



Barcelona *Bistronomics*

In the Catalan capital, a new generation of chefs are challenging themselves to combine fine dining with low prices.

WORDS AND PICTURES STEVE TALLANTYRE

“It’s about giving it your all.” Fidel Puig pauses instinctively to move aside as his young commis chef reaches past for more vegetables. The kitchen is tiny, a couple of metres square, and has to accommodate three knife-wielding chefs during the intense hours of preparation before service. The steps of their dance are well-rehearsed, almost automatic. Squeezed into a back corner, co-owner Santi Rebés’s focus is unbroken as he concentrates on desserts. Their Barcelona restaurant, Embat, is plain and unadorned, almost as basic as the kitchen.

“This isn’t a luxurious place, but we wanted to make great cooking accessible to everyone. We wanted the kind of place we’d like ourselves, where you can eat well without feeling like you’re being nailed with the prices. Intricate cooking, but with maximum possible value-for-money.”

Value-for-money isn’t always something associated with top Barcelona restaurants. During the city’s

boom years of the 90s and into the new century, foreign currency in the form of business accounts and tourist dollars fertilised the food scene and Michelin-starred restaurants duly blossomed, providing spectacular eating at equally spectacular prices.

The undoubted king of Catalan cuisine was, and still remains, Ferran Adrià. The mercurial head of three-star El Bulli, up the coast in Roses, became one of the highest-profile chefs in the world and his restaurant a Mecca for gastronomic pilgrims. His creative genius drew not only diners but chefs; young, ambitious and eager to learn, they queued to serve their time in his kitchens, studying under the master.

Some of Adrià’s early alumni went on to establish restaurants that have become institutions in their own right, such as the creative dessert school Espai Sucre, where Embat’s Puig and Rebés met. They had each earned their chefs’ whites in other restaurants, from family-run affairs to prestigious Michelin-starred temples of fine dining, but the focus on creativity at Espai Sucre set them on their current path.

Restaurant Embat

C/ Mallorca 304, 08037 Barcelona
0034 934 580 855
www.restaurantembat.es



For Puig, this El Bulli-inspired creativity could only have prospered in the food culture of Catalonia and Spain. “It’s not a closed-off cuisine. It’s not based on strict recipes but on general forms. Look at books of recipes, in restaurants or in private houses, and you’ll see that everyone

does things very differently. In France it’s not like that, nor in Italy, where it is more classical. Here, the history doesn’t matter – what’s important is to arrive at the taste. You have some basics but it is mainly about concepts. This is very important for the evolution of the cuisine.”

Despite this, the roots of Catalan cooking are evident in Embat’s menu. Rustic favourites – like *trinxat* (cabbage and potato cake), beef cheeks and the various traditional ‘surf and turf’ combinations of *mar i muntanya* – take starring roles. It all makes sense on the plate. The more hearty and earthy ingredients are presented in original combinations, with a light touch and delicate presentation to elevate them beyond their trencherman’s origins.

As Fidel explains, “El Bulli created a boom – lots of chefs started to learn these techniques that weren’t classical, the foams and the spherifications. I think the two can complement each other. We should seek balance. We want to normalize the modern techniques and integrate them; not making pretensions of modernism but not being closed to evolution.”

One important step in this evolution has been the Darwinian adaptation to the financial realities of a Spain recovering from recession. Offering uncompromising quality at lunchtime for under €25, the restaurants of chefs like Puig and Rebés have become locally known as bistronomics. This word, a combination of bistro and economic, was popularised by local food writer Pau Arenos and has entered the lexicon of Barcelona diners.

Just a few hundred metres from Embat is the restaurant of another chef to have passed through the gates of El Bulli as well as several other of Spain’s class-leading establishments. Robert Gelonch works in a kitchen no bigger than that of his Embat contemporaries, serving his version of modern, value-for-money food in his self-titled restaurant, Gelonch.

“If people come looking for luxury, they’ll not find it. The focus here is the food – to serve the very best at very ordinary prices.”

