance. The cold-water lobster meat was briny-sweet, succulent and adorned the top of the rice, offering myriad textures and intense flavours. A local Penedès white wine made from indigenous grapes worked beautifully with the fish, while an intense 2005 white Rioja had enough stuffing to stand up to the intense rice dish.

Main courses were beautifully prepared and sauced Challans duck breast and breast of local pigeon. Another regional red blend of indigenous grapes from Penedès was well matched to the fowl and the impressive saucing on both plates. We were delighted to be able to personally offer our thanks to Chef as she made the rounds of the room. This was a fine three-star experience in every respect: cuisine, ambience, service, hospitality.

El Celler de Can Roca in Girona is a relatively new addition to the three-star ranks. [It is also what Luis Gutiérrez describes [here](#) as 'probably my overall favourite restaurant in Spain - JH.] The brothers Roca offer an unusual dining experience, and you must be prepared for a late evening. They do not open for the evening service until 9 pm (which is justified, as they finish the afternoon service between 5 and 6 pm). Chef Joan, pastry chef Jordi and sommelier-manager Josep choreograph a uniquely relaxing, enjoyable and thrilling evening for the discerning diner.

Our evening began with a worthwhile Albet y Noya Cava El Celler fizz with copious refills while we enjoyed a 'trip around the world' in the form of *amuse-bouches*. The serving dishes are unique: a rock that splits open; a bonsai olive tree with olive-oriented '*bonbons*' on the branches; pieces of wooden carvings; bento-like boxes, etc. The mushroom essence *bonbon* and the truffled brioche were especially memorable. After the appetisers, the parade of seven diminutive courses followed, each with its own wine accompaniment.

There was a bit of molecularity in certain of the dishes, but it was not overly done. The food still looked like food to be enjoyed, not a science experiment run amok. For example, terrine of apple and duck liver was very traditional, but amped up with an encapsulated bubble of vanilla oil. Lobster parmentier with trumpet mushrooms was a traditional presentation. Next, their theme for the tasting menu evolved more as a series of deconstructed dishes (cod pot au feu) and daring combinations of ingredients such as Iberian suckling pig with baby beets and pieces of various coloured melons carved into baby-beet shapes. The evening's dessert - green colourology - was a deconstruction of eucalyptus ice cream, green shiso, Chartreuse liqueur, lime and avocado. They actually worked well together, however off-beat it sounds. The *mignardises* were dried and caramelised olives in vanilla, caramel and liquorice flavours.

The ambience is modern, relaxing and tranquil, despite the brigade of waiting staff who seem to be everywhere but are not obtrusive. Our only constructive comment is that the pours of the wines accompanying the tasting menu were metered

out too carefully as 'short pours'. Therefore, don't be bashful when seeking refills of the free-flowing Cava at the beginning of the meal. Manager Jordi works the room and keeps a steady eye on the beautiful orchestration of your evening. Clearly, this is another three-star dining experience.

Our trek to Fontjoncouse, France (via Perpignan), was a real adventure into the wilderness of Corbières. After leaving the autoroute near Sigean, we took a local road that became narrower and more treacherous as we ventured deeper into the wilds. The scenery was spectacular, with huge boulders, steep gorges, rushing waters, wild garrigue scrublands alongside the road. Finally, we came upon the tiny hamlet of Fontjoncouse, home to approximately 100 people, of which 40 work directly for the **Auberge du Vieux Puits** and, most probably, the other 60 either garden, hunt, fish or forage to fulfil chef Gilles Goujon's passion for local ingredients. The inn consists of 14 rooms in two locations - the main auberge and the outlying Maison des Chefs and a 60-seat restaurant that serves lunch and dinner.

Chef Goujon is a traditionalist in preparation and uses local ingredients almost exclusively. His innovation is in the presentation of the dishes, using tableware of his unique design, and sauces and accoutrements to achieve the culinary presentation he desires. It is novel, but definitely not molecular. Occasionally, we found something that did not work for us, such as a dollop of fennel sorbet alongside the warm crème of crustacean sauce for langoustine ravioli - but he was presumably seeking to create his own twist on a classic *chaud-froid* (hot-cold) presentation.

Chef's entrée presentation was a most daring, delicious mélange of poached egg, truffle juice, pureed wild mushrooms and burgundy truffle, with a mushroom brioche and mushroom cappuccino accompaniments. The innovative twist was the surprise when you cracked open the softly poached egg - the yolk was tan in color! The waiter assured that it was perfectly fresh. It was injected with warm truffle juice and the resulting flavor was divine. There was total harmony in the various aspects of this dish - the unctuous egg sauce, marrying with the mushroom puree, the buttery/mushroomy brioche and the mushroom cappuccino. My 'gold standard' of egg dishes - previously Henri Faugeron's egg with truffles and brioche - has just been topped!

Autumn brings game in season, and Chef Goujon offered both a roasted dove and a Challans duck breast on the evening's tasting menu. The dove was wild and wing-shot, as Melanie can attest. The breast was roasted pink; the leg was braised and the meat wrapped in a savoy cabbage leaf and sauced with a reduction of the roasting juices. Dove is reminiscent of pigeon but is darker and more flavourful.

Back to the 'shot' found in the dove. When our waiter saw that we were 'shot', he shared our discovery with the chef. Within a minute, our places were being set with new silver, and out from the kitchen came an extra course - pheasant and foie gras in brioche - from the chef as a 'peace offering'. Throughout the progression of our dinner, the sommelier proudly poured a progression of delicious local and regional wines that beautifully complemented the cuisine.

The dessert finale was mercifully small, but so delicious and wonderfully presented. A wild fig was roasted with local Corbières wine and spices. The top was then cut off, and orange-flower flavoured ice cream was placed in the fig and its top replaced. Next, the reconstructed fig was sheathed with a light violet-coloured, champagne flute-like shell of violet-flavoured croquante. This creation was in the middle of a flat bowl and presented to the diner, whereupon the waiter then poured a thin stream of spice-scented cooking liquid over the croquante, gently melting it to create the heavenly-scented and deliciously spiced sauce for the dessert. Three bites of pure bliss, before we went singing into the night. Another outstanding example of a three-star establishment setting forth a memorable dining experience equal to both of the three-stars previously enjoyed on this trip.

There's a lot of culinary and vinous excitement to be enjoyed in Catalonia. Don't mourn El Bulli's closure, but discover the other treasures in this unique, enjoyable region. *Bon appétit!*