

a rock fan in Montjoi

by Juli Soler

In late December I came to stay for a few days with a friend, Silvia, the owner of the *Barbarossa*. One day, while having a coffee in the bar *La Sirena*, I was introduced to Marketta. I had met her once before when I had gone to have a meal in El Bulli with Silvia. Marketta told me that they would be renewing their squad the following year because Jean-Louis Neichel, their chef and manager, was thinking of moving to Barcelona. As the future of the establishment was in some doubt, I was offered the job of manager. Strangely enough, this was the same day I received another offer, from a new restaurant, *L'Antull*, owned by the Perelló family, just next door to *La Sirena*. Marketta filled me in with all the details and we fixed an appointment for an interview with her husband, Dr Schilling, for 12 noon, December 25th, in cala Montjoi. I had only been to the cala a couple of times. The road was pitted with bumps and potholes. The telephone line was often down and there were frequent power cuts. It was rather a bleak area, not sheltered like it is today, but I did not think twice about disappearing from the map, the map I had charted out for myself at that time. It was a big change for me, and the thought of running one of the best restaurants in Catalonia gave me the strength to face up to the challenge.

The night before the appointment, Christmas Eve, was as festive as ever. The next morning, I was supposed to get up at 10 to go to El Bulli, but punctuality has never been my strong point, and it was nearly noon when I woke up. So I went haring off to the road up to cala Montjoi. I was wearing a sheepskin coat, and although it was December, the sun was baking. I walked up the road, a bundle of nerves. Up and up I went; after two kilometres I breathlessly went past the Dolmen, and two kilometres further on, the Torre del Sastre. When I reached the point of exhaustion, a Seat 1500 came round the bend and I cadged a lift.

And that is how I came to the “Hacienda El Bulli”; years later, as soon as I could, I registered the name “Restaurante El Bulli”, as I had never liked the “Hacienda” part. As soon as I went in, there were Marketta and her husband waiting for me. After the usual introductions, they suggested we all try the New Year’s Eve set meal that Neichel was preparing. While we were eating, I soon realised that what Dr Schilling was interested in, more than the business, was gastronomy itself, focusing on enjoyment at the table, accompanied by exhaustive knowledge, seeking at all times to offer the diner moments of intense pleasure. At that time, a table at El Bulli was already different to tables in other restaurants in Spain. Even the cutlery, glassware and china were imported from Germany and drew their inspiration from the great restaurants of the time, belonging to Alain Chapel, Jacques Pic, and so on. The service, consideration – in short, the way the restaurant was run, were also based on these models. The doctor seemed to like my plain-speaking explanation of how, as far as I was concerned, the most important thing was for people to have a good time, and that they also knew how to do so. However, my worldly wisdom and experience of fine food and wines, and even knowledge of the trade, were not up to par, even for a beginner. So I told him, and the Doctor suggested I do two months of intensive travelling, visiting the best restaurants in France, Belgium and Germany. On my return, in the middle of March 1981, I was ready to face my first season as manager.

And right at the start, something odd happened. That year, our opening coincided with Holy Week, and we were fully booked: a large number of French and Germans, together with good customers from L’Empordà and Barcelona, meant that we had to hang the “Reservations Only” notice on the door. On one of these days, some customers from Perpignan came, fairly perplexed, telling us that we no longer appeared in the Michelin Guide. “That’s impossible”, I said. They amiably challenged me to fetch a guide and see for myself. It was my lot, therefore, to go to Figueres and find a well-stocked bookshop with the Michelin Guide. And it was true. At that time, the restaurant was full every day and we would end up tired out. But on Easter Sunday, I invited Marketta to go to Paris with me. Marketta never used to venture outside cala Montjoi, but she keenly accepted. I also took Yves

Kramer, who was then chef de cuisine, with us. One the Monday afternoon, after closing the restaurant, we set off for Paris; we stopped for dinner in Lameloise, in Burgundy, and the next day, in Paris, we telephoned for an appointment. When they asked us what day we



wanted, I replied: “We’re at the door”. In fact, they were very kind, but as I was complaining about our disappearance from the Guide, they were forced to give us an explanation. It turned out that they thought the restaurant had closed down. I explained that we wanted to begin a new cycle, and they promised to keep a close eye on the establishment’s progress. A month later, a man who was lunching alone asked for the bill, paid, and then said: “Hello. Look, don’t hit me – I’m a Michelin inspector.” He then asked to visit the kitchen and the rest of the set-up, and we chatted for some time. The following year, 1982, El Bulli was back in the Guide with one star. With this grounding, we awaited the following year’s visit to ask for two stars. And so it was.

El Bulli was an enchanting place, getting there was almost an adventure, but thanks to our clientele and word of mouth, Germans, French and a good many Catalans came to savour a cuisine that, although very different to that of today, was already in the forefront of new European trends. Jean-Paul Vinay’s menu was very much in the *nouvelle cuisine* line, with light influences from his home town, Lyon, and from Michel Guérard, as one of the last places he had worked had been in his restaurant; and added to all this was the quality of the best produce from our region: the best home-grown vegetables, succulent fish and shellfish, and so on. And then, of course, there was our philosophy, our interest above all in giving pleasure to the diner, so that he would leave the place a satisfied and happy man. In fact,

inspired by unwritten, but ever-present guidelines, we ensured, and still do, that the atmosphere in El Bulli was unique.

