



Insight from the connoisseurs

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Oliver Peña

*What's your full name?*

Oliver Peña Luque

*Where are you from?*

Rubí, a town 20 minutes from Barcelona. It's on the inside, not by the beach.



*How long have you been a chef?*

Almost 18 years. I'm 34, nearly 35. Since I was 17 – it's the only thing I know how to do!

*How did you make the decision to go into that? Was it something obvious for you?*

I always liked to eat. I think to be a chef you need to love to eat, because if you don't love to eat you cannot be a chef. It's the most important thing, to love food. Since I was a child, I've loved to eat. I had two friends, older than me by about 6 six years – they were actually my brother's friends – and they were starting out as chefs, somehow I got inspired by them.

After I finished high school I took the university tests, but then I said, "Mum, I'm going to be a chef." She didn't like it actually! Now she's really proud, but for the first six years with local restaurants and lots of working hours, I lost a big part of my youth.

*How long have you been working with Albert Adria?*

I started at 41° as a head chef, but in 2004 I was working in elBulli Hotel, in the south of Spain, in Sevilla with two stars. That was my first contact with their kitchen. I was working for six years with Carles Abellan, also from elBulli. The philosophy is almost the same.

*How was that experience, working at elBulli Hotel?*

It was nice, but 41° was a on a higher level. I think it's one of the most creative kitchens I've ever worked in and ever known. With 41°, there's almost one dish every week – minimum. There is no routine, there is no comfort zone.

*So you have to always be creative and on your feet.*

Not just me – all the team. We are learning every day. Albert is crazy – he is crazy! You're learning every moment that you spend with him, but not [just] for one year. Normally when you arrive at a new restaurant, you get all the [knowledge in] one year. That's what happens to me – I start, I learn... then you learn almost everything there, and eventually you want to move on to do different things. Here, nobody thinks to go outside to get new things, because we are doing different things all the time. It's his brain that always throws the ideas around.. Sometimes he sends a message, and sometimes he calls you. It's nice to be aware all the time.

*What was the experience like working at 41°, and how do you think that would be different from working at Enigma?*

41° was really really special. It was a small place with a unique atmosphere. We did 16 covers a day. That's what made it more special. Because everybody, every chef, knows that everything should be in its place. You need to repeat it sometimes, but you don't always need to say that everything should be perfect. They know. They know that for 16 people there is no excuse. Even for 80 you have no excuse when it's a fine dining restaurant, but when you're working for 16 you cannot say anything. It's 16, in three hours. Also the mixology and the wine pairing, it's a triangle – food, snacks, and a high level of finger food. When I started in 2012 there were some dishes that were served with maybe just a spoon or the tweezers.



*How long were you at 41°?*

From 2012 until we closed. In the meantime I was taking care of projects in Heart Ibiza last year. Now at Enigma we are going to change the normal sequence of the menu. People are used to start with the snacks, then small ‘platillos’ or tapas, then main course. We’re going to make a turn on that.

*What’s your favourite dish from 41°?*

I think the first snack I made. It was a salty and not sweet snack with *obulato*[oblaat], because Albert said he didn’t want sugar on snacks. That’s another thing that we’re going to do at Enigma. No sugar in our snacks, and everything that has some sugar is for the desserts, and you’re going to enjoy it here in the bar, the old 41°.

*Are there some dishes from 41° that you will bring here?*

No. Any dishes that were good or that could be rethought are in Tickets. That’s the first thing that Albert said, “take all the recipes and give them to Tickets.” That’s a hard job for Tickets, because we were working for 16 and they work for 100. Some of them they simply can’t do, or they make like 20 portions for special people.

*Tell us a bit more about the design and storytelling aspect of the restaurant.*

Today a friend came, he was my pastry chef in elBulli Hotel. I was showing it to him and every time I explained it, I realized that it’s important to make it really natural. If I sit you here and I give you just one bite, if that bite is “wow”, I can make you stop there for one bite. But we need to work on that level, because we make you stand up, and when we give you one cocktail, and then Teppanyaki... It should be really mind blowing... I mean, Ferran came last week and said that all people should remember at least two dishes from the Teppanyaki. So I’m a bit nervous!

*Do you know any dishes that will be on the menu when you open? Anything we can look forward to?*

Yeah! We want people to focus on the food. There's one small twist, *flan con nato*. *Flan* is pudding, we used to make it in the mould, and *nata* is whipped cream. *Nato* is the ugliest thing I had in Japan, the fermented beans. It was disgusting the first time, but now I like it. I went to a Japanese shop and bought – it's kind of sweet but not sweet, made with miso instead of egg, so it's kind of salty-caramel nato. It's like a desert. *Flan con nato* instead of *flan con nata*. It's the only funny dish we have!

