



Chef Fidel Puig Durall finishes a plate at Restaurante Embat, and at Gresca, partners Mireia Navarro and Rafael Peña, the chef who created the carpaccio (below) of octopus with blood sausage.

No skimping on ambition, creativity, affordability

► BARCELONA

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I see this with my main course: two filets of John Dory, stacked atop cockscombs, asparagus tips, and walnuts. It's just as Coma explained: top-quality fish, cooked so that the skin is crispy, the flesh flaky on the edges and agreeably firm on the inside. The cockscomb adds fantastic texture, playing off the good, gelatinous qualities of the fish, while the nuts and greens give crunch and texture.

It's also the kind of dish that if the chef botches it (Fish and fowl? Cockscomb?), he goes down in flames.

Achieving this level of quality day in and day out while staying within budget is no small feat.

"We follow the market and change our prix-fixe lunch menu every two days," says Peña, who runs Gresca with his partner, Mireia Navarro. "Today we had John Dory, but we'll do something else if it's too expensive tomorrow."

"When I do the ordering for the wine list, I have eight wine shops I work with," says Navarro, who runs the front of the house. "I go with the seller with the best price for each wine."

This mix of economy, variety, and seasonality is key to bistro-nomic's survival and a gift for a motivated chef who wants to do his own thing. Before opening Gresca, Peña paid his dues, going from a job as a pizzeria cook to gigs that included El Bulli and Lasarte, chef Martín Berasategui's Barcelona restaurant.

"After working in kitchens for years and years, you get tired of having a boss. The only way you can get out from under that is to do a small place," says Peña.

Nearby at Restaurante Embat, run by chefs Fidel Puig Durall and Santiago Rebés Weindl, there is more clever play with combinations of classic local ingredients.

Lunch appetizers include a chickpea, sausage, bacalao, artichoke, and mushroom dish that's a hearty play on textures. Another plate features chorizo, potatoes, and green beans with a poached egg perched on top. Tuck in and the yolk becomes a simple, luscious sauce.

Economy? The meal-on-their-own appetizers top out at about \$9 to \$13. Mains, except for a \$16 entrecote, stop at \$12. An artisan yogurt for dessert is about \$3.

"These chefs are hugely ambitious and spend a lot of time thinking about the dishes they create," says Arenos, the food writer. "They work with products that they [and in turn their clients] can afford, creating high cuisine at reasonable prices."

And this trend is happening all across Spain?

"Nope," he replies. "Only in Barcelona."

Arenos pauses to recount recent Catalan food history: Michelin-starred restaurants grew in number, Spain got its first female three-star chef in the person of Catalonia's Carme Ruscalleda, and Barcelona now has a bumper crop of young chefs with one or two stars in the Michelin Red Guide.

Worthy movements with names like prêt à manger ("ready to eat") and neopopular grew,



Chef Roger Martínez in his restaurant, La Mifanera.

and high-quality tapas and ethnic restaurants sprang up and flourished.

Yet with all of this happening, it's clear that Arenos loves bistro-nomic food and its chefs, the stars of Barcelona's bright future.

"It's a rough life," says Arenos. "They don't have a lot of money

and their restaurants are their lives."

"Our little guy, Nil, used to sleep over there when we first opened," says chef Roger Martínez, pointing at what looks like a closet shelf behind a curtain.

Martínez cooks while his wife, Marta Floria, runs the floor and

If you go . . .



Where to eat

La Mifanera
C/Sagués, 16
011-34-93-240-59-12
www.lamifanera.com
Lunch or dinner about \$40.

Gresca
Provença 230
011-34-93-451-61-93
www.gresca.net
Tasting menu, lunch \$24, dinner \$60.

Restaurante Embat
Mallorca 304
011-34-93-458-08-55
www.restaurantembat.es
Even a la carte, it's hard to spend more than \$27 at lunch. Dinners and Saturday lunch a la carte, about \$53.

Where to stay
Hotel Condes Barcelona
Passeig de Gràcia, 73-75
011-34-93-445-00-00
www.condesdebarcelona.com
Central and beautiful; rooms from \$200.

does the accounting at their restaurant, La Mifanera, in the Sarrià-Sant Gervasi district.

"It's hard work. Sometimes the bank calls and it gets a little tense," says Martínez. "When you work for someone else, that sort of thing is their problem, but this is our place and we want people

to eat well."

Martínez concentrates on creative tapas and rice dishes, a pair of favorites for the local audience. "You don't come here for fish or meat," says Martínez, "unless it's in the rice."

One of his current favorite dishes is an artichoke risotto with local anise liquor, Parmesan, and a dash of espresso grounds. It sounds gimmicky, but it's well thought out.

"There's sweetness from the anise, bitter from the coffee, salt from the Parmesan, and acidity from the artichokes," he says.

"After months and months,

you're changing dishes and trying to keep up — it can get tiring. If you're not motivated," says Gresca chef Peña with a grin, "it's impossible."

It's not impossible. It's fantastic.

Joe Ray can be reached at www.joe-ray.com.

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