The chef may emphasise that his is not a luxurious restaurant but it is comfortable and

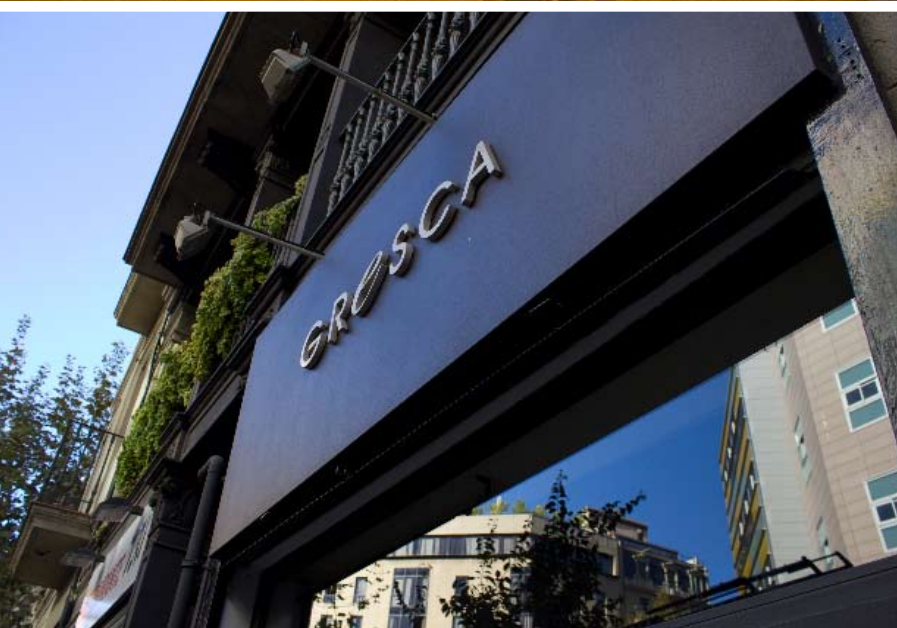
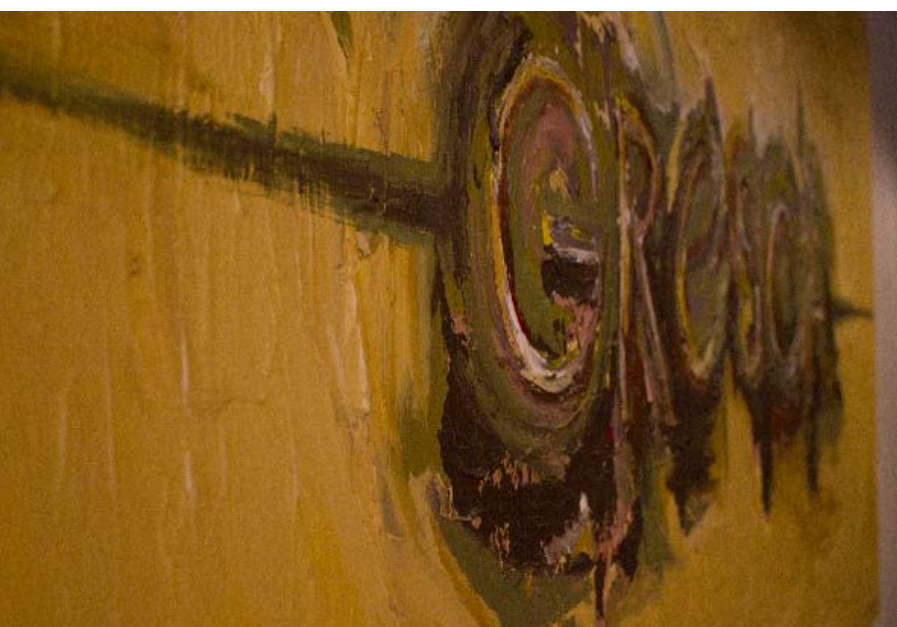
Gelonch

C/ Bailén 56, Barcelona
0034 932 658 298
www.gelonch.es



attractively designed. Excellent front-of-house service and the relentless mill of creativity that is Gelonch’s kitchen are an attractive combination.