Also, another dish that we made after my last trip to Korea is a marinated crab. It's fermented crab, actually with a soy kimchi, instead of the traditional one with cabbage. It has cabbage, but instead of the chilli one it's not spicy. It's a fast marinade with a sesame leave. I think that we're going to change the crustacean, but we're going to make that dish as well.



*Tell us about your most memorable food trips.*

I think the biggest, “wow”, was Korea. For sure. It was there last year for 15 days. In Korea they have a lot of respect for food, and a lot of techniques and a lot of good products. I mean, I really enjoyed it, more than I was supposed to..

There was the marinated crab. We travelled for an hour and a half, but we were supposed to go to Sempio, but we were super late. They had no places, so we came later. We went back and went for dinner. It was amazing. I arrived, I said I was going to clean my hands, and I went to the toilet. When I was outside there were like 20 dishes on the table, in three minutes! 20 dishes! It's really funny food, because you always have 15 things by the side and all of them are good. Some tastes are strange at the beginning, fermentations that are not kimchi. You can feel them for a long time.

We woke up at 4 o'clock because the jet-lag was hard for me, and there was a 24h place that used to cook oxtail. It's one hour and a half to find it, but when you find it... bah! The crab, the oxtail that was for breakfast... also there was a shoulder of pig. It's cooked kind of

Chinese, it's sweet, not sour. They enjoy it with beer and with shoyu, they mix it. So that was another amazing meal, but it was too fast for me. That's the problem, some of the places were just too fast. But they don't know how to be on the table after they finish everything. You cannot be eating that piece of pork for two hours.

We were in -10°, but it was a really, really nice place. Mingu, Mingles, he's in the 50 best Asian fine dining, it was a really nice experience as well. He changed the place, now we're friends because he brought us to a traditional all-style menu in Korea. He recommended Temple Kitchen, it's vegan. That was another experience, also strange, because it was like 16 courses, and after the fourth course I couldn't eat any more. You are biting all the time – roots and vegetables. Maybe I'm not use to eating so many vegetables, but it was definitely a special experience! Some dishes were fermented, and we didn't know if it was good or not as it was the first day.

O: Aside from South Korea?

OP: Japan. Japan for sure. Next year I'm going back! In Japan, you need to check it out *Unagi Kabuto*, they only cook unagi. But the whole menu... You cannot imagine what an experience that was. It was our last evening in Japan. They were famous because they were featured in the New York Times. You can't make a reservation if you're not Japanese, so you need a friend to phone them. They only speak Japanese, but we understood every part of the eel that we were eating. We ate the beating heart.

He killed the eel in front of you. I prefer to see how they prepare it, but he goes through it and says don't bite it. It's so small. When the guy said don't bite it, of course I did. It tastes like iron. And also the live octopus in Korea, it's a special experience when you're biting. When you put it into your mouth it's not moving. But the taste changes all the time. You're breaking the fibres and you feel taste of the octopus. I will never forget that meal. It was the last night, it was amazing. But I heard they've closed, because a friend was trying to go there a year ago and he couldn't find it.

*Besides Korea and Japan..*

Mexico. They love to eat in Mexico. They love food, they love to cook. I have many Mexican friends here in Barcelona, and they said, "okay, you have to go to that corner in Roma...". There was a woman who, after forty years, was in the same corner on Sundays. She was making purple corn quesadillas with so much love. With courgette flowers. You can travel two hours to eat that for breakfast, and it's 10 minutes, you cannot enjoy a quesadilla for more than ten minutes, but it makes perfect sense to travel for it.

*Tell us about Mexico City, what are your favourite restaurants?*

Street food. I want the most authentic and emphatic food if it's what they have. I really enjoyed the markets, and there was a *taquería* that they said we had to go to for the pork intestine. We went there and we really enjoyed it.

For fine dining, I love *Quintonil*. I think he has a really clean way of cooking. That was a really nice place, and nice food. But we enjoyed the street food much more in DF, in Oaxaca as well. But Mexico I think you could spend one year just eating and travelling.

Street food is also amazing in Thailand. We were in Bangkok and I had women who were like 70 years old preparing soup with oxtail, or pork tendons. I had never tasted tendons! It was like a sweet potato. Overcooked, but really, really sweet and with a nice texture. For 40 Bahts, I think it's one Euro? One Euro for such a good meal! In Thailand I feel that I cannot

eat as much as I want. I prefer a day of 48 hours and to have four lunches and four dinners, all of them as street food.

