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ÓSCAR MOLINA

The first thing I'd like you to do is to tell us a little bit about what you're doing, if you have any projects in mind, how the season is going at La Gaia, any news...

The summer season at Ibiza Gran Hotel is synonymous with a great deal of hard work and meticulous care to offer our guests an unforgettable experience with exceptional standards of quality. Gastronomy is undoubtedly a fundamental part of leaving a good taste in our diners' mouths, literally in this case. Both at La Gaia and at the hotel's other restaurants, we do our utmost every day to ensure the best service and the finest dishes.

At La Gaia we've just unveiled a new culinary concept, which is getting an extremely positive reception. Mediterranean Kaiseki is my most sincere and personal project and I think that our diners perceive and value this very highly.

At the same time I'm involved in various initiatives that are geared towards shining a spotlight on Balearic cuisine and produce. In Ibiza, like the rest of the Balearic Islands, we have a very rich gastronomic culture, products and techniques that I think we all have the duty to bring to people's attention.

1. How's this new Óscar Molina stage turning out? What does the Mediterranean Kaiseki philosophy consist of?

Mediterranean Kaiseki is a very special project for me. As I say, I think it's the most sincere and personal project I've ever created, the one with which I've best been able to convey my experiences, my past, my emotions. Following the age-old Japanese tradition of *kaiseki*, we have come up with this tasting menu, which is a fusion of *haute cuisine* and creative expression.

With Mediterranean Kaiseki, dining at La Gaia turns into a veritable ceremony in which every detail, colour and texture is balanced to express and bring out the true flavours of each element that makes up the dish.

We've created a global experience because we're absolutely convinced that we're not content with simply offering excellent food and high-quality service. We want to differentiate ourselves by offering our diners special moments and being capable of exciting them with personal and meticulous treatment that makes them feel at home.

2. Is local produce in fashion?

I don't think that the commitment to local produce is a fashion, I think rather it's a question of self-awareness and showcasing our produce. For us, at La Gaia, local produce plays a starring role. Our relationship with primary producers is highly important. We learn, we share, we develop our offer jointly with the producers on the basis of their output. We also do our little bit and have even helped to restore neglected breeds such as the *porc negre* [black pig].

It's true that local produce is staging a comeback and is increasingly present in the world of gastronomy, but I don't think that it's simply a fad. In fact, if we look at the foundations of *kaiseki*, which as I say is an age-old tradition, we can see that it regards seasonal products as more flavourful and assimilated, and that for centuries there has been a culinary commitment to local produce and to including as many local ingredients as possible.

3. How have you managed to obtain this balance between Japanese cuisine and Ibizan produce?

From the outset the Japanese philosophy and essence were a key part of my cooking. In fact, my passion and fascination for the Japanese way of perceiving cooking induced me to travel and immerse myself completely in their cuisine.

In the first years of getting La Gaia up and running we went through a process of natural evolution that led us to research and immerse ourselves in Japanese cuisine and its variants, such as *nikkei*.

Now, the curiosity to try new techniques, flavours and textures capable of surprising us has taken us a step further. We're very aware of the rich environment in which we operate and we've acknowledged the need to reinforce the presence of all things local, whether through produce, techniques or inspiration, delving into what is on our doorstep. Ibiza, the Balearic Islands and the Mediterranean Sea play a leading role in what we offer.

4. A dessert like Santa Inés, made on a base of soft carob caramel and accompanied by ice cream with a touch of Ibizan herbs and mint gel represents a veritable revolution. Where do you get your inspiration from?

With the new La Gaia offering I've sought to convey moments, experiences and landscapes from my daily life that I want to share. That particular dessert came from a walk I did on Pla de Santa Inés with my comrade in arms, Paco Alcahud, where we were looking for inspiration. We wanted the dish to represent a place as wonderful as Pla de Santa Inés.

5. What takes priority in your cooking?

I believe that our gastronomy is unique in terms of flavours, highly authentic and full of contrasts. We encompass everything from very piquant flavours full of zest to more sober and earthy tastes, but all of them feature as highlights of the meal.

For us, succeeding in expressing the authentic taste in every element of the dish is fundamental, and the worst thing that could occur is a dish being flat or insipid.

At the same time the aesthetic component is highly important. We create very beautiful gastronomy, with highly attractive dishes that become a form of artistic expression.

