



THE GOOD LIFE

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PORTRAIT / EDMON LEONG

Invisible Hands

CHRISTINA KO bites into a bit of unseen magic at Catalunya



WHILE GASTRONOMES FAR and wide mourned the closure of Spanish juggernaut elBulli, there's been at least one positive side effect: the proliferation of its former chefs venturing out around the world opening restaurants that in some way continue the tradition of culinary excellence once upheld by the mother ship. One of these is *Catalunya*, a Spanish tapas restaurant that opened last July in Singapore and inaugurated its Hong Kong outpost mid last month.

The restaurant itself is stunning, an interplay of Spanish design elements worked in with contemporary Hong Kong design ideals, courtesy of the New York-based AvroKo, go-to interior experts for local restaurateurs with big and buzzy spaces looking for hip furnishings and fail-safe people flow. And the menu seems easygoing, a collection of standard Iberian fare, ranging from traditional cod *esqueixada* to meat and potato *bombas* to grilled Bikini sandwiches.

If only you knew how much work went into these seeming standards. Group Executive Chef Alain Devahive Tolosa spent a decade in the kitchen at elBulli before moving into the adjacent research laboratory elBullitaller, where food techniques were researched and status quos questioned and debunked. He has consulted in the openings of restaurants in Spain and spoken extensively on the science of sustenance, but this is his first long-term culinary gig since elBulli.

In a move that's both smart and current, he's democratized the cuisine at Catalunya, so that the technique, while present, is hardly overly apparent, which returns a conviviality to the table. There are foams and airs, still, but no airs and graces. It's this invisible magic that makes a dining experience here so much more enjoyable – there's no six-paragraph addendum to each dish presented, no encyclopedia of foraged ingredients chosen for the express purpose of boggling your mind.

Take a simple dish of pickled vegetables as an example. It's vacuum-packed with the air and moisture removed and immediately replaced with a yuzu infusion (chosen instead of vinegar, which was considered too sour for the Asian palate). The method helps





OPPOSITE: EXECUTIVE CHEF ALAIN DEVAHIVE TOLOSA. ABOVE: THE MAKING OF "THE OTHER SPANISH TORTILLA"

retain the vibrant colour of the food, rather than succumb to the muted cast that results from pickling. The chef gets his toys and techniques; the customer gets a beautifully fresh-hued plate of acidic vegetables.

The difference between a good restaurant and a great one often comes down to how well it pleases its customers; there's a subtle but definite difference between a chef who cooks for his own pleasure and one that does so for the satisfaction of others. Part of what attracted Tolosa to this part of the world was, in fact, the customer, and the Asian

culture of sharing – "[Asia] was perfect for our concept because Asians and Spanish, they all love to share," he observes.

The use of yuzu in the vegetables, a distinctly Asian essence, is first evidence that Tolosa is listening to the buzz at the tables; further verification comes from the menu I'm handed to order, a pre-opening mini-booklet of favourites culled from the menu of the Singapore arm. It's not, I'm told, complete in the least, because Catalunya Hong Kong is still in its testing phase.

With seven days to go till the soft opening,

that news may come across as scary, but the dishes I am allowed to inspect leave me unworried. The point, Tolosa says, is to create a menu almost in tandem with the consumer feedback. "For the next three, four, five months, we will be defining more what Catalunya Hong Kong will be. We expect to have some differences between the Singapore and Hong Kong clients."

A few dishes will demand to stay on the menu. The Catalunya Tartare is a purposefully ambiguous take on raw mince – is it beef? Is it tuna? Whatever it is, it's

The brittle-skinned animal is sliced with nothing more than the side of a plate, to show how tender the meat is inside it



SUCKLING PIG "SEGOVIAN STYLE"

bloody good, although the term "bloody" is hardly literal, because what we're eating is tomatoes, marinated and treated in a long process that gives it a more supple texture.

This trompe l'oeil tartare is finding favour in modern menus – in the last month, I've had versions that utilise beets (at the always-pleasing The Principal) and carrot (at the New York critics' darling Eleven Madison Park) – but none fool the palate so completely as this version, which is served with a mound of never-deflating tomato air, which hints at the key ingredient's presence without ever giving away the game. It's just one of the inventions borrowed from the menu at elBulli, a variation on the dish that Anthony Bourdain eloquently described as "fucking awesome" in a visit for his show *No Reservations*.

Another appropriated dish is the Spanish tortilla, which takes a deconstructed approach to the classic potato omelette. Like many of the dishes at Catalunya, there's a tableside performance element to the service, which starts with a martini glass lightly packed with a caramelised onion confit. Egg sabayon is drizzled over the top and then the rest of the void is filled with potato foam. It's epic, a mélange of all that's good and holy and tasty in the world, and a perfect homage to the past.

Tolosa is quick, however, to emphasise that Catalunya is not elBulli. "ElBulli is elBulli and it doesn't exist anymore. We have a background from elBulli, but we are not elBulli at all. We understand that there's going to be people who have that expectation, but our job is knowing how to explain that and attract them," he says.

Rustic comfort food like the traditional suckling pig "Segovian style", the *croquetas de jamon* or the *bombas de la Barceloneta* will accomplish that task easily. The suckling pig, roasted for half a day or longer, is a brittle-skinned animal that's sliced at the table on a wooden slab with nothing more than the side of a plate, to show how tender the meat is inside it. And tender it certainly is, with a fall-off-the-bone succulence that's a perfect counterpoint to the thin, crackling exterior. The plate is smashed in accordance with tradition after this mini ceremony, though

CATALUNYA FRUIT SALAD

for what reason I'm not entirely sure.

As for the *croquetas* and the *bombas*, they do a fine job of showing that deep-fried fun can be so much more than just that. The *croquetas*, in particular, feature oozing centres that seem like the stuff heart attacks are made of, but are actually a simple mixture of flour and velouté with sprinklings of hand-cut Iberico ham, slow-cooked until the desired viscosity is reached.

It's with great relief that I examine two desserts, a cheese flan with berries and crumble, and a pretty but simple fruit salad given drama with a pouring of dried ice. Frankly speaking, I'm sick of sweets that look more like Kandinskys than food, and I verge on angry at dots of sauces that hint at flavours without giving you anything to chew on. But there's no culinary blue-balling here – the cheese flan (really, a glorified deconstructed cheesecake) offers plenty of substance and a classic fluff-and-crunch harmony.

And while the Catalunya fruit salad won't be winning any awards – a fruit salad by any other preparation is still a fruit salad, after all – it acts as the perfect denouement to this meal. Crisp-edged cubes of fruit that almost don't look like fruit at all, but some factory-made facsimile, are artfully jumbled in a bowl. Not only are they refreshing and ripe, they've been subtly infused with herb flavouring – a dash of basil here, the scent of cloves there, a hint of mint that gently tickles the tongue.

It's these unseen touches, that sense of gastronomic modesty, that make Tolosa a chef above the countless others that trill the *elBulli* name wherever they wander. Tolosa is indeed a protégé of that same school, but what he took from the experience isn't a just a name and a roster of signature dishes. The underlying sophistication in his cuisine is not always evident, and therein lies its magic. Says the chef: "If you want to know if anyone's food is good, the best way is to go and taste it. Somebody might have a résumé that says they have worked everywhere, but the food is tasteless. And somebody else who just has the passion could make the best food." At Catalunya, both résumé and passion are married happily. ■

