

## Adrià, Ferran

Spanish chef, culinary innovator, restaurateur

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Born: 1962, L'Hospitalet de Llobregat, Spain

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With his renowned restaurant El Bulli, on the Costa Brava, the Spanish chef Ferran Adrià “changed haute cuisine more than any other chef of the past 20 years,” according to a writer for the *Economist* (March 15, 2014), who characterized Adrià as not only a brilliant chef but an “exhaustive note-taker, risk-taker and master of introspection, obsessed with assessing every recipe he created.” Many commentators, and those fortunate enough to have dined at El Bulli, would agree but extend that time frame. Yet Adrià by his own account was indifferent to food while growing up and appears to have stumbled into his career after dropping out of school. The only culinary training he received was on the job, both before and after he took over, at age 24, as the top chef at El Bulli. (The name, which means “the bulldog,” is usually given as elBulli in the company’s own publications.) Adrià’s food is often written about as if it were the result of not just an advanced culinary education but a scientific one as well. Eager to name a trend, writers have generally described the products of El Bulli, which Adrià co-owned with his longtime business partner, Juli Soler, as an expression of the food science called molecular gastronomy, dubbing Adrià’s food “molecular cuisine” (a term Adrià dislikes). Although he embraces and promotes culinary science, Adrià insists that it came second at El Bulli. “We have never ascribed any scientific origin to our creations, which have come about from a purely culinary quest: observation and curiosity have been part and parcel of our activity, in my case for almost a quarter of a century,” he wrote in *The Story of elBulli*, which he made available on the restaurant’s website. “Naturally,” he added, “if a chef wants to label his work as molecular cuisine, he is perfectly at liberty to do so. But in the name of that liberty, I claim to be merely a cook; and everything we do at elBulli as cooking.”

The most influential of Adrià’s inventions so far are hot gelatins, culinary foams—frothed distillations of such foods as asparagus or foie gras—and their even more rarified descendants, almost textureless substances he calls “airs,” which take a single ingredient, such as celery, and reduce it to little more than a bubble. To supplement these, servers at El Bulli sometimes sprayed an aerosol over the table to evoke a particular setting or memory. The idea in all cases was to produce a singular experience of taste and smell—with a dash of theater, even irony. “My philosophy,” Adrià told Phyllis Richman of *Gourmet* (October 1999), “is to make a carrot something more than a carrot.” Reporters or critics visiting El Bulli often describe themselves as initially skeptical about the value of such gimmicky-sounding, willfully provocative food—only to be won over by the actual dining experience. Corinna Hardgrave, writing for the *Irish Times* (June 10, 2006) after the British trade journal *Restaurant* named El Bulli the best restaurant in the world for 2006, asked: “Is El Bulli the world’s best restaurant? Is it worth the wait? Is it worth the journey? The answers have to be

yes. Because, despite how it sounds, El Bulli is not at all pretentious. Yes, it pushes culinary boundaries to extraordinary degrees, but it never loses sight of the fundamental elements of taste.” In *Vanity Fair* (October 2010), Jay McInerney confessed that he had wondered beforehand if the meal he would eat at El Bulli “would be too intellectual to be genuinely enjoyable,” but in fact, he wrote, “it was a hedonistic revel, a feast more than a mind game, Dionysus and Apollo wrestling on the plate, the senses ultimately triumphing over the brain.”

Open only six months a year, from April through September, El Bulli offered one meal a day, consisting of roughly 25 courses, to about 8,000 diners annually—a tiny fraction of the roughly one million people who, according to a 2010 estimate, attempted to reserve a seat each year. (Some commentators set the figure at more than two million.) Reservations were obtained by lottery; “Getting a reservation at El Bulli,” Jeffrey Steingarten noted in the December 2004 issue of *Vogue*, “is three times as hard as getting into Harvard and ten times more difficult than getting into Yale or Princeton.” Having received, in 1997, the highest rating (three stars), from the *Guide Michelin*, which has long been considered an international benchmark of culinary quality, El Bulli has also been lauded by the world’s top chefs. In the 1990s Joël Robuchon, considered one of the best chefs of the twentieth century, pronounced Adrià his heir and the “best cook on the planet,” as Arthur Lubow related in an influential article in the *New York Times Magazine* (August 10, 2003). One Spanish chef described Adrià to Lubow as “stratospheric, a Martian,” while another, Juan Mari Arzak, told Lubow that Adrià was the “most imaginative cook in all history.”

