

STORIES

Chef Oliver Peña Dishes on elBulli's Mysterious Successor, Enigma

By [David Jenison](#) on May 8, 2017



"This is not the elBulli of 2011," Albert Adrià told the *New York Times* earlier this year. "Enigma is what elBulli would be in 2017." Before [closing shop](#) in 2011, elBulli was the gourmand idea of Shangri-La, a mythic culinary wonderland in northeast Spain that received millions of reservation requests for the 8,000 openings it had each six-month season (with the other six months spent working on the next menu). Ferran Adrià led elBulli with Albert at his side for 23 years, and after elBulli went out on top, the two brothers looked to create a new concept in Barcelona that Albert would lead. Always looking to innovate, the Adriàs created [elBarri](#), a collection of progressive restaurants clustered together in Barcelona's Poble Sec neighborhood, and half the restaurants have already collected Michelin stars.

Enigma, which opened in January 2017, is the latest and most ambitious elBarri restaurant, and it's the best bet for food enthusiasts wanting a taste of the elBulli magic reimaged for modern times. Adding to the intrigue, the name Enigma references the mysterious nature of the restaurant's maze-like design and space-aged dishes that are not explained until after the guests enjoy them. In fact, the restaurant asks guests not to post images or information about the food or experience to maintain the mystery. Albert, whose new R&D research kitchen is on the premises, works with his team on the 40+ courses served in each Enigma experience, which elBarri vet Oliver Peña oversees as head chef. PRØHBTD spoke with Chef Peña to learn more.



I love the idea of the dining experience being a secret. What can you tell me about Enigma without giving away too much information?

It's like several different restaurants in one space. We call [the dishes] "enigmas." Even if you are in the same spaces [within the restaurant], you can feel the first part with the cocktails and snacks is different than the second part and then the third one. Enigma is the same philosophy in the same building, but it's different styles and different ways to eat.

Is the enigma the food, or is the whole experience considered one big enigma?

It's a whole project, not just the food, because it's not a traditional restaurant where you go in, sit down and eat the different courses. People don't know when it starts and when it ends. You need to go in with the attitude that says, "Have no fear."

Unless this ruins the surprise, what are some of the more unique ingredients you use?

We are working right now with the abalone. You know it?

Albacore?

No. It's a "sea ear" as we call it in Spanish. The Japanese one has holes, and it comes from the family of mussels, like the conch shell that sticks to the rocks. It's typical from Asia, China, and they used to buy it when it's dry. We are buying from a new company that put a lot of investment into it here in the northwest of Spain, in Galicia. We started 15 days ago [preparing] the abalone that we will serve tonight, and for 95 percent of the people, it's probably their first time trying abalone. It's nice to show something that you cannot find next door in the other restaurants. It's difficult now to find some ingredients that people don't know or eat because planes can get whatever [ingredient] from the other part of the world in one or two days. It's difficult to get something special, but we try to always.

Chef Adrià closed the 41 Degrees Experience to open Enigma. What motivated the change?

We were limited in the space, and we could not go further. The space was so special, but we were cooking in the bar. I mean, my production kitchen here is as big as the whole kitchen at 41. There we had many excuses, but now we have none. I mean, Enigma is the natural evolution of the theme and the whole project, and people can feel that in the atmosphere, the food, everything.

Didn't 41 Degrees feature a lot of the most popular dishes from elBulli?

No, 41 Degrees started as a cocktail bar where you can share some snacks. It was not fine dining—just a cocktail bar with some snacks from elBulli. It moved away from elBulli later to create its own personality as a cocktail bar. Then, in November 2012, it changed to the 41 Degrees Experience with a menu that included 41 courses with the snacks and cocktails, and there was some reminder of elBulli. We closed it in August 2014 and started working on Enigma.

How would you define a successful dining experience at Enigma?

For me it's just to give an experience with the whole meaning—not just to come see it and eat. It's a triangle between the cocktails, the drinks from [sommelier] Cristina [Losada] and the food. It's also the [commitment to drinks like] from 41, you know? We changed the menu, so we have to talk with Christina and [co-sommelier] Marc [Álvarez] to make everything fit in its place, including the wine and drinks. I want people to be happy. It's the most important goal for us, for me. I tell people they don't need to understand a dish. What matters is, "You like it or you don't like it?" That's about the taste. Then you can add flowers and a lot of things around it, but we are just focused on the taste.

You originally started off as a pastry chef.

Yes, I started with Albert in 2004 as a pastry chef at the elBulli Hotel in the south of Spain.

What did you learn as a pastry chef that makes you better as an all-around chef?

I think you must know everything to control everything. If you don't know how to make a creme brulee—I don't know, any preparation from the pastry section—you cannot see if it's okay or not. It is important to be better, always. It's the same for the wines. I mean, a chef doesn't have to be a professional, but he needs to try wines and have some idea. It helps you to understand other aspects from the food. [To create a complete experience,] it's never just food. It's never just one thing.

Many years ago, you held the title Creative Chef at Comerç 24. What did that role entail?

I was in a small workshop just testing new dishes. I'm more creative here with Albert, making service every day, than at Comerç 24 in a small room. With Albert, it's really different. Here, you come, and you know that you are alive, always. It's a different realm of creation.

When you go out to dinner for fun, where do you go? What kind of food?

It depends on the day, but I usually don't go for a complicated operation, you know? If I go for Japanese, I just want the tuna or squid clean without sauce or anything. I like to enjoy the product. I like ceviche. We have a really good [ceviche] restaurant here in Barcelona, and I go there every Monday.

Have you done food-based travel?

Sure. I always travel for food.

What was your favorite place you visited for food?

Japan and Korea.

What was special about Korea?

The respect they have for food. It's the same in Japan. They cook one ingredient, like crab or pork, and they are really methodical about how they cook and how they serve it. The same with the vegetables. I never tried to enjoy temple cuisine—the vegan cuisine—as an experience before, but it was a real experience with a lot of roots and they know how to work them. In a traditional market, you have the small farmers' part where you can buy some special food that is not typical from a market.

I read that you are a big music fan.

I like music, sure.

Do you play?

No, I don't play music. I love hip-hop. All of my friends—I don't see them much because I'm here all day—but they all have music groups and bands. I like to play music in the kitchen on Saturdays. We make two services on Saturday for lunch and dinner, and it's a special day for the staff as well.

Which are your favorite music artists?

I have many, but I love the Wu-Tang Clan, and from Spain, I really like a rapper named [Kase.O](#).

Would you ever take a temporary job as the tour chef for Wu-Tang Clan?

If they called me, for sure. That's a really, really, really nice job. I have friends that are chefs for some DJs or whatever. It's a nice life, but it's different. Normally I wouldn't, but for Wu-Tang or Kase.O, yeah.



Could you handle all the smoke?

Yeah, no problem. I have patience for that, or I'll just wear a mask.

What would you recommend for a young chef that would love to come be a *stage (i.e., culinary intern) at Enigma?*

They have to be good people. That's the only thing that I ask, and that's the only thing that I try to see. I need good people here. I've been a chef for 18 years. When I was 17, I started as a waiter, and then I started to peel potatoes. I meet a lot of really nice people, but I also meet a lot of... if you are good, you don't need to look to your sides. If you are good, you are sure you are good, and you shine because of yourself. You don't need to make the rest [of the cooks] feel less than you. That's important for me. We have only been open for three months, but I have repeated many times that it's really important that the whole team is [made up of] good and nice people. The guests can feel it, and it's important.

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