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CHEF OR VISIONARY?

Thinking up breath-taking and exciting food experiences is what *Albert Adrià* is all about. *Eva-Luise Schwarz* meets the Spanish chef in London, and discovers what this man at the forefront of creativity plans to offer the dining world next

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MOISÉS TORNE



ALBERT ADRIÀ

Imagine the elBulli kitchen as a hub of creative thinking—the centre of inventiveness, the innermost heartbeat of imagination, talent and vision that led to a revolution in gastronomy. And just imagine Albert Adrià joining the team at 15 years old, working his way through all positions and ending up as the head of creativity and development in 1997. Since then, his talent has gone from strength to strength, and what followed after elBulli closed is a success story like no other.

Today, at the age of 46, he is handling five restaurants in Barcelona and one in Ibiza, each of them as original and visionary as you would expect from such a vivid imagination—a mind that never wants to stand still, that wants to deal with challenges. One such challenge was 50 Days, a pop-up at London's Café Royal, where, between February and April 2016, Adrià created a whole new dining experience.

It's a couple of days after 50 Days finished, and the team are not quite ready to pack up yet: they are busy evaluating, as well as developing and adapting their concept. I meet Albert upstairs at the renowned Café Royal, located on Regent Street in the heart of the city's West End. As he walks in, he gives me not his hand, but his pinkie: "My hands are dirty. We are making ducks," he says excitedly.

With an image of a yellow rubber duck in my head, I make a mental note to come back to this later on. But first I want to hear all about his time in London. "From the very beginning we knew that it was going to be a challenge

BELOW Tickets is one of five restaurant concepts that Albert manages in Barcelona

because opening a restaurant for 50 days means that you really have to have a concept that needs to be completely perfect. Usually when you open a restaurant you need between two or three months to develop a direction, but with us it was not possible because from the moment we opened, we knew that we were going to close. That was the main challenge that we had to overcome. That said, we are very happy because the response has been amazing. It was lots of fun."

While working in Ibiza last summer, where he and his brother Ferran have just opened Heart, a collaboration with Cirque du Soleil that only opens for six months in the summer, Albert was approached by the Café Royal and immediately liked the idea that was put forward. He found the hotel very easy-going, and developed a concept based on a culinary journey through two of the hotel's historic rooms. The 50-day residency sold out almost immediately, and now that he's had a chance to evaluate the experience, Albert and his team were surprised to find that people were travelling to London specifically to visit 50 Days. "We thought there was probably going to be an impact, because it's the first time that we opened abroad, but not that much. It has been very nice."

As the younger of the Adrià siblings, Albert has often been in the shadow of ex-elBulli head chef Ferran, but with his restaurant empire in Barcelona, Albert has been getting more attention of late—and rightly so. Being part of the creativity team at elBulli, Albert has invented cooking »



ALBERT ADRIÀ



« techniques now widely used throughout the world, most famously spherification: “Spherification is special to me because of the way that I came up with it, because it was a complete surprise. But I was lucky enough to discover many techniques along with my team. There is not a favourite one, but many of them.”

He continues: “The way I understand it now, the techniques are not good or bad, but are just serving the taste that I’m trying to create. So it can be a bad thing if it overpowers, or becomes more important than the food itself. Creating techniques was more about trial and error rather than gathering information and then using it. For us it was also very important to be effective, so rather than losing time we were able to use all the mistakes that we made in a good way for another reason. Because I was in charge of the creativity team, that’s very expensive as well, so you have to make sure that these people are taking advantage of the time they have because they are getting paid for that. It’s also about intuition. In the case of spherification, it started as a sauce. We had some spheres, and then I tried to push it and see what happens and how it happens and why.”

I ask him what takes up most of his time these days, whether it is cooking, developing or organising. He says he is trying to improve the system for his restaurants in Barcelona, a system in which everyone can be more effective. With his flagship Tickets (tapas), Pakta (Japanese-Peruvian), Bodega 1900 (tapas bar), joint-restaurants Hoja Santa & Nino Viejo

“The techniques are not good or bad, but are just serving the taste that I’m trying to create.”

ABOVE With a 55-strong staff, Tickets in Barcelona is Albert’s flagship restaurant

(Mexican street food) and the soon-to-open Enigma, Albert has to manage five different restaurants and work out how to direct five different head chefs. Albert explains: “I am doing that in order to be able to cook again, because here in London I am very happy, I am able to cook all day, because there are no distractions, no one who is having meetings with me. That’s what makes me happy.”

Heart in Ibiza successfully celebrated the opening of its second season at the end of May. An exploration of food, music and art, Albert has learned from the difficulties encountered during the first year and developed the concept further. For once, spaces each night are reduced and instead»

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«of two restaurants, there is just one, where guests will first go upstairs and then downstairs, similar to a concept that worked so well at 50 Days in London. Albert says: “[London] was a very good exercise for us to see the complications this could have and how to manage them and solve them. So when we open in Ibiza, we will have seen the big surprises already. The team from Ibiza are working here now, because we knew that for six months we had this team ready to work and it was good for them to train for the new concept.”

I ask Albert about one of his greatest talents—making food an experience. “It’s the difference between feeding oneself, and the experience of someone going out, who doesn’t just want to eat but try different things that they cannot have at home. The key is making the guest happy. It’s not about us, but about them. That’s the most important thing to have in mind. And then depending on the concept that you have, you are looking to trigger different emotions of the guests. For example, at Tickets you want them to have fun, at Bodega you want them to recall when they were little. You play with the memory of the customers at Bodega because it’s traditional. It is difficult to play with the memory of the people. Pakta and Hoja Santa are about discovering new cultures through food, and then with Enigma we hope to be able to really tickle the feelings of people emotionally. The only thing about creating emotions in people is it’s very expensive—for me and for the guests. The more emotion, the more people are working on it.”

BELOW A ceiling made to look like strawberries and cherries in one of the dessert rooms at Tickets

With Enigma’s imminent opening, Albert can’t really imagine working on yet another project. “When we do something, we really mean to do it,” he says. No half-hearted concept just for the sake of them, then. But I ask him whether there’s a project that he’d like to realise one day. He says: “We have a project delayed by seven years in the Dominican Republic, on the beach. It’s a project that has been in the drawer for many, many years now. It would be easier for my wife and son to visit the beach in the Dominican Republic than to visit London. It’s a beach club, so it would be unlike anything that we have done so far. We would have to imagine a guy on a beach in a swimsuit—that’s who we have to think about: arriving in his boat in a swimsuit. Creating a concept like that, you have to make them have fun, and that’s something that I’d like to do. In this place I’d like to make ceviche, open oysters, rice in a charcoal oven—very simple dishes. For me, the only problem is the mosquitos,” he laughs.

Finally, I ask Albert about the mysterious ducks he mentioned earlier, and he laughs: “Not ducks—we are making dough for Chinese dumplings, a big basket of dim sum for Ibiza. In London, I have been inspired by Chinese cuisine because every night I go to have dinner in Chinatown. The Ibiza mentality is not to have food that is too complicated, and dumplings are something very easy to eat. I would like to make the best dumplings, but then when I think of the Chinese making paella, I’m not so sure. OK, back to the kitchen!” ■





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