In January 2010 Ferran Adrià and Juli Soler stunned the culinary world with the announcement that El Bulli would close in 2012 for a “two-year period of reflection” and would “reopen in a new format.” As Lisa Abend reported in *Time* magazine (Feb. 18, 2010), Adrià said that El Bulli would “change from a restaurant to a nonprofit foundation, operating as a think tank where talented young chefs will explore new directions in gastronomy. . . . Discussions led by prominent chefs and leaders in art and design will complement their research.” “Each year,” Abend explained, the foundation would “release a book and video that catalog its discoveries, and a team will disseminate those ideas at chefs’ conferences and culinary schools. The fellows will also help Adrià compile an encyclopedia of contemporary cuisine.” Adrià and Soler planned to retain the famed kitchen and the comfortable dining room but add an audiovisual facility and a library. Adrià’s announcement led numerous commentators to assess his accomplishments to date. Abend wrote that beyond “any one dish or technique, he has changed the way people think about food. Chefs around the world have adopted not only his dazzling concoctions but his ethos—to bring science, art and cooking into closer collaboration; to use food not only to please and satiate but also to amaze and provoke; and above all, to constantly reinvent.” For his part, Adrià explained his decision to close El Bulli: “Part of my job is to see into the future, and I could see that our old model is finished,” he said, according to Abend. “It’s time to figure out what comes next.”

### **Education and Early Career**

The older of the two sons of Ginés Adrià, a housepainter, and Josefa Acosta, Ferran Adrià Acosta was born on May 14, 1962, in a city adjoining Barcelona called L’Hospitalet de Llobregat. Sources offer somewhat contradictory impressions of how important food was in Adrià’s family when he was young. His official biography on the website for El Bulli described a “marked interest in everything related to food in his home,” while Anna Murphy, in a profile for the London *Sunday Telegraph* (July 20, 2003), wrote that Adrià’s parents were “unusually lackadaisical in the kitchen.” Murphy quoted Adrià as saying that his parents “never

did any special cooking. It was very mundane.” By all accounts, Adrià’s own tastes as a child and young man were certainly straightforward. “All I ate were French fries and pasta,” he told Elaine Sciolino of the *New York Times* (July 28, 2004). “I was a horrible child.” Looking back, Adrià has argued that this indifference has served him in the long run. “If my parents had told me, ‘You have to do it like this and this,’” he told Murphy, “well, then I would have been influenced by them and I might not have examined things so much.” As it was, Adrià explained to Michael Paterniti of *Esquire* (July 1, 2001), “I came as a virgin to the kitchen.”

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By 1980 Adrià had abandoned his studies at Barcelona’s Institut Politecnic Verge de la Merce, a secondary school preparing students for business careers, intending to spend time on the beaches of the famed Mediterranean island Ibiza. To earn money for his trip he washed dishes in the restaurant of the Hotel Playafels in the resort town of Castelldefels, not far from Barcelona. After the hotel’s chef exposed him to Spanish haute cuisine using the influential nineteenth-century manual *El Practicón* by Ángel Muro, Adrià went on to Ibiza, where for four months in 1981 he held a position with a club on the Cala Leña beach. Brief stints at a series of Barcelona restaurants followed, but this early professional experience ended when he had to report for his obligatory term of military service (a requirement Spain abandoned at the end of 2001). Stationed with the navy in the southern Spanish port city of Cartagena, Adrià worked in the kitchen of a high-ranking officer alongside another budding chef, Fermí Puig, who introduced Adrià to nouvelle cuisine—the lighter, more imaginative, and somewhat more internationally minded style of food then fashionable in elite restaurants around the world.

