



The Mystery of Albert and Ferran Adrià's Enigma Concept in Barcelona

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The brothers behind the renowned elBulli introduce their latest concept: dinner as theater

The Enigma concept has been one of the most talked about restaurant offerings from Ferran and Albert Adrià's elBarri group since it was announced two years ago. After closing the world's most famous restaurant, elBulli, in 2011, the Adrià brothers have opened a series of super successful concept restaurants including Tickets Bar; a Peruvian-Japanese restaurant, Pakta; Bodega 1900, across the street from Tickets; and two Mexican restaurants, the gastronomic Hoja Santa and the casual Nino Viejo. Their 41 Degrees experience opened adjacent to Tickets Bar in 2011, first as a cocktail bar with just 16 seats, and blossomed into a dining space with a 50-course tasting menu paired with more than a dozen cocktails. The unique dining experience was accompanied by an audio-visual component and very quickly became one of the hottest dining destinations; gourmards from all over the globe vied for the elusive reservations. It closed in 2014 to make way for yet another revolutionary concept from the Adriàs: the performative Enigma restaurant, one unlike anything anywhere else in the world.

The 41 Degrees spot has been transformed into a dessert bar in an *Alice in Wonderland*-like space, its ceiling festooned with giant strawberries. The desserts, since it *is* an Albert Adrià venture (world's best pastry chef), are unlike any served elsewhere in taste or wow factor.

Albert, chef turned restaurateur, has been holding onto to the name Enigma since he was in the elBulli kitchen with his brother, Ferran. After closing elBulli, Albert took over the active management of their six-and-counting projects (luckily, all are within sprinting distance of each

other). It's now possible to tour all of elBarri's destinations with a specially designed map that will lead you to these modern icons of Barcelona. Move over, Gaudi – elBarri is on the tourist (gastro) route now.

During Enigma's two years of development, the project was kept under lock and key to preserve its 'enigma' prior to January's unveiling. In the interim, the Adrià brothers collaborated with Cirque du Soleil to produce "Heart," a mixed-media experience on the jet-setting island of Ibiza. When asked what was taking so long with the construction of the restaurant, Albert said the project had morphed into a bigger venture with money and time-consuming details.

With costs running more than €3 million and given Albert's perfectionism, his maverick vision has resulted in a spectacular space. Weeks before the opening, electrical engineers were still working on the controls to operate the 2,500 LED lights embedded in the cloud-like ceiling. Guests enter the 700-square-meter Enigma through a winding hallway into a series of spaces. Albert wanted the effect to be similar to entering a cathedral — a cathedral of food with high-tech mesh clouds and blue-gray resin walls.

During December's soft opening, there were 2,500 names on the wait list for this month's opening. The structural challenges of building this modern cathedral have been immense for the engineers and architects. Albert said he didn't want the culinary aspect to be overwhelmed by theatrics or proportions, and it has been a balancing act.

A test kitchen behind a hidden doorway is accessed through a private bar area, which was finished and stocked two months before the opening. This test kitchen is the core of the elBarri projects and where Albert tests out his ideas and tweaks the work of his elBarri kitchen team before it is presented to the diners in the six projects.

There are seven defined areas for the tasting journey for 24 guests at each seating. I asked why, off the Japanese-style reception area, there are seven different themed dining areas, including a Spanish bodega, a teppanyaki grilling station, a dining room, a cocktail bar, and a kitchen counter. Albert explained that for returning guests, it would still be an unpredictable and unique experience. The menu is tweaked each service (as is the prerogative of any culinary genius), making the experience unique to each diner. The 24 guests, in small groups, journey from one section to another, dining either seated or standing for each magical experience, none of them quite predictable. Guests better be ready to mingle at some stations; the groups of eight might be seated with other diners. Albert hopes it will inspire new friendships amid the new experience.

Entry to Enigma does not come cheap with an initial €100 (\$107) charge to reserve in addition to the €230 (\$246) tasting menu excluding libations. As with any opening, it will take time for the team to find its groove and so the project is still under wraps with limited social media coverage. Albert has often spoken of overcoming his fears every time he unveils another revolutionary concept. However, it does not stop him from introducing new ideas like dessert before savory courses or playing with unexpected flavors and ingredients. Forty dishes had been worked and painstakingly reworked over months, but not all made the final cut. Everything is in flux and what is at one service is probably not going to appear at the next — or it just might.

The Daily Meal: What should diners expect at Enigma?

Albert Adrià: The name says it all; it's an enigma for all! I have done a disservice by professing in earlier interviews that it would be the new elBulli and because of that there are a lot of expectations, and people will come with preconceived notions. However, for me, it is going to be a new elBulli in some ways.

Are you excited that Enigma is finally open?

Yes, very happy, though the whole process was very stressful, as you have seen during construction. We have used stone that needed to be cut to fit the surfaces and stations, a very tedious and expensive process. Getting the effect I wanted was not easy for the design team and engineers.