Even in Hoi Chi, in Vietnam, we went to a restaurant, but I didn't want to go to restaurants there as it doesn't feel authentic. They're trying something they're not used to. In the street, people cook the real food of every city and nation.

*Back to Barcelona. Guide us through this city.*

There is a Mexican restaurant, it's called *Tlaxcal*. He's a good friend of ours, they started like five years ago. It's casual food. The first question I ask people is "How much do you want to spend?". That's like 25 per person, but it's drinking good micheladas, things like that, and you can have five courses between two people. They have a tongue taco, it's amazing. The tostada ceviche is amazing, also with chipotle mayonnaise. Fried quesadillas are nice. It's a nice place – it's cool, it's casual, relaxed. They've started playing all the football matches, so when Barça played it was perfect for me, because you have good food with a match!

And now they've opened a cevichería called *Costa Pacífico*, it's amazing. When you come back you have to go there! It's really spicy food, aguachiles...

*Where else?*

Shunka is my favourite restaurant in Barcelona. It's Japanese. When I was starting to study as a chef, I remember it said in a newspaper, "Mejor restaurante en Barcelona, Shunka". And I was like, "What is Shunka?" I had no money to go to Shunka because I was studying, so my parents paid the train for me. And then when I discovered it, it was like... you can always have the same *unagi nigri*, the same *ikura nigri*.

Shunka had a small makeover, but it was the same for 15 years. If you go, ask for the bar. It's a different experience, but it's the same food, but you see when people cut the fish. We don't eat anything cooked, I think, when we're there. The owner's name is Hideki Matsuhisa, and he also has a fine dining place, Shunka, with one Michelin star. And he opened Kak Koy, it's a kind of bar, but there are no waiters. It's a very interesting, kind of *izakaya*. His three restaurants are three seconds from each other, so he has a small empire. He opened Majide, it's the same as Shunka but in a different neighbourhood. It's the same food, they are so strict with that. I've been going every Sunday to Shunka for one year.

*BarBas* I like. It's in Plaza Catalunya, in the centre. One part of the menu is like *vermut* – you know *matrimonio* – the wedding? It's a white anchovy, vinegar, and inside there is an anchovy. It's called wedding. It's a kind of sandwich, with one fish and another fish, and we used to eat it for *vermut*, before lunchtime. When you go to your parents' house, or maybe you meet some friends for some drinks, and you have a *matrimonio*, chips... They make their own potato chips and for me it's, *chapeau!* You can enjoy a potato chip because they fry it with a traditional big fryer. Mussels in *escabeche*, *berberecho* this is just the *vermut*. And then they have salads, and a lot of seasonal products. The best season to go BarBas is now – mushrooms, black truffle, everything. There's a menu, and you can enjoy a really good selection of cheese.

Some meats, like Presa, are Iberian, from the *matanza* – the season when they kill the pork, February/ March. They have a special menu, and you can choose the part, so it's a product temple. It's kind of Bodega, from Albert, but not as high [quality]. This respect for the quality – it's like three, four tastes in one dish, and that's it.

I love bars. Shunka, all of them have bars.

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*The tip*

There's another nice place, an Italian. It's called Bacaro, just behind La Boquería. When you go by the main entrance, you turn on the left and it's called Calle Jerusalem. It's a Venetian, Italian kitchen - it's so fresh. I ate the best squid I've had in my life there. It was just a squid grilled with some vegetables. Chapeau!

They also make liver – it's not really common to find liver – with polenta, a traditional dish. You need to be really hungry to go there. Shunka you can go without being hungry, but [for Bacaro] you have to be.

Machiroku. It's a 9.50€ menu. It's traditional Japanese, not a beautiful place. It's like Japan. They work from 9.30-13.30. They have miso soup, it's always the same. Same temperature, same tofu... You get the miso soup, then the *yaki soba* without the vegetables, just the noodles with the spicy sauce. Then you get the *chirashi*, it's a big bowl of sushi rice with salmon sashimi on top, and salmon rolls and some *nori*. As desert, you only have matcha tea, ice cream, or red bean ice cream – always with ice, always crystallised. It's a nice place.

I go on many Mondays. I used to share with the Mexican, BarBas and Machiroku. They are nice places.

The other menus... I wouldn't order sushi there. All of the restaurants have their own strengths. When I recommend a place, I also use to recommend which kind of food to order. Sometimes they make the best *croquetas* but the worst *patatas bravas*. Not Shunka! But most of them have their highlights, and things that you don't need to eat.