

I AM NOT GOD, I ALSO GET FEEDBACK IN THE SUNDAY MEETING

ALBERT SASTREGENER - TWO STAR MICHELIN CHEF BO.TIC
- CORÇA, CATALONIA, APRIL 2021

2ND MICHELIN
STAR IN PANDEMIC
EVERYTHING IS
PERSONAL
A LIGHT HIERARCHY
WORKING FOR THE
FUTURE

Sheila Struyck is inspired by the new generation top chefs.

they talk about new leadership style, personal beliefs, excellence, teamwork, conviction, feedback, creativity and perseverance



photo: Michelle Muus

'CHEFS ARE THE
REAL-LIFE MODELS
OF LEADERSHIP,
WORKING IN
DIFFICULT
SITUATIONS.'

'SHEILA STRUYCK'



photo: Lluís Català

As a seasoned Board member and investor, Sheila Struyck (1965, Gouda, The Netherlands) is convinced that business can learn from the restaurants they love to visit. She visits fine dining Chefs to sample their menu and discusses leadership and innovation.

'The common belief is that working for Michelin Chefs is like entering a military hierarchy where large egos shout, swear and hurl food at you. In reality they lead teams in demanding, dangerous and stressful situations without any formal training in leadership. They are creative and commercial leaders working with tiny margins and to the high expectations of demanding customers.'

At 54, Struyck vacated her seat in the Boardroom of a French multinational and finished a 9-month French chef-training at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris.



photo: Lluís Català

'I AM NOT GOD. I ALSO GET FEEDBACK IN THE SUNDAY AFTERNOON TEAM MEETING'

March 2021, I am in Begur, Catalonia, to research the leadership of great Chefs in difficult times. Investigating the Michelin starred restaurants in El Baix Empordà, [an ad campaign by Damm](#) - a famous Spanish beer- celebrating the culinary entrepreneurs of our area, pops up. It is a message of hope and optimism. Besides the very famous Roca brothers, my eye is drawn to a calm and self-assured Chef in graphite coloured 'whites' embroidered with Bo.Tic. He gazes at the horizon, enjoying his beer with a concentrated determination. Last December, Bo.Tic Chef Albert Sastre gener and sommelier Cristina Torrent received their second Michelin star. Remember that long and culinarily boring winter without any fine dining?

This month the restrictions have been lifted slightly and restaurants can reopen with service hours limited to 13.00 - 17.00. No dinner, most are therefore still closed. To my surprise Bo.tic is open five days per week. As a newly trained Chef, I feel starved of inspiration after a non-existent culinary year and I want to ask Chef Sastreger about his Chef's style. Lluís Català, a talented local photographer who previously portrayed all of the local fine dining Chefs, comes along to portray the Chef at work with his team. Thankfully, Lluís was instrumental in bridging any cultural and linguistic gaps between us. In the kitchen everybody speaks the same 'franglais', but my Catalan and Spanish are not very sophisticated.



photo: Lluís Català

WARMTH SHINES THROUGH MASKS

Smartly dressed -at last an opportunity- we arrive at the glass frontage of the Bo.tic, on a chilly Monday afternoon in March. The restaurant was formerly a carriage factory. Will the experience be as carefree and intimate as it used to be pre-pandemic in the Baix Empordà? We are welcomed like long-awaited friends coming for dinner. 'All our guests enter via the kitchen, where it all happens'. In a modestly sized yet efficient set-up, a diverse crew of fourteen people work calmly and with full concentration. Chef Albert Sastreger looks up and smiles. He is at the middle station, portioning ray, a local line-caught fish.

It is not easy to tear myself away from the action. We step into the restaurant, passing the transparent wine cellar that houses over 800 wines, carefully sourced at small vineyards by sommelier Cristina Torrent. We are seated next to each other, facing the glass sliding door. It feels like we are in a theatre, on the front row with the performance happening in front of us.

No need to study the menu. When making your reservation, you choose between: El petit Menú (80€), the Menú degustació (120€) or the Menu del Xef (180€). Nothing gets prepared that is not going to be served that day. All we need to decide on is the wine. We are given an iPad. Sommelier Aga explains: Wines are not organized by vintage, year or alphabet, but in distance to our restaurant'. We choose the limited Presència - 2017 from Sota els Angels (White Garnache) which ripened only eight kilometres from our table.