Encouraged by Puig, Adrià joined him in devoting their month-long break in August 1983 to cooking at one of Spain’s most revered outposts of nouvelle cuisine, El Bulli, located on the Costa Brava near the small town of Roses (Catalan; in Spanish, Rosas). (The restaurant is said to have gotten its name because the original owners kept bulldogs as pets.) In *The Story of elBulli*, Adrià described his first month at El Bulli as “highly intense” and “a real immersion in the world of haute cuisine, since it was the first time I had heard of all the trappings of this world: the critics, the running of a restaurant, gourmet guides, and so on.” Enjoying the work and evidently making a positive impression on Juli Soler, who had been the restaurant’s manager since 1981, Adrià was asked to return the following March, once he had finished his military service and the restaurant, then open ten months a year, had reopened for the 1984 season.

Fewer than seven months after Adrià returned, Soler divided the position of chef de cuisine, the top spot in the kitchen, between Adrià and a coworker, Christian Lutaud. At the beginning of the next season, in mid-March 1985, Adrià’s brother, Albert, then only 15, quit school and joined the staff, becoming the restaurant’s pastry chef in 1987, the same year Ferran Adrià was made the sole chef de cuisine. Though he had risen quickly through the ranks, Adrià remained inexperienced when compared with the chefs running other top-flight restaurants on the continent, and as part of his education he spent part of 1985 interning in the restaurants associated with two practitioners of nouvelle cuisine, Georges Blanc and Jacques Pic.

Throughout these early years, he and Lutaud, along with one of the restaurant's then-owners, also developed their knowledge of contemporary cooking by traveling to France for meals at some of the country's best restaurants. Carles Abellán, an El Bulli cook during Adrià's first years there, told Thomas Matthews of *Wine Spectator* (December 15, 2004), "It was never easy. I remember weeks in winter when we didn't have a single customer." But, Abellán continued, "Ferran was preoccupied, an evil genius. Ferran—at 22!—told me he didn't want a girlfriend, because she would only get in the way. He didn't have a house or a car. He had an objective. He was always looking ahead. At first, he was looking to France. Later, he found himself."

A key turning point for Adrià came on a trip to southern France in 1987, at a presentation by the chef Jacques Maximin. Asked by an audience member to define creativity, Maximin answered, according to the *Story of elBulli*: "Creativity means not copying." Adrià embraced Maximin's idea wholeheartedly. While still employing many of the same principles as nouvelle cuisine, he began putting aside recipes that were clearly outgrowths of French tradition, instead taking up more characteristically Spanish dishes, which he then revised or refined with the addition of more rarified ingredients, such as caviar, lobster, and truffles. Although the project did not turn the restaurant around immediately, it did contribute to El Bulli regaining, in 1990, its second Michelin star, which had been taken away in the mid-1980s.

### Later Career

Soon after Soler and Adrià bought the restaurant, they embarked on a series of renovations, altering the landscaping around the building and updating and dramatically expanding the kitchen until it was as large as the dining area and, by all accounts, a considerably more impressive space. The restaurant's reputation was also being upgraded during these years. In 1992 Joël Robuchon visited El Bulli and, after a meal composed of such dishes as sautéed veal marrow with caviar, accompanied by puréed cauliflower, began trumpeting the restaurant and advising Adrià on how to develop his cuisine. That same year Adrià won the Spanish Academy of Gastronomy's award for best chef de cuisine. At the same time, he was recording some of his recipes and beginning to set down his ideas about food in preparation for his first book, *El Bulli: El sabor del Mediterraneo* (which translates as "El Bulli: The Taste of the Mediterranean"), published in 1993.