What do you want your guests at Enigma to experience?

I want them to have fun, be surprised, to tickle their imaginations. I create not food but an experience. Subsequently, when the guests have a positive experience, it transforms into a living art experience. I think it will surprise a lot of people that in the same restaurant we can deliver so many concepts. At the bodega station, we will serve a classic Spanish cuisine, in the teppanyaki it will be more product-oriented, and the space in the middle is a fine-dining experience.

At Pakta and Tickets, they're not white tablecloth fine-dining concepts, so is this central space more formal?

Yes, it is more formal service because in our business now I am not only thinking about the concepts but also the revenue. All our present concepts bring in revenue though some more than others; Enigma does need to do that to justify the operation.

Have the time and the cost overruns been a factor in this decision?

I have had the space for three years and for one year I was undecided especially since the Heart project in Ibiza materialized. Then it was difficult to handle two big projects simultaneously. So, we put Enigma on hold for a while, and it has been challenging.

Has it become easier over the years with so many successful projects under your belt to create new experiences for diners?

It has become easier only because my ideas have become more clear. For example, at Tickets even now the ideas in my mind for my guests are being expressed in new dishes all the time. This is actually true for all my restaurants but my team has become stronger. My former chef and sommelier from 41 Degrees and staff from Tickets are on the Enigma team. I am now working just like at elBulli in my test kitchen or Taller [the Barcelona workshop], which is within the Enigma project.

How many seatings are there every night that Enigma is open?

I would like to be able to accommodate more but the logistics limit the number of guests each evening to 24. Eventually, at every service, groups of eight will move two or three times to different parts of the space. There is a teppanyaki or Spanish plancha station, for example, which could be a stop on one evening and not on another. I must point out that it's not a thematical restaurant where you move continually.

Is there a set seating time and do people arrive together?

Every 45 minutes, eight people arrive and are received in the Japanese-inspired ryokan reception area with a welcome drink and are then directed to the chosen station.

What kind of fine-dining service can diners expect at Enigma: assigned servers or chefs bringing dishes to the table?

More classic service, and more serious and fine. We are planning for Enigma to be unconditionally one of the best restaurants in the world, so no compromises. The expectations are high, and I know it will take time to get there since it takes five to eight years to create something spectacular. Enigma will fulfill the job that Tickets is doing right now and it will be the top tier of all our restaurants. Do you remember Inopia, which you visited before Tickets? It was smaller and unlike

Tickets, not serving 300 people every day. For me, the six restaurants and other projects within elBarri are equally important.

What products will appear on the Enigma menu this season?

We are working with jellyfish, with rabbit brain, which is a take on a traditional stew which we will serve in a walnut shell since a walnut looks like a brain. The tableware we are using is very simple, and the food will be the star. The light is perfect to show off the food, and my cooks will be alert and making sure it's a great experience. I don't want it to be boring or too long but definitely full of surprises.

One of the plates I made recently with a modern aesthetic but a classical base for example is a torchon of foie gras with smoked eel and nori, and it's delicious. The eel is inside the foie and there's charcoal outside. It will be a similar style of cuisine at Enigma that people don't expect but I promise that my customers will have taste and flavor in every dish.

What's next after Enigma, or are you going to take a break?

I have the idea to open a tea salon, which we are exploring right now. I have been a pastry chef for so long, and the dessert bar in the 41 Degrees space has fulfilled one of my biggest dreams. I have been very lucky because I have had the opportunity to see the world of gastronomy through the eyes of a pastry chef and now through the business and service vision.

You are super creative and a quick thinker, so are you able to keep up with these constantly evolving ideas?

I have learned to live with this and realized that with time and patience things evolve on their own. I think every night that we are open we are learning and getting better. In 2017, all the restaurants will have progressed. I believe if you have confidence and passion then that is your strength.

Have you and your work evolved with time and maturity?

I have changed so much even in the last five years and am constantly evolving. Now, I have a big team that I trust; I delegate more and they have trust in me, so it has made us stronger. Five years ago, we were all young and finding the way. I practically grew up in elBulli, and it was the high point and central to all gastronomy. It was a dream though not the reality, but a wild ride for sure.

I cannot say exactly how I have changed from the young chef who started in this business three decades ago as the man who had dreams of opening his own restaurant, which took 26 years to materialize first as Inopia. Now I have years of experience, though I wouldn't say I know everything, but I have learned a lot.

There are some elements like fear and respect for the new that are still there. We are working and learning constantly but I have learned to take a break, go on vacation and recharge. Self-neglect is not beneficial, and it is important to take care of yourself. No more 14-hour days all year round. It's all about the intensity then you can work 10 hours with focus and good energy and get good results.

What is coming next in Spanish gastronomy?

It's impossible to answer it concisely, but it's going to be healthy and product-centric. The more that we learn, the more wisely we will use our products and resources. Instead of consuming more chicken, pork, or beef — depending on the culture — there will be more consumption of vegetable products while avoiding waste.