NEW INTERPRETATIONS, ROOTED IN THE SOIL



photo: Lluís Català

The Xef's menu starts with four 'stages': the bar, the season, the roast and the bakery. Each stage consists of various items. The names on the menu sound -almost disappointingly- familiar: rice pudding, patata brava, garden vegetables, duck with pear. Fear not, the flavours and shapes are there, but the dishes are a real new interpretation of these authentic dishes.

First to arrive are two 'olives' on a pedestal with a slice of orange. One bite, the skin is crispy like a chocolate egg and the centre is liquid. Not an olive at all, but the flavours are full on olives, vermouth and orange. It is a splash; your palate is refreshed and makes it ready to experience more. The patatas bravas are featherlight potato soufflés. Bread with tomato and anchovies -a rustic Catalan classic- is an elegant breadstick, filled with tomato creme and topped with anchovies and caviar of olive oil.

Only after a while we notice that we are using our fingers, it feels so natural to snack. Ha, there's not even any cutlery on the table.

FEEL AT HOME

'Eating with your hands is a more intimate sensation, you lick your lips, wipe your fingers. I want this to be a place where you feel free and relaxed. In Moma in Denmark, the sommelier squatted next to our table, like talking to an old friend. Respectful but intimate. If Moma, the best restaurant in the World with three Michelin stars can do this, why not us in Catalonia? If a young couple comes to a fine dining restaurant they should feel welcome and appreciated. Not intimidated because they don't know the order in which to use the cutlery, explains Chef Sastregener. 'I want people to feel at home'. Indeed, the only cutlery at the table is for the plate you are eating.

Chefs are leaders that can be observed leading their teams in real-time. At Bo.tic I was welcome to spend time at the pass -the area where finished are placed under lamps before being expedited- during the preparation shift. The crew is in T-shirts and slacks. Full concentration, no music, no yelling, no loud 'yes, Chefs.' Things you often find in restaurants.

The Pastry Chef discards some of the delicate chocolate flowers an intern is lifting from sheets to put into boxes. Without any discussion, excuses or resentment between them. Both know what this is about. Every single detail needs to be perfect





photo: Lluís Català

Still, a smile lingers in the air, a sense of friendliness and curiosity between colleagues. No sign of fear or submission. The staff also feel at home. 'Of course, we need a hierarchy, because otherwise it's a mess. But this is a "light hierarchy". I have five strong chefs de partie and I work through them. That gives clarity. They lead the teams and are accountable for the quality, consistency and the development of new ideas. I don't want fear to rule in my kitchen. When I was young, I was "made to fear" and that does not work.'

STEER EXPECTATIONS

The second stage -the seasons- are four small dishes served on a delicate artistic structure, looking like a glass insect. Calçots and romesco is a highly coveted and very messy seasonal Catalan affair, eaten like the Dutch eat a herring. This Huerta -the kitchen garden- is a miniature version, all the flavours of this roasted leek dish in a glass bowl. No need for the traditional bib. Lluís could not be happier. The foie gras in sweet candy floss is outstanding. Sweet at the beginning of a meal is unconventional. 'More sweet at the beginning when you are excited and less at the end, when you slowly go back to your normal life', Sastregener explains. Preconceptions are not easy to change. Present a Parmesan ice cream -very popular in 1870- like an ice cream or sorbet and people will be disappointed for lack of sweet. Call it a frozen cheese and they will be delighted. Chef Strastegener's menu and naming does that. It frames your mind in the right direction and then he completely blows your expectations. 'Hallucinate' is a Spanish word many guests rightfully use on social media after visiting Bo.tic.

The third stage is the roast, two Costa Brava favourites, normally eaten in rustic restaurants by workmen. A flavour as big as the workers' plates in a tiny crust cup, which easily fits in the palm of your hand. The 'roast chicken with shrimp' fills your nose and mouth and you can't help but smack your lips. 'This takes me back to the dishes made by my grandmother, but it also transports me into the future', says a very happy Lluís finishing off the 'duck confit with pear'.



