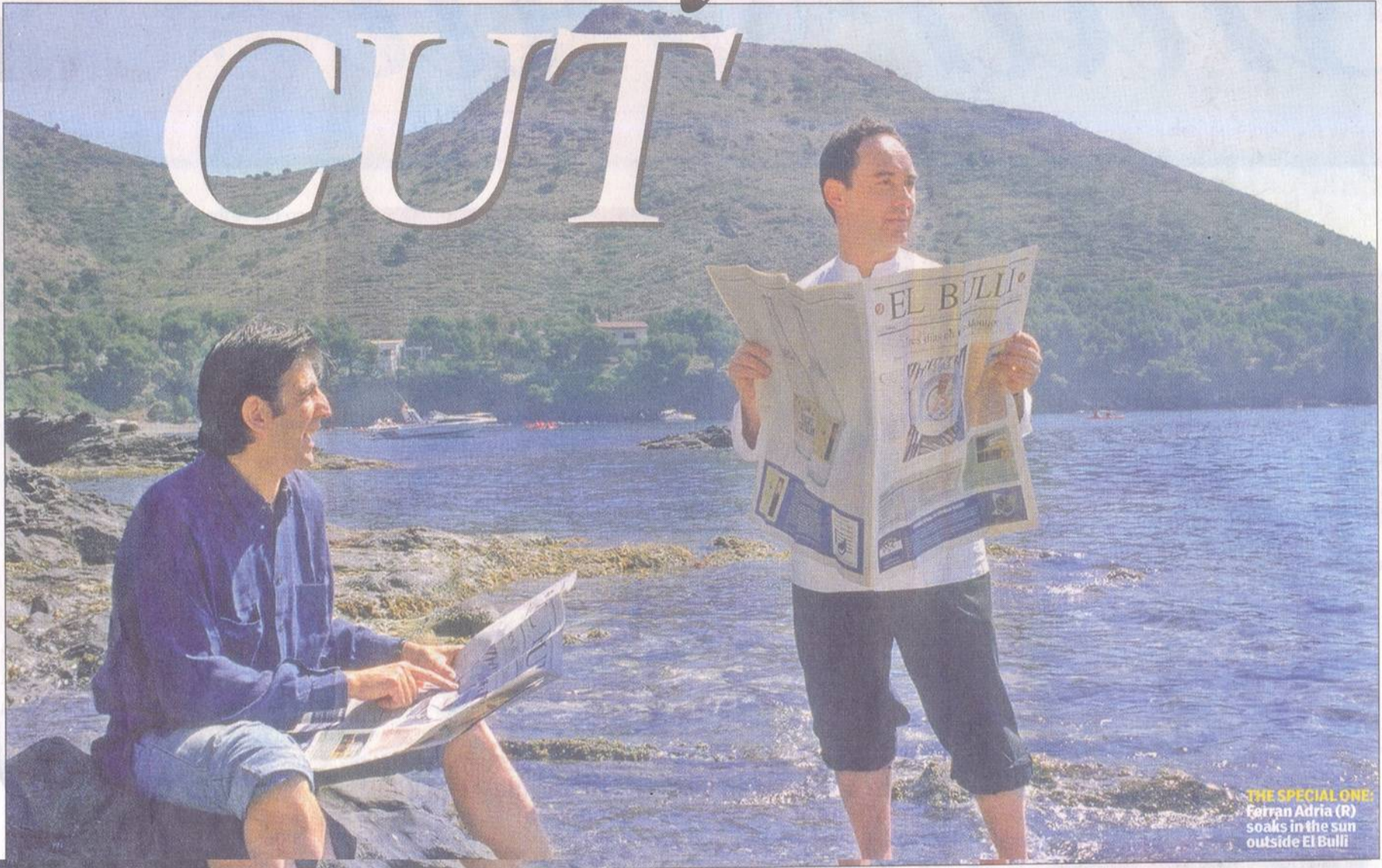


The Chef's

Ferran Adria's El Bulli, one of the most sought after restaurants in the world, served its last meal on July 30. But what makes eating places exclusive? Is it the food, the atmosphere or the exoticness?

