



WANDERING STARS

Ferran Adrià is credited with reinventing fine dining. Susan Jung talks to the Spanish master and two of his protégés about what's next

FERRAN ADRIÀ IS not one for false modesty, but why should he be? elBulli, his now-closed restaurant in Roses, Spain, received a reported 500,000 requests for its 8,000 available seats during the six months it was open each year.

Most of his contemporaries would agree that he is the most innovative chef in the world. Cooks who worked in the elBulli kitchen or the Taller, the workshop in Barcelona where much of the culinary experimentation and innovation took place, either as stagiaires (unpaid workers) or as paid staff, have gone on to open their own Michelin-star establishments. They include Rene Redzepi of Noma in Copenhagen, Denmark; Joan Roca of El Celler de Can Roca in Girona, Spain; and Massimo Bottura of Osteria Francescana in Modena, Italy.

Hong Kong has at least four chefs who worked there: Uwe Opocensky, executive chef at the Mandarin Oriental, Paco Roncero de View 62 by Paco Roncero, Gianluigi Bonelli of GE at the L'Azur Manor, and Alain Desvallée of Tolosa de Catalunya, which opened earlier this week in Wan Chai.

"There are people who have never been to elBulli but they've listened to me at a [culinary] conference and it changed their lives," says Adrià, sitting down at Catalunya. The chef was in Hong Kong earlier this month for the Sotheby's auction of the contents of the elBulli cellar and other memorabilia —

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Ferran Adrià (left)

the first of two auctions, the second taking place on April 26 in New York. The chance to dine with Adrià in Barcelona was also auctioned for HK\$180,000, not including the 22.5 percent buyer's premium.

"The phenomenon of elBulli is incredible," says Adrià. "It's not only the kitchen. Designers, architects, a lot of creative people, for them elBulli is the reference, but why? Freedom. The most important thing is the freedom, risk and liberty to create. If elBulli can do this, why not us?"

Opocensky can't praise his time at elBulli highly enough. "I had been executive chef at the Aberdeen Marina Club, but left his position in 2006 to spend six months as an elBulli stagiaire, going back the following year for

another three weeks." "The first few days there were terrifying," he recalls. "It was so unfamiliar. Everything you think you know as a chef you just do not know. There's nothing they do that you would recognize as something anybody else would do. It's like your first day in the kitchen. You throw out everything you know. You break down rules — don't assume, ask, look at it and make it your own."

It took Opocensky a little time to stand out from the rest of the pack.

"I was there for three weeks and was put on a section with an Italian chef who had been there for four years. They came across some Asian ingredients — banana flowers, different types of soy sauce — which they didn't really understand. I told the Italian chef I had worked in Asia and explained what to do with banana flowers," he says.

"Ferran saw what I was doing and asked who I was. He came over and the Italian chef explained what I was doing. All of a sudden, everything changed. He invited me to be part of his research and development team. I learned so much, he really showed me everything."

By the time Opocensky had applied for a stage position at elBulli, his application was just one of thousands from cooks eager to work there.

It was a very different situation when Catalunya chef, Devadhw Tolosa, first went to elBulli in 1994 for work experience while he was still in culinary



Uwe Opocensky was a stagiaire of Ferran Adrià.