photo: Lluís Català

STRUCTURED LIKE PASTRY CHEFS

The kitchen blackboard shows the names of the dishes in white or blue. 'Blue means new on the menu, so pay extra attention. Twenty years ago, I attended a pastry and dessert development training course at Espaisucre Barcelona. They teach a methodology for creation and organization. That put a chip in my head', Chef Sastreger is not just using pastry techniques for cooking or using sweet and savoury at unexpected places in the menu. 'They codify flavours, so we use the same words to describe what we are looking for. We start with asking why? No recipe books, argumentation, no explanations. Why an acid with chocolate, why a bitter with chocolate, why a spice with chocolate? Trial and error, trial and error. Everything is measured and noted, until we are happy. This can take weeks to get right. The ingredients, measurements and methods are noted on technical fiches, plasticized and always kept in the kitchen. It is like a well-structured bookshelf. With lots of people in a small kitchen, it all needs to be organized to the millimetre. We measure everything, every single day. No guessing or winging it. Not everyone likes to work to such precision. But if you do start your career here, you learn a creative system that can stay with you and help you to control the business side too.'

The fourth stage is the bakery. These pastries are from Girona: Buñuelo and Xiuxo, shaped like a doughnut and a cannolo. Lluís shakes his head. 'Unbelievable, these look like the Xiuxo that I remember. Even the texture is the same, they are crispy, chewy and creamy. But I only know them sweet, never had one with mushrooms and truffles or cod'.

ENCOURAGED TO EXPERIMENT

After the starters, a parade of nine signature dishes starts. Chef Sastreger and his wife and sommelier Cristina Torrent met in El Roser 2, in Escala. 'She was sixteen, I was nineteen. Rafael Sabadí, the Chef and owner, is my culinary father. My confidence grew by him letting me experiment with the fish and meat at this age'. Usually owner-Chefs don't let young people mess with expensive ingredients.

'The dish "Costella d'escrita a la Donostiarra" is based on what he taught me about cleaning fish. Ray (escrita) has lots of bones and is therefore under-used. I combine this humble fish with sea cucumber.' The sauce is based on the simple and famous Basque sauce Donostiarra with olive oil, garlic, cayenne pepper and parsley. The emulsion is the stage for the delicate flavours. The moist fish contrasts with the chewy texture of the sea-cucumber. The fish pastel prepared like a 'Royal' adds silkiness.

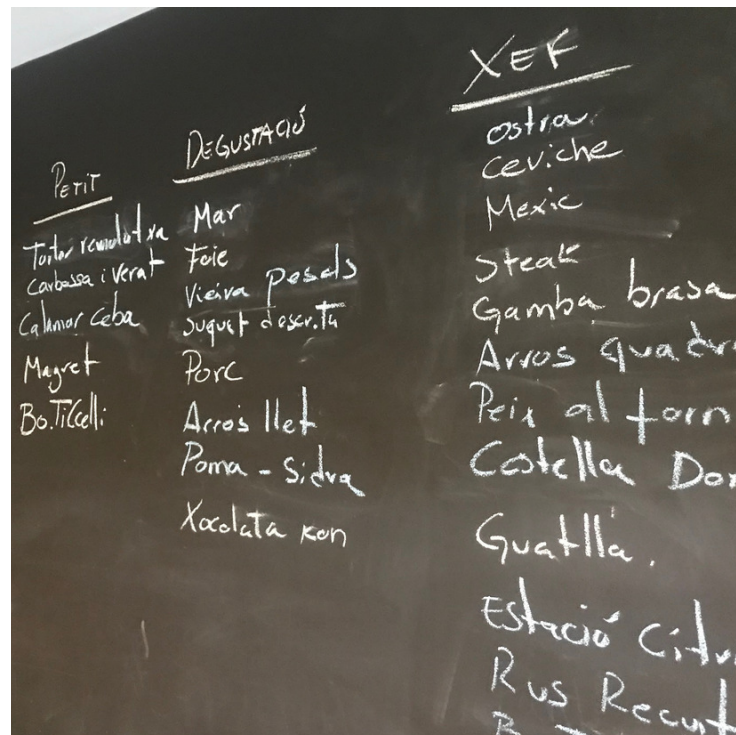


photo: Lluís Català



WE CAN DO THIS

Receiving a second Michelin star in the middle of a pandemic seems like bad timing for business. How did they cope? Albert shrugs his shoulders. 'We started Bo.Tic in 2007, amid the previous economic crisis, and we always gave 200%. We did all the work ourselves and got through the first few years by being sensible and always keeping an eye on what comes in and what goes out. I personally see every bill, the only way to have a healthy business.'

'In the Baix Empordà, restaurants only make money between May and October. Last summer was excellent with the beach restrictions, a lunch in the countryside offered a good alternative. After the usual winter break, we opened again in March. For the team, they work and they learn rather than sitting at home and getting depressed. The strength of the team is the strength of the restaurant.'