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THE SPECIAL ONE: Ferran Adria (R) soaks in the sun outside El Bulli

Saira Kurup & Shobha John | TNN

When Zorawar Kalra, the son of well-known chef Jiggs Kalra and a restaurateur himself, made reservations at El Bulli to coincide with his honeymoon in 2006, it was almost like going on a pilgrimage. Just the drive to El Bulli, two hours from Barcelona, was breathtaking. "One has to be a serious diner to go all the way there," he says. "Once you exit the city, you reach the highway and go through the region of Costa Brava. Then you wind through the mountains on one side and the sea on the other, finally reaching an antique building that houses El Bulli."

In the last decade, El Bulli became the mecca of gourmets worldwide, topping Britain's 'Restaurant' magazine list of the world's top 50 eat-

ing places a record five times. Getting a reservation was easier said than done — only 8,000 people got a chance to dine there every year. Kalra recalls that he was taken around its kitchen and shown various techniques of freezing and cooking. "It was almost like a laboratory," he says. "There was lime-filled popcorn, air-filled cheese, man-made olives with egg yolk in them, algae which was fished from deep under the sea the day before and potato soup in the form of a gelatin. Every bite was gastronomically divine." It cost Kalra Rs 45,000 for the meal, but that was nothing compared to the memories it left.

El Bulli created culinary art for the senses. But is just great food enough to make its lovers go hunting for the special places they will not compromise on? For most food connoisseurs, it's the total experience that matters — at El Bulli, even the cutlery and

glasses were designed to fit the particular dish. Kalra adds what made El Bulli unforgettable was also its personalized service. He recalls that as he went to the restroom, a waiter accompanied him and flicked his hand. "Magically, the other waiters created a path for me," he says. Quite like the Red Sea parting for Moses!

The trick lies in making people feel special. Abhijit Saha, co-owner and executive chef of Avante Garde Hospitality Pvt Ltd that owns two premium restaurants in Bangalore — Caperberry and Fava — says the exclusivity of a place comes from three factors: "Ideas about doing things differently, maintaining the highest quality, and attention to detail which makes the difference between a good and a great place... El Bulli was famous for its scientific approach to cooking, new ideas and new styles."

Saha missed out on dining at El Bulli last year, but lists among his memorable food experiences those at Indian Accent in south Delhi; Varq at Taj Mahal, Delhi; San-Qi in Mumbai; Fat Duck in Yorkshire; French Laundry in California; Per Se in New York, and Locanda Locatelli in London. But Radhika Poddar, owner of Cinnamon, a lifestyle store in Bangalore, finds Saha's Caperberry too has that X-factor as it "does a lot of experimentation with the food, blending new ingredients to create fresh tastes."

Kalra says restaurants in India haven't breached those sky-high standards yet though "Megu, a Japanese

Quail egg with caramel, anyone?

El Bulli — restaurant, experiment, legend

Located in the remote town of Roses on the coast of Catalonia in Spain, the place was bought in 1961 by Dr Hans Schilling, a German, and his Czech wife Marketta who wanted a restaurant there. The name "El Bulli" comes from the French bulldogs they owned. Getting a reservation here is easier said than done — only 8,000 get a booking here every year. Meals are a series of 25-30 small courses, some no more than a bite or a slurp. The menu is the brain child of Ferran Adria, called the world's greatest chef. Adria was born on May 14, 1962, in a Barcelona suburb. By 18, he left school and became a dishwasher at a French restaurant in Castelldefels, a coastal town. Ask him what spurred him to become a chef and he says it was sex! It drove him to get that dishwashing job so that he could earn enough money to spend on girls. Well, he did more than that. He learned culinary techniques and moved from job to job, till at 23, he became chef at El Bulli. But it was molecular gastronomy, the blending of science and culinary, that got him name and fame. His innovations are mind-boggling: soft-boiled quail egg with a crispy caramel crust, almond ice cream on a swirl of garlic oil and vinegar, a deconstructed Spanish omelet served in a parfait glass... Even the cutlery and glasses are contrived to fit the particular dish — a silver spoon or a stick or a tiny fluted glass. Dinner can extend up to five hours. The restaurant used to be open just six months of the year; the rest of the time, Adria is traveling, tasting and reading. In 2014, El Bulli re-opens as a culinary think-tank

