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From Spain, with Love

Katie Button met her husband and earned her chef stripes on the seafood-rich Costa Brava. Discover her favorite haunts along this insider tour

Chef Katie Button brings paella to table



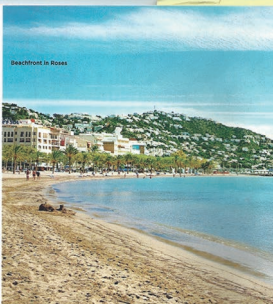
THERE ARE TIMES WHEN you feel your life about to change. For me, it was at a little restaurant called Rafa's on the Spanish coast, when I took my first bite ever of *espardenya de mar*.

Seared on a *plancho* (a cast-iron griddle) with a little bit of olive oil, the dish—the closest translation is “sea cucumber”—had a flavor so mild, a texture so poised between chewy and tender, that it made that ephemeral promise of umami suddenly as real as the simple white platter in front of me. Next: *tellarinas*, the tiny purplish bivalves that reminded me instantly of the coquina clams I used to dig up as a little girl on the beaches of South Carolina. I scraped the delicate meat with my teeth like I was eating sunflower seeds, and built a colorful mound of their tiny shells.

I was enchanted with my meal and with the man sitting across from me, and ready to embrace all of it in a very big way.

THOSE LUCKY ENOUGH to spend time on the Costa Brava in Spain know that it is deeply romantic—the romance feels baked in like the saffron in paella. Translated as “rugged coast,” this stretch of northeastern Spain runs 132 miles from Barcelona to the French border and is marked by small villages filled with whitewashed buildings and terra-cotta roofs, tiny beaches called *calas* that often lie hidden from view, and incredible food. The Costa Brava was also home, for a time, to elBulli—widely considered the best restaurant in the world. Aspiring to make my own mark in the culinary world, I'd landed a six-month apprenticeship in 2008 at the restaurant, located in a Costa Brava town called Roses. While there, I fell deeply in love with a Roses native and elBulli colleague, Félix Meana; with Spain; and with its marvelous food.

The flavors of the Costa Brava are of both the sea and the mountains. The Mediterranean announces itself in dishes like rockfish, anchovies, and, yes, sea cucumbers. From the land come meats crafted into cured perfection and cheeses that are sharp and pungent, mild and



Beachfront in Roses



Fresh-caught tuhu



Cadaqués



natty. The region also borders Penedes, the home of Cava, Catalonia's sparkling wine that pairs effortlessly with the cuisine.

Over that brilliantly humble meal at Rafa's, I decided to return to the States with Félix to launch our own restaurant, Cúrate, devoted to Spanish cuisine. Even after marrying and starting a family, we've made annual trips to the coast that is so much a part of our lives. It remains my favorite destination in the world.

THERE IS NO BETTER PLACE for a taste of the Costa Brava than Roses. While we worked (and I learned) at elBulli, the lively streets of this ancient town amid low-lying hills provided small, unpretentious, and thrilling restaurants to explore. Cal Campaner, which just celebrated its 52nd anniversary, is like a dressed-up version of Rafa's, with a larger menu and a slightly fancier setting, but with the enduring Roses focus on seafood in the hands of generations of family. La Sirena, another house of deliciously fresh seafood, is known for its tapas classics like *pimientos de Padrón*—blistered Padrón peppers tossed with sea salt—and *ensaladilla Rusa*, a traditional potato salad prepared with tuna, olives, piquillo peppers, and a delicious house-made, olive oil-based mayonnaise.

While lingering over plates might be the supreme activity on the Costa Brava, the ideal complement is to linger on the region's gorgeous beaches. Just up the road from Roses is one of my favorite haunts: the Platja de l'Almadrava, a pale, fine-sand beach sheltered from the *tremonte*—the region's north wind. With a path along its shallow arc for an invigorating walk and calm, crystalline waters for midday plunges, it's the world's best way to work up an appetite. And when it's time to dig in again, Almadrava has the perfect restaurant: Santallúcia, a white-washed bistro that spills out onto the palm tree-dotted sand. Sit with a bottle of *Garnatxa blanca* (a Catalan white Grenache) and order the *fileuà*, a cousin to shellfish-rich paella that's cooked and served in the same broad, shallow pan but made with noodles instead of rice.

The coast stretching north from Almadrava is a beach-lover's cornucopia—a bit like a tapas menu of small delights. This is a land of calas: smaller, pebble-covered beaches that form a scalloped shoreline, their confines protected by rocky outcroppings and headlands. Pick your pleasure: the isolated intimacy of the tiny Cala Calís (reachable only via a short hike); the

GET HERE

American, Delta, United, Norwegian, and Iberia airlines fly direct to Barcelona's El Prat airport, which is about 110 miles south of Roses.

