

## Eating out in Empordor

25 Jul 2012 by Nick Lander/FT

Cadaqués and Roses, on the Catalan coast 170 kilometres north of Barcelona, are just 15 km apart. Nature has, however, bequeathed these two very popular towns with a different perspective on the Mediterranean.

While the smaller bays around Cadaqués act as a safe haven for many of the small boats that belong to those who live or holiday there, the much wider bay at Roses is an obvious point of call for those who travel in much larger sailboats. And, happily for those who enjoy eating fresh fish and shellfish, Roses is home to many professional fishermen.

Rafas and Cal Campaner in the centre of Roses have been beacons for those who like their fresh fish either simply grilled or who, like me, are addicted to anchovies. (On this last trip I started eating them laid out on thin slices of bread soaked in tomatoes, pan con tomate, for breakfast.) The surrounding deep, cold, waters also provide a local delicacy: gambas de Roses.

These bright red prawns are about six inches long and I first enjoyed them on the terrace of the Almadraba Park Hotel, which is now run with a mixture of precision and relaxed charm by Jordi Subirós, whose grandfather designed the building that, despite being 42 years old, shows not the slightest sign that its Mad Men patina may be fading.

We had already ordered quite enough tapas for lunch when I saw a tray of these prawns being taken to the table next to ours and I felt at once that this was a dish neither I, nor my friends, should miss out on.

What followed 15 minutes later was a treat for all the senses. We were shown a round metal dish, smaller than but similar to a paella dish, that contained 10 prawns covered in sea salt. We waited impatiently for them to cool slightly before ripping the heads off, peeling the shell and enjoying everything that emanated from them: their intoxicating aroma; the sweetness of the meat; the juices that flowed; and, best of all, licking our salt-encrusted fingers clean.

This dish, I learnt subsequently from Subirós, is a combination of the freshness of the prawns allied to the least intrusive cooking technique. Once covered liberally in sea salt, the prawns are laid out in the tray and then cooked for precisely four minutes at 180 degrees C. And that is just about the time we took to do them justice.

The more obvious charms of Cadaqués' narrow streets and inlets, as well as its proximity to the fascinating former home of Salvador Dali, have made the more northerly of these two ports exceptionally popular with tourists, particularly during the summer, but until now it has been devoid of any really fascinating restaurants. This changed in early May with the opening of *Compartir* (pictured above and below) in an association that would undeniably have delighted the town's extraordinary artist.

The restaurant is located in the centre of the town in what was a rather run-down hotel that belongs to Senor Vehi, an art dealer who specialises in the works of Dali. Appreciating that it was singularly underperforming, he has now handed the ground floor over on friendly commercial terms to a trio of Spain's most exciting chefs, Oriol Castro, Mateu Casañas and Eduard Xatruch, while still running the four apartments above.

These three chefs honed their skills over the past decade standing next to Ferran Adrià at El Bulli and while they are still involved in the transformation of this restaurant into a culinary foundation (scheduled to open in 2014), they are also transforming their knowledge into producing a much simpler, and far less expensive, menu than the 24-course extravaganzas once available at their alma mater.

It takes its cue from its name: *compartir* means 'to share' and here the emphasis is on sharing dishes among friends. In practice, I have always found that this works best with first courses and desserts rather than with the main courses, although this may be because we all become proprietorial at this stage of the meal.

Certainly, our three first courses were stunning. Fillets of marinated sardines with slices of orange and green olives; whipped gorgonzola cheese that covered strips of endive and hid nuggets of walnuts and passion fruit; and, best of all for an anchovy lover, more of these little piscatorial gems here covered in grated black truffle and pearls of olive oil caviar. Our main courses were good: half a lobster; a 'shabu shabu' of salmon with asparagus; and a whole, small sea bass with

mushrooms and seaweed.

There is an excellent wine list, in Spanish, Catalan, French and English, compiled by Ferran Centilles, the former sommelier at El Bulli who is now preparing the 10,000 bottles the restaurant had when it closed for sale via Sotheby's.

But the real charm of Compartir is that it is more than the sum of its parts. Sitting outside under the stars; eating and drinking well; listening to the squawking sea gulls above; and hoping that the meal will never come to an end.

**Rafas**, 56 Carrer de Sant Sebastià, Roses, tel +34 972 15 94 01

**Cal Campaner**, 23 Mossèn Carles Feliu, Roses, tel +34 972 25 69 54

**Almadraba Park Hotel** [www.almadrabapark.com](http://www.almadrabapark.com)

**Compartir** [ca.compartircadaques.com](http://ca.compartircadaques.com)