



Written by
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Selling the Costa Brava via the table



I accepted an invitation to join a lunch organised by Jaume Marín, the marketing director of the Costa Brava Tourist Association, for several reasons.

First of all, I love this particular mountainous region of north-east Spain, which boasts the Pyrenees, some wonderful walking opportunities as well as many beautiful coves and beaches.

Secondly, it has for the past 50 years been the cradle of modern Spanish cooking, a process begun by chef Josep Mercader at the *Hotel Empordà* and then carried on by Ferran Adrià at *El Bulli* and subsequently by many of his disciples.

Then there were two more unexpected reasons. Firstly there was the address of the lunch venue. This was to take place neither in a hotel nor in a restaurant but in a film studio, No 1 Park Village East, close to Regent's Park. Intriguing...

And secondly, I wondered – would I be the only man there?

There is no doubt that today young women are taking most of the positions in food and tourism journalism – becoming in effect 'the good times correspondents', the title Jancis always wanted for herself. This impression was confirmed at the lunch: out of the 20 around the table, 14 were young women and two out of the six men were Jaume, our host, and Oriol Aguilà, the director of the annual *Peralada Music Festival* that is now almost better known than the wine producer that inspired it.

Once the marketing speech had been given, Jaume asked us all to follow him through to lunch. We walked past what was, as it later became obvious, a makeshift kitchen and into a 'dining room' that had been created by the placing of four pieces of white cloth as walls. On top was a complex set of lights and cameras. These initially projected down our names, instead of common or garden place cards, onto a wooden box. [This sounds like pure Ferran, our very own Ferran Centelles! JR]

As the images on the 'walls' began to change and project images of the Costa Brava, a waiter entered and asked us to open the box. This contained some sprigs of rosemary, a spring flower and a cube containing a welcome vermouth, the local aperitif.



A voice then explained what lay ahead. 'A sensorial journey through our wine and gastronomy' that comprised the five senses, five acts, five courses and five wines. At this stage the importance of LightThink Lab became obvious. This Girona-based company (www.lightthinklab.com) which specialises in multidimensional mapping and light architecture was the secondary star of the show – after Quim Casellas, the chef from the hotel and restaurant Casamar in Llafranc on the Costa Brava, and his sister Maria, who led the waiting team.

Both opened with a relatively light touch. As the background of the Pyrenees and the sea shore gave way, the waiting staff arrived with three parts of a plate that formed the irregular whole shown top right. On the top of one was an anchovy, including the edible spine, to the right was a piece of Manyac cheese, while to the left were all the ingredients for pa amb tomàquet, the tomato-smear bread that is often described as the easiest Spanish tapa. With this we drank a refreshing glass of Finca Olivardots, Groc d'Àmfora 2016 (all the wines were from the DO

Empordà).

It was the next course that really caught the imagination. While the eyes were seduced by shots of the sea off Cap Creus, one of the region's numerous national parks, and fishing boats, the table was covered in numerous red-coloured fish that resembled the rock fish, rascasse. Simultaneously, a fish-shaped dish was placed in front of us that contained Casellas's version of a 'suquet', the local fish soup.



There were two highlights to this dish. The first was that the principal ingredient in the soup was a marinated red prawn from Palamós, the speciality of this renowned fishing village. The second was that this delicacy was given greater piquancy by the picada sauce that it was embellished with, a local rather magical sauce incorporating saffron, garlic, parsley and hazelnuts. With this we drank a Cellers d'en Guilla, Magenc 2016.

As the table top changed from the bottom of the sea to checked red gingham, so did the style of cooking. First of all, to highlight the local use of cooking pots, a surf and turf dish incorporating rice from Pals, the medieval town where rice growing was first introduced in the fifteenth century. With this we enjoyed a Sol i Vent 2016 from Espelt Viticultors.

There then followed another meat course as the light show turned its attention to the number of Michelin stars the Costa Brava chefs have garnered: 19 in total, awarded to 15 restaurants (although none to either the Hotel Empordà or to [Almadraba Park](#), which both exemplify the very highest hospitality and courtesy in the region in my opinion).

While stars covered the tables, Casellas served a beef dish with wild mushrooms alongside a Masia Carreras 2015 from Celler Martí Fabra and a slightly over-sweet version of a baked Girona apple with an even sweeter glass of non-vintage Vinyes dels Aspres, Bac de les Ginesteres. The finale was accompanied by loud music and fireworks projected on to the table.

The lunch, accompanied by many an invitation to visit the Costa Brava, was obviously an effective use of the chef's time while his restaurant is closed, and will obviously generate many tweets, Instagrams and column inches. (As well as being one of the few men present, I was the only one using a pen and notebook as well as my iPhone.)

But why, I wondered, was all this effort being made, effort that will be reproduced for the travel journalists of Paris, Milan and Munich? As anyone who has tried to travel by car through the region during July and August will recognise, the roads could not be busier. On our visit last August we set off from Empordà at 10.30 am to drive the 30 minutes to Roses and had to turn back because the traffic was so heavy.

But on the website of the Hotel Casamar and its restaurant, family-run today by Quim and his sister Maria, I perhaps found the answer.

Here they write, 'It has been 10 years since we managed the restaurant and now we can take time to review the way from the beginning to the end. We believe in quality and there are no shortcuts to thank our client. We would like to approach more closely to our producers so that their products that fill our menu are better known. We have a lot of work to do, to recycle better for example, to reflect closer the product to our goals, the relationship with the producer, to promote the region's wines and wineries. We combine the challenge to maintain our personality, our local culture and collaboration with small, local producers with their own self-discipline.'

Quim Casellas is quite the philosopher – and a pretty good chef, too.

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