



TO HIM, IT'S A SALAD Jordi Butró, above, the chef at *Espai Sucre* in Barcelona, and his spiced milk pudding with matchsticks of green apple, left.

Photographs by Michele Cavali for The New York Times

In Barcelona, One Has Dessert and Then Dessert

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delivered a plate upon which rested a curious pile. Tiny cubes of spiced milk pudding peered out from under matchsticks of green apple. There were a few leaves of baby arugula, paper-thin flecks of a peppery caramel, dabs of lemon curd and lime kefir and a single line of toffee drawn straight across the pile like a road in the forest. I reached for my fork, and soon found that it was no different from eating a salad. It was simply the weirdest salad ever created. Like a Cobb salad, some flavors blended while others popped. It was tart, creamy, peppery and sugary.

Next came that Manchego cheese "tart," only the cheese rested underneath the tart shell, a flaky, sweet thyme biscuit. It was accompanied by — what else? — a snappy pineapple sorbet and cubes of fresh, sweet pineapple.

As my waiter drew away my plate, I paused to take in the room, and to make sure everyone else was eating the same thing; it seemed odd to be eating desserts this way. On a neighboring table was a single decoration: a glass flask filled with Demerara sugar and a test tube propping up a single flower. It was tongue in cheek, I hoped.

The room itself is spare, like an empty stage, with a dark ceiling, baby blue walls and lights that dim to darkness in the corners. A rectangular window in the back appears to offer a glimpse of the kitchen. A man's head can be seen shifting and wagging as he works in his small cell. It is the dishwasher. The chefs are concealed in the room beyond.

By the Manchego course, there was no doubt that the content of the dishes was shifting: flavors were intensifying and concentrating. And this, I later learned, is intentional. Like a savory meal, Mr. Butró's desserts have a deliberate progression.

"The first two almost aren't desserts," he said. "They are more ideas of a dessert."

"You start," he added, "with things that are light, acidic, spicy, very refreshing. For cleaning the palate. Like the soup." Then the flavors become heavier, more tightly constructed, just as they do when you begin a meal with a frisée salad and move on to cassoulet.

Seeing desserts in terms of courses comes naturally to Mr. Butró, who began his career by studying to become a chef. He attended the hotel school in Barcelona. When the course turned to a brief introduction to pastry, that was all it took.

Soon after, he began working at *Escriba*,

SMOKY TEA CREAM WITH CHOCOLATE, BLACK SESAME AND YOGURT

Adapted from *Espai Sucre*, Barcelona, Spain

Time: 1 hour, plus at least 6 hours' chilling and freezing

For chocolate ice cream:

- 6 ounces bittersweet chocolate
- 4 large egg yolks
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 2 cups milk
- 3/4 cup heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons instant coffee

For smoky tea cream:

- 1/2 cup milk
- 1 cup heavy cream
- 2 tablespoons sugar
- Scant 1/2 cup Darjeeling tea leaves
- 1 1/2 tablespoons Lapsang souchong tea leaves
- 1/4 cup dried currants

For sesame tuiles:

- 1/2 cup white corn syrup
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 3/4 cup black sesame seeds

For chocolate cake:

- Oil and flour for baking pan
- 2 tablespoons butter
- 4 ounces bittersweet chocolate
- 4 large egg whites
- 2 1/2 tablespoons sugar
- 3 large egg yolks

For assembly:

- 2 cups high-quality plain yogurt.

1. Prepare chocolate ice cream: Using a microwave oven or double-boiler, melt chocolate, then place in large bowl. In a small bowl, mix together the egg yolks and sugar. In a medium saucepan, combine milk, cream and instant coffee and simmer. When mixture steams, quickly whisk about 1/4 cup into egg mixture. Slowly pour egg mixture into remaining milk mixture, and reduce heat to low. Simmer, stirring with a wooden spoon, until thick enough to coat back of spoon. Immediately pour into chocolate. Stir well, cool and refrigerate for about 6 hours.

a pastry shop in Barcelona known for its chocolate work. Stints at *Le Crillon*, *Pierre Gagnaire*, *Michel Bras* and *El Bulli* followed. When he returned to Barcelona, he took a job as the pastry chef at *Jean Luc Figueras*.

"When I was at *Jean Luc*, my boss asked me, 'Why don't you have a tasting menu for dessert?' And so I said, 'O.K., I'll do it.' And it was a great success." With *Espai Sucre*, which means "sugar space," he took the idea one step further.

Mr. Butró opened *Espai Sucre* in a part of Barcelona called *El Born*, which not

Place in ice cream maker to freeze, and store in freezer until needed.

2. Prepare tea cream: In a medium pan, combine milk, heavy cream, sugar and tea leaves. Bring to boil, remove from heat. Strain over a bowl, pressing lightly to extract liquid. Return liquid to a clean saucepan, add currants, simmer till slightly thickened, about 3 minutes. Cool and refrigerate.

3. Prepare sesame tuiles: Heat oven to 400 degrees. Line a baking sheet with parchment paper. In a small saucepan, combine corn syrup, sugar and 2 tablespoons water. Boil until mixture is slightly thickened, about 5 minutes. Mix in sesame seeds and immediately pour mixture in a large pool onto baking sheet. Bake until mixture melts and spreads very thinly across baking sheet, about 6 minutes. Remove from heat and allow to cool. Break into large pieces.

