



Eating with the locals in Barcelona

By Lee Jackson

It all changed with the Olympics in 1992. Xavier explains, before this time the site of the Olympic village had been an area of disused industry and a dirty coastline with an equally dirty sea. Fast forward 22 years and the city is transformed, very much the view of Xavier, a proud Catalan business owner who has returned to the city after 7 years in New York. As he says “where else can you get the city and beach mix that Barcelona offers, a lovely beach area and promenade combined with a vibrant innovative city that has been shaped both by the creations of Gaudi, by its historic centre and through the contemporary designs of recent times such as the Iconic W hotel and the Agbar Tower”.

This view is matched through the visitor numbers. Pre the Olympic Games Barcelona

would not have been high on the agenda for foreign visitors. Xavier explains that before hosting the global sporting event the language on the streets was almost entirely Catalan whereas now in the popular sightseeing areas it is more likely that you will hear almost any other language! Says Xavier “it is hard to think of an Olympic host city that can point to such a transformation in its fortunes as that seen by Barcelona”.

As tourist interest has grown the city has responded with a glittering array of boutique and luxury hotels and fantastic dining options, and as always it helps to have the inside knowledge of a local to experience the best of the local cuisine.

On Xavier’s recommendation we

visit Martinez which offers stunning views of both the city and the harbour. The restaurant serves "Probably the best Paella in Barcelona" and Xavier explains that the city shares its fondness for the famous rice based dish with Valencia due to the shared Catalan heritage. The mixed seafood and chicken version is excellent but superseded by the Black Paella recommended by my host and coloured and flavoured by the squid's ink. The black version is aesthetically the most unappetising plate of food I have ever witnessed and resembles the burnt black residue of a kitchen disaster! The reality though is quite the opposite with a wonderful rich flavour that leaves me stealing more of my host's food than I consume of my own dish.

For lunch the following day we visit La Barraca on the beachfront. I have the Bollota to start (Iberian cured ham from acorn fed free range pigs) followed by oven baked fish and shrimps with tomato and potato, the flavours of the fish infuse with the tomato and potato and as the dish is served from the pan I am encouraged to mop up all of the juices with the freshly baked bread. Here I am also encouraged to suck the body of the shrimp to witness the real flavour of the food. My host is both pleased and amused with my enthusiasm to engage with this practice but I have to agree it does lead to the real flavour.

On my hosts recommendation that evening we dine at Els Pescadors a locals restaurant serving the best fish in the city. The restaurant terrace resides in the square of an old neighboured that preserves the flavour of the ancient city and the flavour of the location is surpassed by that delivered on the plate. After a sumptuous starter of clams in white wine sauce duly mopped up with Catalan tomato rubbed bread I have a main course of cod with garlic, piquillo peppers and smoked paprika, the final ingredient being a long-time favourite of the Iberian Peninsula. The food is

excellent but priced accordingly and if it were not for the generosity of my host I would certainly reserve a repeat visit for a special occasion.

Beyond these restaurants Xavier recommends also Arenal a good option for Paella and seafood on the beach front at Barceloneta, and also Barcanete for expensive but outstanding tapas close to Las Ramblas .

My choice for the stay is a good one. From a wide offering of boutique options I go for the 5 star Claris Hotel, well situated for La Sagrada, an easy stroll to the central shopping area and just two minutes from a direct rail link to the airport. Like many Barcelona hotels the Claris features an attractive rooftop bar for early evening drinks and a token pool to help you cool off if you don't make it to the beach.

Between our dining we take in the sightseeing options of the city, a stroll up La Rambla predicated with much caution given its well-earned reputation for street theft, a visit to Park Guell, to Gaudis unfinished Masterpiece La Sagrada Familia, and a visit to the Museum of Catalonia covering the history of the city and the region. We discuss the comparison of the drive for an independent Catalonia versus the recent referendum for self-government in Scotland and Xavier tells of a growing momentum for independence that that the Spanish government is fighting to ignore. It is clear to see the Catalan pride that exists in Barcelona and a confidence that the cities success of the past 20 years can be continued into the future, and possibly under an independent state.

Before I return to the UK Xavier explains to me his liking for the city. His day starts with a run on the beachfront, a cool down in the clear blue sea and a pleasant walk from his apartment in the converted Olympic village to

his office on the Avenida Diagonal. The city offers a truly amazing array of dining locations and though the tourist centre has a number of eateries that are best avoided the locals rightfully have a sense of pride of the quality of the Catalan menu that the visitor can explore.

The following day Xavier plans to entertain business guests at Vivanda where he recommends for excellent Mediterranean cuisine, and later in the day participate with his work team in a beach volleyball tournament. It is hard to imagine a better work life balance but if living there is not on your likely agenda then a few days in the Catalan capital is as good as it gets for city and beach break.