'I am an optimist. I know we are strong enough to last and with the vaccine coming. We operate at our normal capacity. Our permit says 98, but we always only serve 30 guests, that is the type of kitchen we want to be. So, the 30% restriction rule does not change anything. Even in these times, every day we work for the future. That's a thought that's never depressing.'



photo: Lluís Català

THE CHEF LEADS THROUGH HIS PEOPLE



photo: Lluís Català

Chef Strastegeners' sous chef Jhean Phillip -his right-hand man- carries a lot of the responsibility. He drops by to consult the Chef about the quality of the peas and the fish. Jhean Phillip also appears during dinner at our table and is friendly and confident as he serves the steak tartare of the 'vaca vella'. The 'old cow', a free roaming cow first kept for her milk and then gets the time to relax, before the meat is used. Better animal husbandry and better for the planet.

Sastregener: 'I have always been a bit of a challenger. That is why our uniform is different -The crew looks smart yet different in their anthracite-grey uniforms with cubist details, visible zippers and matching grey toques (Chefs hats)- I am the only one without a toque. I don't shout and scream, I have been shouted at enough when I was young. I never even worked in a Michelin-starred kitchen, because there were stories about serious mistreatment.'

As the Chef I can't be assigned to a specific station or task. There is always something that comes up -like talking to you now. So, I work through my sous-chef and chefs de partie. My role is to test a dish after some months. If it does not taste as expected, I get upset. That means someone has not followed the preparation we noted on the fiches.'



photo: Lluís Català

HERITAGE IN A CUBE

Many chefs make exquisite things with expensive ingredients. Chef Sastreger makes local rice the hero of the dish with patience and passion. The Brocci truffle is shaved generously over of the golden fried cube. With the sand-coloured leaf of local mushroom cream, all earthy tones on the dish. 'To make it personal, we start from scratch and ask "what do we want to achieve, what do we want to say"? Arros de muntanes was our starting point for innovation'. The famous Pals rice fields are at walking distance. The carneroli -rice with a large kernel- is traditionally prepared with a sofrito. What would happen without onion? With the finest stock, pigs trotter and cod-tripe we inject flavour and collagen. This almost jellified 'risotto' is left for three days to set and then cut into squares. Coated 'a l'anglaise' with puffed, powdered rice instead of panko. The crispy crust is sweet-savoury and gives a nice pop. The inside is warm, unctuous and creamy. The Brocci truffle crowns this understated umami.

AA MEETING

'I select my team by watching them work. How do they react when being corrected? Do they improve the next couple of days? Those that come in with big egos don't last long. Every Sunday after service we meet with the whole kitchen. It is like an AA meeting, we are all equal. Even though I am the Chef, I am not God, so they also provide me with feedback. That is the only way we can improve. We see each other more than we see our brothers and sisters, so we need to take the time to be together and help each other. It is better to discuss things than to explode.'

THIS IS US, IT CAN ONLY BE PERSONAL

Chef Sastreger is an original and elegant storyteller with his feet firmly planted in the terroir. As a pre-dessert he brings us the citric sequences. A wonderful quartet of small patisserie portraying all intensities of citrus in interesting combinations. A true transformational journey from the surprising taco of quail to the honeycomb made with cream from Ullastret ewes.

What a journey! We tell Sastreger that it feels like wandering through a gallery with exciting new art in every room. We tasted the past and the future of this area in the Baix Empordà. He runs a tight ship, with very clear processes and procedures to unleash their culinary mastery.





TEXT: SHEILA STRUYCK

Sheila Struyck started as a sous Chef at the tender age of 23, whilst studying business administration. After 30 years in international business and big corporate roles she returned to the stove. Besides being a Chef, she holds non-executive Board seats and works in Venture Capital.

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PHOTOS: LLUÍS CATALÀ



Lluís Català, born in Palafrugell (Girona) in 1978, studied Image at San Ignasi's School in Barcelona and Audiovisual's at ERAM school of Girona. As a freelance photographer he combines commercial work with documentary photography. He has published in Enderrock, Diari de Girona, La Vanguardia and made all the portraits of local Chefs for [La Cuina del 'empordanet](#).

His work "Els Fills del Suro" was exhibited at the Palafrugell's Art Gallery and in the Biennial Xavier Miserachs from Palafrugell.

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