

The Hungry Traveler: Sergi Arola, La Broche

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The hottest table in Madrid is rough knotty pine, as thick as a barn door, tucked in a corner next to the kitchen entrance. On any given night, the restaurant's popularity makes snaring any one of La Broche's 15 ivory-covered tables quite a coup, but this rustic board is the Holy of Holies of the Spanish capital's gastronomic scene. It is the chef's table, where the chef, a flamboyant young Catalan named Sergi Arola, plays host to a few favored guests right in the kitchen itself.

"The problem with getting this table," laughs Arola as we sit down, "Is the lousy service. I'm your waiter for the evening."

He walks back to his podium at the end of the long, beautifully polished wood counter running the length of the kitchen at center stage. Behind him, there is a large dry-erase board on the wall, covered with diagrams for dishes as detailed as architectural drafts. Among the charts he has scribbled phone numbers, grocery lists, and cryptic notations like "equilibrium of quality/price" and "In the service of creativity and business: the complicity of your client."

The line cooks are taking their stations, pulling out equipment, organizing ingredients, looking for all the world like an orchestra tuning up. It is just after eight, and we are the first diners in the restaurant; most Madrileños won't begin showing up for dinner until at least nine or ten. The chef brings over little dishes of olives, candied green pine nuts, and fried pistachios, commenting that he hates seeing nothing on the table but oil and vinegar when he sits down. Despite the palpable tension in the room as the staff gears up for the evening's exertions, he manages to maintain an atmosphere of casual hospitality around our table with his friendly chitchat.

From the moment he opened the restaurant on Valentine's Day 1999, Sergi Arola rocketed to stardom with his imaginative New Catalan cuisine. He earned his first Michelin star in record time during La Broche's inaugural year, and a second star came the following year. Of all the fine eateries in Spain, there are only eight with two stars, and with Martin Berasategui's recent anointment in the Basque country, four at the elite three-star designation. Now La Broche is, according to the Michelin inspectors at least, the top-ranked restaurant in Madrid. Stargazers vie for the chef's table like rock groupies sneaking backstage, hoping to watch Arola go for gold, hoping to get a taste of the future of Spanish cuisine.

Now 33 years old, Arola looks tanned, relaxed, and fit after a month's vacation at his home in Roses on the idyllic Costa Brava. At heart, he says, he is a surfer bum and a Grateful Dead fan. His eyes gleam but he quickly shrugs at the prospect of earning his third star. That quest has cost many a chef millions of dollars and years of agony. He points to a photo of his two-year-old daughter Carla stuck to the bulletin board next to the phone. He believes in hard work and often puts in 16 hours a day with Sara, his tall and stylish wife, running the front of the house. He would love to get that third star, he says

with a boyish laugh, but he is not willing to sacrifice his whole life for it. I almost believe him.

Arola is bending intently over two glasses, arranging finely chopped chicken breast as garnish for his seductive play on *pollo con mole*: a silky, chilled chicken mousse custard filmed with a gel dark with chili and chocolate. There are traditional Catalan meat dishes with chocolate sauces, but he has chosen to reference Mexican cuisine and uses spicy Galician *pimientos de padron*. Arola stands by and watches with obvious satisfaction as we make short work of the delicate concoction. Our role in tonight's drama is clear. We are spectators with forks. A meal is interactive theater, and the chef needs to know that we understand what he is trying to communicate. By bringing a table into the kitchen, chefs around the world are literally eliminating the wall that separates cook and diner. Arola studies our faces for signs of pleasure, surprise, amusement.

He then brings over white beans with a froth of salt cod, a carpaccio of gelatinous cockscomb with mushrooms and little shrimp, a chilly cream of foie gras with almond ice cream. The play of the pale green cucumber and orange fish roe salsas against the foie gras cream makes me want to wrap myself up in a sweater of those colors. The opening salvo of meticulously composed, self-consciously postmodern dishes reveals the unmistakable imprint of his two years as a top disciple of fellow Catalan chef Ferran Adria of El Bulli, perhaps the most talked-about chef in Europe, best known for his futuristic, iconoclastic cuisine.

Ferran Adria is clearly his idol, and Arola also calls his mentor his best friend. Back on the Costa Brava, the two chefs are practically neighbors. But as he serves up his *suquet*, a boldly spiced seafood stew with balls of sweet white peaches and a swirl of broiled aioli, Arola won't allow himself to be put in Adria's category. "El Bulli is a scientific lab doing experimental research at the cutting edge of cuisine," he says. "It is food as pure intellect. We are more down-to-earth here." Rather than following Adria's lead into the uncharted outer universe of gastronomy, Arola finds ways to make clever twists on the familiar, the nostalgic, and the kitschy. Eating his dishes, I can almost taste how torn he is between the impulse to thrust himself on the international stage with trendy innovations and the romantic notion of making his way back home to a simpler way of life. Behind him, cooks are squirting bacon foam from the siphon bottles that are Adria's trademark tool. Perhaps at El Bulli, they would be squirting tarama.

By now, the dining room must be filling with the politicians, businessmen, and socialites that clamor for reservations. The pace in the kitchen has become frenzied, and Arola's wild mane of hair is looking decidedly Beethovenish as he urges his staff to work even faster. He himself is wielding a squeeze bottle in each hand, garnishing plates with painterly abandon. Even his wife is now pitching in, balancing trays with little fear for her elegant flax-colored suit. Tempers are tight, and terse orders fly through the air. It is like having dinner in an emergency room operating theater.

After unleashing a particularly vitriolic upbraiding on a young trainee, Arola suddenly remembers he has an audience. He flashes a smile and slaps the flustered youth encouraging on the shoulder. "I'm really very good-natured as far as chefs go," he assures us. He points out two senior cooks, both of them screaming orders, beet-faced. "Take Etienne and Diego. I expect them to be far bossier than I am when they open their own places."

The main course is conceptually still under development, and Arola mans the stove himself, searing filet of beef in herb butter and filling delicate potato crepes with young corn. I whisper to my husband that it could use a bit more work, and he nods. After nine courses of New Catalan cuisine, this dish tastes almost American, as familiar as hamburgers and hot dogs. At this comment, Arola's mental light bulb goes off, and "HOT DOG" gets scribbled up on the idea board.

By midnight, the pace has slowed, and a lone cook stands behind the stoves. A beefy Latin American man wearing an apron with PELUCHE ("TEDDY BEAR") emblazoned on it is scrubbing down the prep areas. The pastry chef, a hip young dude in cutoff chef's pants, bleached dreadlocks and a tattered headband, is busy putting the finishing touches on a tray of equally wild-looking desserts. A few guests start making their way from the dining room to pay their respects to the chef. As Arola holds court near his podium, we smile at the newcomers, trying not to look smug. The others arrive too late for the real action, but we have seen it all, up close. We feel now like part of the kitchen, witnesses to its secrets.

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