steak house, and Le Cirque, a French restaurant, both soon to open at Leela Palace in Delhi, have the potential".

The snob value attached to clinking fluted glasses and making soft conversation at these expensive places is often the icing on the cake. Tarun Thakral, COO of Le Meridien Hotel at Delhi, says, "An exclusive restaurant should have its own ego and the right to deny admission. In fact, it should give you also an ego boost just to go there. The people who come there would also be those who talk and dress elegantly."

For true food geeks, the flavour lies in the spice, not the cost of the pan. Columnist Pushpesh Pant's happiest memory is of an exclusive eatery run by yesteryear Tamil actress Sahukar Janaki in Chennai, where diners come by invitation only. "I had a sublime meal of prawn curry, rice and banana stem subzi," he reminisces. "The conversation was scintillating. I felt I was in a high-class salon where films, art and creative pursuits were talked about. There was no crude transaction of money. The atmosphere was too delicate for

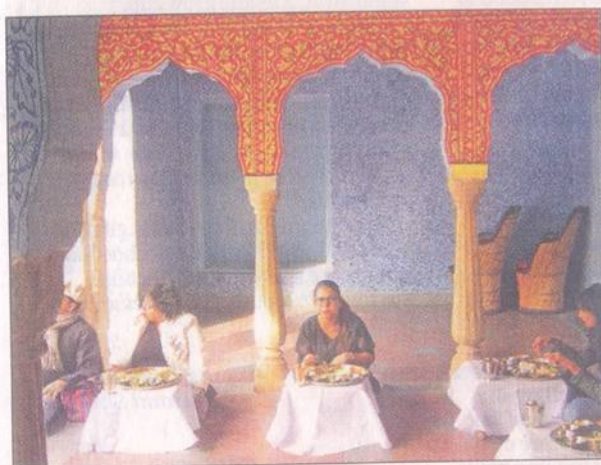
that." Another unforgettable gastronomic experience was at the Surajgarh palace resort of Tikaraj Singh, the former prince of Kangra. "He called me for a dhaam, a Himachali meal which doesn't use vegetables, garlic or onions. Instead, only five-six lentils of different colours are used and served with sweetened rice and papad," says Pant.

Ronesh Puri, MD of head-hunting firm Executive Access, has fond memories of the organic food at Chicago's Italian restaurant Vista. He was also bowled over by the 20 varieties of Garrett's gourmet popcorn in the same city. "Exclusivity doesn't have to be 5-star," he says. The essence then, could even lie in a secret recipe, an elusive spice or in the host's company. Eلودi, a senior French professional working in Delhi, says, "The historical setting at the Imperial in Delhi, the pleasure that a chef in France takes in what he does, the traditional south Indian recipes at Delhi's Saravana Bhawan — each is exclusive in a different way." A favourite with her is the restaurant Le Jardin de Sens in her hometown Montpellier "where the chefs take pleasure in making you discover dishes".

Taste and ambience do matter for the food pilgrim, but ultimately it is the people who make a place and leave enduring memories that travel from mouth to mind. In the final analysis, that is what El Bulli was all about.

saira.kurup@timesgroup.com, shobha.john@timesgroup.com

With inputs by Shrabonti Bagchi in Bangalore



ROYAL FLAVOUR: Guests sit down for an exclusive meal at Surajgarh