STAY HERE

Begin and/or end in Barcelona at the Grand Hotel Central, set in the El Born neighborhood near the Gothic Quarter and the Cathedral. Rates start at \$266; grandhotelcentral.com.

About 30 miles south of Roses in the medieval village of Begus, Hotel Alguacilar has turned a Colonial-style mansion into a stylish boutique hotel. Rates start at \$93; hotelalguacilararabegus.com.

The most luxurious retreat in Roses remains Hotel Vistabella, a five-star hotel with a Michelin one-star restaurant, els Brancs. Rates start at \$220; hotelvistabella.com. For more casual beachfront digs, consider booking one of the apartments above the Santallúcia restaurant on the Platja de l'Almadrava, where you'll be steps from the sand. Rates start at \$125; santallucia.com.

North of Roses in Cadaqués, the Tramuntana Hotel pairs the white-washed stone walls of a fisherman's cottage with minimalist touches of Mediterranean blues in its 12 guest rooms. Rates start at \$110; hotel-tramuntana-cadaques.com.



Katie and Félix in the kitchen at Cúrate



LET THE EXPERTS TAKE YOU THERE

See the Costa Brava with Katie Button and/or Félix Means by joining Cúrate Trips's 2019 journeys to Spain. Button and Means join culinary travel experts Paladar y Tomar to lead food-and-wine-focused luxury excursions of eight to 10 days to Catalonia and Andalusia, as well as Basque Country, Madrid and Castile, and Portugal. Prices start at \$7,634 per person, double occupancy; curatetrips.com.



Cadaqués

deep waters off sandy Cala Montjoi that draw boaters and scuba divers; the charming open-air restaurant and beach bar at Playa La Pelosa (known for its rice stew with lobster and its mojitos), and the pure beauty of Jóncois, a dreamy, tight horseshoe of pebbled beach that holds the azure Mediterranean in its arms.

While it can be so tempting to make a beeline for the cosmopolitan lures of Barcelona just two and a half hours south of Roses, the real treasures of the Costa Brava are its small fishing villages, and each seems to have a taste that calls from its waters. The port town of L'Escala, for example, is home to a famous anchovy fishery and to the 17th-century salt trade that preserved the catch for transport and sale. Shop for locally cured anchovy brands sold in tins wrapped with bright paper: Caïllol Serrats, Anxoves el Xillu, Solés, Anxoves de l'Escala. Visit the Anchovy and Salt Museum. And do not leave town until you've ordered and eaten those little fish the best way I know how: piled *à top pa amb tomàquet*, the classic toasted bread of Catalonia that's rubbed with fresh tomato, garlic, and olive oil—an experience guaranteed to convert any anchovy nonbeliever into a devotee.

Another village, Palamós, offers up a treasure known throughout Spain: the *gamba de palamós*, a large, bright red prawn prepared simply on the plancha with a little salt. The sweet meat is cooked to a divine texture, but it's the juices from the head of the prawn that are to die for, and that make the preparations here so distinctive. But there's more to this picturesque port town than just mind-blowing prawns. Palamós is also home to a daily fish market auction that is a parade of the afternoon's catch, unloaded by fishermen into blue plastic crates and rolled past weighers, inspectors, and price setters as it moves on to the market in the adjacent building. It's emblematic of the diversity of Spanish fisheries, how quickly the catch moves from boat to market to plate, and is really fun to watch.

Finally, there's the great discovery of a second-wave culinary revolution happening in the most unexpected spot. When *el Bulli* closed its doors in 2011, a trio of its chefs migrated north to a remote little fishing village—Cadaqués—to open their own place. Under the leadership of Oriol Castro, Eduard Xatruch, and Mateu Casañas, *Compartir* (Spanish for “sharing”) occupies a 300-year-old house in the historic center of town, and has taken *el Bulli*'s modern preparations and turned them into custom

Shrimp
at Rafa's

menus that are crafted for you based on your conversation with your server. These deeply gifted chefs create new dishes constantly, but imagine options like this: a salad of artichokes with raisins, surrounding a small scoop of vanilla-almond sorbet; the tender meat of local mussels set atop fresh green peas with a tiny dice of Iberian ham; or sardines marinated with whitling, raspberries, and radishes.

This is the challenge of the Costa Brava, and Félix and I twist with it on every trip home. Where to eat first, to eat next? Is there time for another lunch at Compartir? A return to our beloved Rafa's? And while we strive to visit all our favorites (and discover the next), we often do what Spaniards do best. We toss our swimsuits into a straw bag, and head to the farmers' market. We pick out local fruits like apricots and melon, cheese, cured pork sausage, and a bottle of rosé from Espelt Viticultors, a local winery—and decamp to the beach.

Because it's time again to work up an appetite.



Félix and Katie, sampling cheese in Spain

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