While *El sabor del Mediterraneo* had essentially put forward Spanish cuisine varied along French lines, Adrià soon began more actively seeking out techniques that could put El Bulli's food outside any established tradition—other than the broad one of artistic innovation and evolution. In *The Story of El Bulli*, the name given to this new approach is "technique-concept cuisine," and Adrià's dedication to creating a truly original type of cooking was evidenced by the creation, in 1994, of a "development squad" that would take charge of creating new dishes without first thinking of how they would work in the restaurant itself. In the two years previous Adrià had already begun mixing components traditionally associated with sweets into savory foods, as in the case of a potato flavored with vanilla, and vice versa, creating, for example, a mousse made with corn or an avocado sorbet.

In spring 1994 Adrià finally perfected a process he had been working on, sometimes with comically disastrous results, for roughly four years: creating highly flavorful savory foams that would convey a single clear flavor, with just air and a gelling agent to give them shape and structure. "Foam grew out of the idea of mousse," Adrià told Virginia Gerst of the *Chicago Tribune* (March 13, 2006). "I was looking for a way to maintain 100 percent of the integrity of the product, with pure taste and no fat or heavy cream. Then I thought of the foam that forms when you put an orange in a juicer at high speed." First experimenting with a bicycle pump (which he used to inject air into a tomato), Adrià eventually settled on a device used for mak-

ing whipped cream. By mixing the liquefied form of an ingredient with a thickener and injecting that with nitrous oxide, he was able to create an extremely light but solid substance that offered diners a revelatory insight into foods that had come to seem banal. Seized upon by the gourmet world, foams swiftly became a point of controversy—with some chefs doubting whether they could be called food at all—but also of imitation. As the 1990s progressed, foams appeared with increasing frequency on menus around the world, and today, although still found only in a certain type of elite restaurant, they have become a standard part of the repertoire. As Adrià told Thomas Matthews in 2004, “Ten years ago the foams were a scandal. Now they’re routine.”

Bolstered by Adrià’s growing reputation as a genuinely innovative chef, El Bulli began to receive the kind of critical praise enjoyed by only a handful of restaurants in the world. In 1995 it received almost perfect scores from the Spanish guide *Lo mejor de la gastronomía* and the highly influential French series Gault Millau. The next year Robuchon designated Adrià his heir and called him the world’s best chef. (In 2003 Robuchon revised his compliment slightly, telling Arthur Lubow, “Ferran is the best cook in the world for technique.”) Then, in 1997, the *Guide Michelin* awarded El Bulli a third star: the three-star designation was shared at that time by only about two dozen other restaurants in the world. The honor, according to the *Story of elBulli*, “could not but overwhelm us with pride. Without any doubt this marked one of the major milestones for the understanding of our story, and changed the gastronomic world’s outlook and recognition of our cuisine.” Indeed, the French-based *Guide Michelin* had, to some degree, helped reinforce the perception that that country’s chefs have a stranglehold on the highest levels of cuisine, and Adrià seized on fact that El Bulli and two other Spanish restaurants had achieved three stars to announce what he saw as Spain’s new importance to the world of fine food. “French cooking is over,” he had declared, according to Phyllis Richman. Adrià later elaborated to Lubow: “It is a movement in Spain. It is not only me. In a culture with a very strong traditional gastronomy, there is a cuisine for the first time with new techniques and concepts. It is a new nouvelle cuisine.” In his text Lubow agreed, arguing that Adrià and a group of new Spanish chefs, many of whom worked at one time at El Bulli, bring an “idealism” to cooking that is “so sadly missing in France.” “Besieged with soaring costs and smothering regulations,” Lubow added, “French cooks think more imaginatively about brand extension than about recipe invention. They cling to the past, to a tradition of nouvelle cuisine that is becoming as hoary as [the nineteenth-century French chef Auguste] Escoffier. In Spain ... young chefs still touchingly believe they can change the world.”