4. Prepare chocolate cake: Oil and flour a 7 1/2-inch-square baking pan. Heat oven to 450 degrees. Using a microwave oven or double-boiler, melt together butter and chocolate. In an electric mixer fitted with a whisk attachment, combine egg whites and sugar. Whisk until mixture holds peaks, add egg yolks and mix to blend. Gently fold in chocolate mixture, and pour into pan. Bake until mixture is set and dry, about 5 minutes. Set aside and allow to cool. Trim dry edges from cake, and cut six 1-inch squares.

5. To assemble: On each of six serving plates, place a square of chocolate cake. Drizzle a tablespoon of smoked tea cream around edge of cake. Top with 1/2 cup yogurt, covering both cake and tea cream. Garnish with one or more sesame tuiles and two small scoops of ice cream. Drizzle drops of tea cream around edge of each plate.

Yield: 6 small servings

very long ago was unsafe to walk around in at night. Over the last few years, it has become something like Manhattan's Lower East Side, where young cooks with lots of ideas but little money have come to open restaurants. Just down the street, at *Santa Maria*, you can have both sushi and *tapas* like liver cream with poached quail eggs. Or, at *Comerc 24*, green onion tempura that you dip in a soy sauce foam. These preceded my dessert menu, but left less of an imprint.

It would please me if my fourth course at *Espai Sucre* was picked up by New York chefs and copied as often as, say, salmon

tartare. A warm apricot pit cake sat poised next to a fat swirl of mascarpone and coffee cream. Candied kumquats and little, crumbly cinnamon nuggets littered the bowl. The waiter poured a faintly sweet milk infused with lemon and cinnamon over the dessert, which moistened the cake and made the whole thing as easy to love as a bowl of cereal.

Then the winds shifted once more. "This is a different kind of dessert," my waiter said, as he placed the last plate before me. "What do you mean?" I asked. "Um, it's very different. You just need to know that," he said, then walked away.

It looked to be the most conventional of the bunch, with a black sesame seed and caramel tuile balancing a quenelle of chocolate ice cream, but it was the most pungent and the least sweet. A flourless chocolate cake lay in a pool of Lapsang souchong sauce with plump currants. They were all hidden under a blanket of yogurt. The yogurt came across as salty, the tea smoky, with the potency of something like sautéed mushrooms. But then there was a chocolate cake and a hint of coffee. Sweetness was fleeting, I ate slowly, and appreciatively. It is rare to taste something so original, and you know when it is not just an act of whimsy.

By 2 in the morning, I was finishing up. The waiters were drying glasses as I tasted the remains of my petit four plate: a salty, airy cookie that began tasting of curry and ended with the flavor of peanut butter; a phyllo pyramid, the size of a pencil eraser, filled with lemon and rosemary marmalade; almonds and cacao nibs covered in white chocolate and a cold cube of bitter dark chocolate and coffee.

The restaurant runs on a slightly later rhythm than most in a city in which dinner before 8 p.m. is unheard of. On the weekends there are two settings, one around 5 p.m. and the second around 11 p.m. There is no à la carte dessert menu. Just two dessert-tasting menus, one with three choices (\$18.00), the other five (\$28). "In my view," Mr. Butró said, "if I was a client and I came, I would eat a dish or two savory, then come have the grand dessert menu." And for himself? He said he would rather have meals that consist of one savory dish to every three sweet ones.

Since opening two years ago, Mr. Butró has given in and added a short list of savory dishes. It is slipped into the back of the menu. But, Mr. Butró pointed out, "In all of the savory dishes there are sweet elements." His beef fillet, for instance, is kept in check by a green apple sorbet.

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By AMANDA HESSER

BARCELONA, Spain
IT was well past 11 p.m. when I entered Espai Sucre, not particularly late for Barcelona, perhaps, but I had already eaten dinner. The restaurant was full, diners deep into their meals, their voices leaping to the high dark ceiling, then seeping back down. I opened to the main page of the menu and decided to go all out for the five-course tasting menu.

For the next three hours, I had one of the most interesting meals of my life, textured with salads, flavors of curry, smoky Lapsang souchong tea, kumquats and yogurt. Not one dish was savory.

Espai Sucre is a rare beacon on a relatively homogenous dining landscape. Rare because it's attempting something original, without a single gimmick. It is a formal restaurant dedicated entirely to desserts.

That would be enough to entice the chronically hungry, myself included. I know almost no one who would refuse apple tart followed by a ginger cake and tiny chocolates. But that is precisely what you won't find

here. Jordi Butrón, the chef and creator of Espai Sucre, holds your hand and leads you down a thought-provoking, delicious path to a new place where salty, sour, hot and sweet flavors live together in harmony.

Gone are the familiar landmarks like pear tarts and lemon cakes, whipped cream or that pesky mint leaf. Instead, you are put at ease by his skillful, confident take on creations like cubes of spiced milk pudding, a circle of baked Manchego cheese that sends up wafts of dried thyme, and flakes of peppery caramel.

My first course arrived with no fuss, and plodded along modestly. The waiter set down a bowl containing a lump of black tea sorbet, scented with lemon and cardamom. It lay on top of cardamom and lemon creams and tiny dice of passion fruit and pineapple. The waiter then poured a cool Darjeeling tea infused with cinnamon, clove and more cardamom into the bowl. The sorbet became an outcropping in the brisk tea and cardamom soup. It was clean, fruity, and with the tea, bracing.

Then the action began. My waiter

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Michele Carel for The New York Times

SMOKY SWEET Tea cream with chocolate and yogurt at Espai Sucre.