6. Do you think that the restaurant business on the island is set on the right course? What could be improved?

Yes, whoever was familiar with this island 10 years ago, as I was, can say so with absolute certainty. The island has evolved in all aspects, starting with the manufacturers who have spotted a burgeoning market, the distributors who have looked for new products in order to become much more competitive, the restaurants, which have paid careful attention to their offerings and of course the end-customers, who have embraced the various proposals made by Ibiza. It's also important to underscore the role of widely-renowned chefs, who have opened their restaurants on the island and act as an international mouthpiece and lure for a more gastronomically-minded and discerning clientele.

Seasonality and the cost of housing are possibly the greatest problems that all the businesses on the island face, including restaurants. However, I'm convinced that the rise and growth of the restaurant business on Ibiza is unstoppable, because I believe that we're pioneers in the creation of successful conceptual restaurants, and thanks to the fact that they travel all over the world, they can be seen in London, Miami and Madrid. It's also worth pointing out that Ibiza has become an icon for all these top international restaurants: "if you're not on Ibiza, something's wrong".

So if anything can be improved, it's the commitment of all of us who work in this industry to create something special and unrepeatable on this small patch of the planet. I believe that to a large extent success stems from teams of people, less so from venues.

7. These days gastronomy goes beyond eating well and has become an experience in itself. What would you say to those who still find it difficult to 'open their minds'?

There are times when diners struggle to tear themselves away from traditional cuisine and embrace fusion cooking, for example. I would ask such people the following question: what's wrong with combining concepts that we like? I believe that if a chef is capable of extracting the best from various types and styles of cuisine and mix them in a coherent and informed way, the result must necessarily be good. And this can be extrapolated to other types of cooking. Professional cooks now have a training that enables them to have a very wide outlook and knowledge, which they can express in their creations. For me the ideal thing is to let yourself be carried away, forgetting your prejudices and enjoying one of the greatest pleasures in life.

8. Has Ibizan gastronomy obtained the recognition it deserves? Is Ibiza succeeding in taking its next step, beyond leisure?

A great deal of work is being done to ensure that both concepts, leisure and gastronomy, complement one another. This is why many initiatives have been launched in what is an extremely lengthy process, which has led to an increasingly attractive offer where things are being done better and better.

While there are many people and institutions that put considerable effort into positioning the island as a gastronomic destination, I think that Ibizan cuisine still doesn't have the recognition it deserves given all the work that has been done.

But as my father used to say, where there's a will there's a way, which is why I think it's just a question of time and diligence.

9. What improvements would you make to the restaurant business?

I'd improve the training and preparation of those who'll have to take over from us. These youngsters are tempted by a job with a minimum salary and the temporary nature of the post and the outcome is that they stop studying, since nobody requires them to study and it's the easy thing to do.

If we want to have a better future, we have to invest in it and foster high-quality training that teaches values that will be indispensable in the future.

I'd like to invite all chefs, maître d's and managers to take an active part in the colleges that we have. The latter are anxious to arrange collaborations of this kind and these initiatives are a long-term investment for everyone.

10. What is your greatest virtue as a cook? And as a person?

I think this is the most difficult question.

I try to excel every day and I consider myself to be rather stubborn. I suppose that this answer applies both to the professional and personal sides of my life.

11. What ingredient have you been unable to master?

Nothing occurs to me specifically. It's true that, sometimes, when we've decided to work with particular ingredients we've had to carry out many tests and gone round in circles. Sometimes it works out at the first attempt, and sometimes it's a question of trial and error.

The main problem is working with seasonality. The availability and output of certain products is not as high as we would like it to be and this affects the course that we take.

Even so, I suppose that ingredients with the strongest flavours, such as carobs, are those that can be most difficult to manage, because unless you're careful with the measurements, the entire dish tastes the same.

12. Do you feel the pressure of the current gastronomy boom and the high expectations?

I'm delighted about what's happening. I think that we form part of the boom and that's why I believe in it. Even so, I have to confess that the sensation of being part of this movement on the island causes me to feel a certain degree of pressure, because we can't disappoint the people who have trusted in us. The same applies to the guys in the kitchen and the guys front of house, who do their utmost every day to provide an impeccable service.

13. Any unfulfilled dreams?

Many [laughing], dreams are endless.

14. Recently the Balearic Islands Association of Journalists and Writers gave you the 2018 'Chef of the Year' award. What qualities do you think they saw in you to deem you worthy of this great honour? How did it feel?

The first thing I'd like to emphasise is that it wasn't me who won the award, it was won by the team that works at the Ibiza Gran Hotel on a daily basis. Each one of them is the "*Xef de l'any*", so I think the quality they saw in me to deem me worthy of the honour was all of the team, and I feel happy and proud to belong to this wonderful family.