The same year that El Bulli received its third star, Adrià and the other culinary leaders at El Bulli, including Albert and the chef Oriol Castro, opened a workshop that, located in Barcelona and separate from the restaurant proper, would work exclusively on developing other examples of technique-concept cuisine. In 2000 the workshop, called elBullitaller in the company’s literature (*taller* is Spanish for “workshop”), moved into permanent quarters and took on a full-time, year-round staff, with Adrià joining them during the restaurant’s off-season. In the years after the workshop was first formed, it helped lay the groundwork for some of Adrià’s other famous innovations, including the “airs” first served in 2002 and the many variations the restaurant served, from summer 1998, on hot gelatin—almost a contradiction in terms, since gelatins had traditionally been thought of as needing to be at room temperature or cooler in order to set.

Adrià has always been surprisingly open about his discoveries. He regularly taught classes and invited journalists and other chefs to join him in the workshop, and every year the ranks of the restaurant’s cooking staff were swollen by interns who come from all over to train, often working for room and board alone. As

the brother of one such cook told Paterniti, “In 20, 30, 40 years, they’re going to say Ferran Adrià was the best that ever was, and it’s going to be an honor for my brother to say he chopped his vegetables.”

Adrià also disseminated information about his discoveries by publishing an unprecedented amount of material about El Bulli’s cuisine. In addition to releasing, in 1997, *Los secretos de El Bulli* (“The Secrets of El Bulli”), Adrià embarked, in 2000, on an ambitious project of cataloging the thousands of dishes made in El Bulli’s kitchen from the time he joined the staff, in 1983. The end result was, first, a series of three books (divided into the years 1983 to 1993, 1994 to 1997, and 1998 to 2002) that exhaustively named, numbered, photographed, and explained years of cuisine; the books were then supplemented by detailed recipes on CD-ROMs. (Published over three years in Spain beginning in 2002, the books became available in the United States in 2005.) In subsequent years, the catalog was supplemented by two further volumes (one on 2003 to 2004 and another on 2005). In March 2014 the art publisher Phaidon published *elBulli 2005–2011*, a seven-volume “catalogue raisonné,” in the publisher’s description. The first six volumes comprise the catalogs from 2005 to 2010–2011; the seventh, *Evolutionary Analysis*, covers El Bulli’s history and discusses Adrià’s creative process. Some 700 recipes are included. To Adrià the effort was part of establishing a clear historical record analogous to the type used by art historians. Without such a record, he told Lubow, “It’s as if one were talking of art and they say, ‘Picasso, what year was that painting?’ and you say, ‘I don’t know.’ If we want to talk seriously of creativity, it is necessary that all cooks make a catalog for people a hundred years from now.” Some of his other publications include *Cocinar en casa* (roughly, “Home Cooking”), a 2003 collaboration with the Spanish grocery chain Coprabo that contains recipes using ordinary ingredients from the supermarket, and *Chefs contra el hambre* (2003; published in the United States in 2006 as *Chefs against Hunger*), a fund-raising effort for an international relief organization.

Adrià and Soler significantly expanded the company’s reach by branching out into a range of related businesses, including work with major food conglomerates to develop new products, such as flavored oils, or to refine existing ones. In 1995 they opened a catering wing of El Bulli in Barcelona, and the following year they began consulting with a group opening a new high-end restaurant in Barcelona’s Olympic Port. In 1998 the El Bulli company undertook another consulting project, this time with the Hacienda Benazuza in the town of Sanlúcar la Mayor, helping to shape the hotel’s restaurants; the establishment is now designated an “elBulli Hotel,” according to the company’s website. In 2004 the first of what was intended to be a chain of relatively low-cost restaurants, called Fast Good, opened in Madrid. A direct competitor of such fast-food chains as McDonald’s and Burger King, Fast Good was later run by NH Hoteles. One reason Adrià undertook such a variety of work was, as he frankly stated, “to buy my creative freedom,” as Elaine Sciolino of the *New York Times* (July 28, 2004) quoted him as saying with respect to Fast Good: to help support El Bulli, which, he insisted, made very little money, in part because the price was roughly half to a third what other three-star restaurants typically cost. “I could charge a thousand euros for the meal and still book every seat,” he told Matthews. “But that’s not the character of El Bulli.” Despite its fame the restaurant did not make a profit, according to Adrià, except in 1998–2000.

