

Lunch with Lydia: Ferran Adrià, Spanish chef/gastronomic scientist

By Lydia Martin Special to the Miami Herald

Spain's Ferran Adrià, mad scientist of foams, airs and deconstructions, the man who has been called the most famous chef in the world — also the Picasso, the Dalí, the Beethoven of avant-garde cuisine — is asking trick questions today.

“Is this a liquid? Something one could drink?” He holds up a bottle of beer at Tuyo, the downtown Miami restaurant blessed with stunning skyline views and operated by the Miami Culinary Institute, part of Miami Dade College.

Um. Yes?

“Only in its current state can you drink it,” he says in his hurried, Catalan-flavored Spanish. “But if I turn it into an ice cream, it's not something to drink anymore. It's something to eat, no? What about the tomato? Is the tomato something that occurs naturally?”

Isn't it?

“The tomato originated in the Andes, in what is now Peru. For a long time it was considered inedible. The tomato we know today didn't exist in nature — it was man who bred the tomato to be what it is. When it comes to the culinary, think about how much more there is to discover, to invent, at least to rethink.”

These days, Adrià, credited with the concept of molecular gastronomy, which revolutionized modern Spanish cuisine and picked up disciples around the world, thinks about food much more than he gets his hands dirty making it. When he closed his famed El Bulli restaurant in 2011, he traded his starched whites for the black-on-black of the artist, which is what he's sporting today. Fitting for a man whose culinary creations have been as much about the conceptual as they have been about actual taste, texture and temperature — something he likes to mess with anyway.

On a cliff above a beach in Spain's Costa Brava, El Bulli was hardly easy to reach. But more than 500,000 people requested reservations annually, most of them striking out. A total of 8,000 got in during each six-month season. The rest of the year, Adrià and his team of cooks and scientists huddled at his Barcelona laboratory, working to come up the next edible invention and documenting every last detail.

El Bulli boasted a maximum three Michelin stars and was ranked No. 1 in the world a record five times by The World's 50 Best Restaurants. But it never made a great deal of money, which made sense when you accounted for how labor-intensive every dish was, and how long it took to get through a 35-40 course meal. No such thing as turning over tables there.

“What I have always been interested in is finding the true vanguard,” says Adrià, 53, in Miami recently to headline the Estrella Damm Gastronomy Congress at the Miami Culinary Institute. “Over the years we served 1,846 very different dishes at El Bulli. But I felt that we needed an even freer arena. To really break through culinary barriers, to go beyond where we have already been, what we need to do is focus on the investigative part of the work, not the practical part of serving diners each night. It's very difficult to keep up the work of a restaurant, to worry about the stars that can be given or taken away, when you're trying to see the bigger picture.”

El Bulli, in the town of Rosas, north of Barcelona, will reopen within the next year as El Bulli 1846, a privately funded

culinary museum and research center offering the occasional something to eat — but more as food-related performance art than anything a mere restaurant could cook up. A staff of scientists, culinary experts, historians and anthropologists is currently plugging away on research for a separate project called Bullipedia, a sort of Wikipedia that will track history's great culinary developments.

“Context is everything,” says Adrià, who has long explained his quest for the next true revolution in food by using the fried egg as an example. “One day, someone figured out that if you took an egg and broke it over hot oil, you would change it from a liquid to something else entirely. How much more is there to discover? We think we know it all when it comes to food, but we know very little.”

Years back, Adrià figured out how to use calcium chloride and sodium alginate to make edible little pearls that pop in your mouth like caviar but can taste like whatever fresh ingredient he introduces to the science: perfectly ripe melon, or the juice of raw oysters, for example. He has played with liquid nitrogen, siphons, centrifuges, dehydrators. He and his crew have been doing investigative work for years already. They have even come up with a sort of periodic table of ingredients.

“What we're interested in now is making other people in the food world think,” Adrià says. “There have always been food historians and there have always been chefs. But they never truly worked side by side as they are doing now through the El Bulli Foundation. What was the most important development in the culinary world after the discovery of fire? It's pottery. Without a vessel to cook in, all food would have been some form of barbecue. Pottery allowed for other foods, other techniques to be developed. Surely there's more humanity can come up with as we move forward.”

But doesn't Adrià miss running his kitchen?

“In the last few years my brother Albert, who always worked with me, has started several of his own restaurant projects in Barcelona,” he says.

“Among them is Tickets, which is a more casual El Bulli, sort of the prêt-à-porter version of El Bulli. He has allowed me to help him develop some of the menus for the various restaurants, which has kept me connected to cooking.”

What about eating? Any place he's looking forward to visiting while in Miami?

“Do you know that I've been in Miami eight or nine times over the past five years? That's more than I've been in Rosas. And every year, Miami's culinary scene seems better and better. I was just at The Bazaar on South Beach. It's always incredible. Of course, José Andrés is a close friend who also happened to start at El Bulli. But there are so many other top-notch restaurants in Miami today. The Japanese restaurant Naoe is one of the very best in the world outside of Japan. Miami has a lot to brag about today.”