Gelonch seems perpetually in the grip of his creative muse. “To take simple ingredients and create something special is very difficult, mentally. >



Now, though, if I go out and eat a salad, I'm thinking in terms of concepts, of deconstructing it."

He feels driven to create and the process has become as much of a habit to him as sharpening his knives. "I change the tasting menu every six weeks. I don't need to do it so much, hardly anyone does, but I want to do it, to stay creative. I have a laptop and whenever I have an idea I write it up. Then I work on it. And when I have, let's say, some venison, I can go to my files and look at what ideas I've had, what accompaniments and presentations would be best."

Running one's own restaurant is economically daunting but Gelonch resists the temptation to put his prices up. "The evening tasting menu is only €45. I know that some restaurants have to pay for a bigger place and more staff but either I'm far too cheap or they're too expensive, charging two or three times this price. People aren't stupid. They won't throw money away. I want people to be able to afford to come here and not just for their birthdays. It's more than a

normal lunch but €25 is something most people can afford if they want to."

Chef Rafa Peña's restaurant, Gresca, also lies in the Eixample district of Barcelona and is founded on a similar philosophy.

"Everyone can afford to eat at Gresca. That's our goal. Lunch menu is the same quality as the evening. We only have a choice of two starters and mains because we can't offer five and maintain the same value for money."

Confident and charismatic, Peña trained in Paris, Sweden and some of Spain's most prestigious restaurants. He is one of the rising stars of Barcelona's food scene. Like the other chefs here, he adheres to Ferran Adrià's maxim that 'a very good sardine is always preferable to a not-so-good lobster.'

Peña denies having any master plan though, instead insisting that he has merely responded to the market. "When we opened the restaurant, we had very little money. The solution was to look to bring prices down to attract customers but without losing quality. We tried to create dishes of maximum

Gresca

C/ Provença 230, Barcelona
0034 934 516 193
www.gresca.net



quality that were also inexpensive. It comes down to a choice of ingredients. We can buy the very best fruit and vegetables because no matter what, they won't be that expensive. Our job is to use simple ingredients and get the most out of them."

Gresca's menus showcase modern techniques and the original thinking of its head chef, but Peña is careful to avoid changing recipes purely for the sake of it. "The season still tells you what you have to cook. There are some things that are best not messed with. We leave them alone. *Lièvre à la Royal* (the famous French hare dish), for example; you're not going to do it any better than the classic recipe. There are some areas in which we can improve upon the traditional, others, no. We must strike a balance between the two."

Unlike many fine-dining restaurants, Gresca is still packed every day, with the lunchtime tables fully booked.

"Our model came out of necessity but perhaps it's more sustainable. Maybe it's not the future, but maybe the old Michelin model isn't either, where you spend €250 per head and you don't even get what you want. Ask me again in two years!"

This point is also raised by Carlos Ortiz, head chef in Terrabacus. This restaurant, part-owned

by the chef, is a hidden gem often neglected by food guides.

"I once left a Michelin-starred place after spending €250 and had to go for a pizza because I was still hungry. That shouldn't be the way it is."

Ortiz is Argentinean but trained in Milan before finding his way to El Bulli, via Portugal's famous two-star Vila Joya. He also returns to Adrià's sardine and lobster aphorism.

"What is important is the love you put into it. What's important is how you use it. You can use basic, less expensive ingredients and create something truly exceptional."

Twenty five euros spent on Terrabacus's lunch menu buys a belly-bursting showcase of Ortiz's talents. The generous portions, he says, were made so in response to the current economic climate. A conversation with Juan Mari Arzak, the legendary three-star master of Basque cuisine, convinced Ortiz that he could boost quantity without sacrificing quality. "People should leave full after a good meal."

Terrabacus

C/ Muntaner 185, 08036 Barcelona
0034 934 108 633
www.terrabacus.com



Full bellies, and perhaps with their pockets full too: Barcelona's bistrionomics are a great way to make one's trousers pinch – without feeling the pinch in your wallet. High-level cooking has never been so affordable.