Adrià was named by *Time* magazine to its list of the world’s 100 most influential people in 2004. In 2002 and then from 2006 through 2009, *Restaurant* magazine declared El Bulli to be the best restaurant in the world. Adrià, however, evidently began to feel that the demands of the restaurant were stifling his creativity. In the view of Jay McInerney, “The pressure of customers, the spectacular disparity between the supply of seats and the number of customers who want them, seems to have reached some kind of tipping point” for

Adrià, who told McInerney, speaking of the foundation, “It will not be a restaurant. No Michelin, no customers, no pressure. Every year will be different.”

Adrià closed El Bulli on July 30, 2011. He turned to business schools for suggestions for realizing his vision for the El Bulli Foundation, and in May 2013, as reported by PRI International (May 10, 2013), at a breakfast event at the IESE business school in Barcelona, he announced that the El Bulli Foundation would fund a food lab where cooks would keep on inventing and then publish their findings, on a webpage called Bullipedia. El Bulli itself would be reopened as an interactive museum, visitor’s center and source of inspiration. “What we want to endure is El Bulli’s concept of innovation,” he said. “The spirit of the place, of all the people who passed through our doors.” In October 2012, however, the resourceful and charismatic Juli Soler, whom McInerney called “Adrià’s business brain,” resigned as co-director of El Bulli Foundation, owing to medical problems.

In 2004 Adrià helped establish an organization devoted to food and science called the Alicia Foundation. Beginning in 2010 Adrià collaborated with Harvard University on its famed Science and Cooking lecture series pairing “world-class” chefs and Harvard researchers, which was developed by the Harvard School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS) and the Alicia Foundation. The Harvard web page devoted to the course explains that it “uses food and cooking to explicate fundamental principles in applied physics and engineering.” Adrià also collaborated with the MITMedia lab on *elBulli1846*, a visual record of every dish Adrià created at El Bulli and one of the three primary initiatives of the El Bulli foundation. In 2005, the Camilo José Cela University in Madrid created an endowed professorship named the Ferran Adrià Chair for the Study of Food Culture and Science.

In 2006 Adrià cooperated in the making of the DVD *Decoding Ferran Adrià*. Hosted by the chef and television personality Anthony Bourdain, the DVD traces the creation of an El Bulli meal from workshop to table. A German documentary, *Cooking in Progress* (2011), followed the restaurant’s 2008–2009 season. In addition to his El Bulli catalogs, Adrià had been involved in educational and art activities before the restaurant closed; afterward, in advance of the opening of his foundation, he helped develop *Innovation in the Science of Food*, an exhibit mounted at the Museum of Science in Boston that opened in February 2014. Around the same time, the exhibit “Ferran Adrià: Notes on Creativity” opened at the Drawing Center in Manhattan, the first stop on a two-year tour of museums in Europe and the United States. “Notes on Creativity” presented, as Roberta Smith reported in the *New York Times* (February 13, 2014), “drawings, notes, notebooks, diagrams, pictograms and prototypes by Mr. Adrià and his various collaborators, among them the chefs Albert Adrià (his brother) and Oriol Castro, the graphic designer Marta Méndez Blaya and the industrial designer Luki Huber.” Smith drew analogies to the work of Joseph Beuys, Joan Snyder, and Cy Twombly, and she noted the “archival instinct that has compelled Mr. Adrià, post-El Bulli, to establish the Bullipedia, which will document all of Western cooking.”

In about 2004 Adrià, who speaks Castilian, Catalan, and French, married his longtime girlfriend, Isabel, who for many years was an administrator at the Barcelona Aquarium, where El Bulli’s catering division and the workshop first came into being. The two shuttle between Roses and Barcelona and reportedly live with great simplicity in both locations.

**Further Reading:**

*Economist* Mar. 15, 2014

El Bulli website

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El Bulli: El sabor del Mediterraneo, 1993

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Chefs contra el hambre, 2003

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