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## Flying fish high above Barcelona



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Only one question kept bothering me after our highly enjoyable dinner at Marea Alta in Barcelona: would virtually everything we ate have tasted quite as good had the views, in all directions, not been so exceptional?

This restaurant starts with certain advantages. It is on the twenty-fourth floor of an office building very close to the city's bustling port. And it has been purpose-built with large 360-degree windows.

The views from Marea Alta, as a consequence, are simply magnificent. To the east, a cruise ship bound for the Balearic Islands was moored. To the north stretched the Costa Brava. Immediately below us was the old Customs House standing proudly by the water, the trees lining Las

Ramblas were over to the west, and when we arrived the sun was obligingly setting behind the mountains.

Being a gentleman, or at least the son of a gentleman, I gave Jancis the seat facing the harbour but this gesture was not without its own rewards. As darkness fell, the city lit up in front of me and left me in no doubt that I was sitting overlooking the Catalan capital.

All this was in a restaurant that aims to take every advantage not just of its particular location but also of the length of the Spanish coastline. Marea Alta's added attraction is for anyone, like me, who is fascinated by fish and shellfish: their provenance; the varied and distinctive ways in which they are cooked; and, perhaps above all, by how much easier it is to sleep after a fish dinner than after a meat one.

The menu makes all this very clear. Printed with that day's date to show off that day's catch, it lists the main ingredient in a clear, dark blue. Underneath that it lists the cooking method, then the provenance, and finally the price and the quantity served.

The menu opens with a section headed Canned at Home, a reference to how proud the Catalans are of this particular method of preserving small fish. Then comes the seafood heading; then another called To Start, before one headed Stews, and the final one of half a dozen fish, ranging from *kokotxas*, or cod cheeks (as beloved here as they are in Asia), to sardines and turbot, all cooked over charcoal.

We began with a few dishes from the Canned at Home and Seafood sections, including a bivalve that I had never eaten before. These were described as *caixetes* from the gulf of Ebro near Tarragon. These were presented on ice in an orange plastic miniature crate, having been boiled in salt water.

In shape, *caixetes* resemble mussels but are much hairier and much less common. They are dived for only when the sea is extremely clear and their taste is very true, a taste accentuated by their cooking method, having been cooked in seawater. With this, we enjoyed thin strips of mackerel from Catalonia, its sweet flesh offset by a slightly sharp apple compote, and some delicious Galician mussels marinated in an escabeche that included the top-quality smoked Chardonnay(!) vinegar that was to be another hallmark of this meal.

These were followed by three dishes, two that showed the kitchen at its most exciting and one that was a little disappointing. The first was a dish of cod fish curd, topped with the last of this season's black truffles from Lleida and honey, while the second was a dish of *calcots*, thin leeks, topped with local caviar. Disappointment came only with a dish of sea urchins rather swamped by an egg sabayon and potato purée.

All this led seamlessly on to our main course, for which our table of six was again recommended a species from the sea that I had never eaten before. The absolutely delicious red sea bream, from Asturias in northern Spain, was barbecued before being expertly filleted and returned to our table. Its flesh was firm and its skin burnt by the barbecue to contrast delightfully with it.

We finished with a relatively simple but satisfyingly seasonal dessert: a bowl of diced strawberries topped with the first of this year's wild strawberries, sitting on a basil and lemon sorbet.

We ate here on a Sunday evening when, because most of the city's other top restaurants are closed, it attracts many of those employed in them. But this restaurant's attractions are not just

confined to its kitchen led by its head chef Enrique Valentí.

The staff, waiters in navy striped jerseys and the chefs de rang in more formal blue jackets, are kept under the watchful eye of the Argentine maître d', Pablo Sacerdotte. Their wine list is impressive, too. With our various shellfish and fish dishes we drank a deep golden, waxy, mature white rioja, a 2003 from Finca Allende.

But what I perhaps most admired about this particular restaurant's approach was its self-restraint. There was no attempt other than our pink plates in the shape of fish to overstate the obvious. That would only have detracted from the pleasure of being there. With fish sourcing as sensitive as this, with fish cooking of such a high standard, and with views so spectacular, who needs anything else?

**Marea Alta** Avenue de las Drassanes 6-8, Edificio Colón Piso 23-24, 08001 Barcelona; tel +34 936 313590; [info@restaurantemareaalta.com](mailto:info@restaurantemareaalta.com)

Menu 100 euros per person.