

The legend lives on

The fascinating story behind the legend that is elBulli restaurant was on display at Somerset House in London. Jackie Mitchell paid a visit

The story of how Spanish restaurant elBulli evolved to be voted the world's best restaurant is encapsulated in the exhibition "elBulli: Ferran Adrià and The Art of Food", which ended its run at Somerset House, London on 29 September.

This retrospective relates elBulli's 50-year history through a series of interactive, historical displays. The restaurant, which closed on 30 July 2011, used to receive two million reservation requests for 8,000 places a year.

The exhibition also charts the career of Ferran Adrià, globally recognised as a pioneer of innovative culinary techniques. It transferred from Barcelona, Spain and as Claire Catterall, head of exhibitions at Somerset House says: "The biggest challenge was fitting it into our gallery. It came fully formed from Barcelona so we had to rearrange and readjust it. I think it was better than at Barcelona. Here, the timeline exhibit fitted continuously in one room whereas in Barcelona it had to be broken up into three different rooms."

The exhibition starts with "The Last Supper", which was served on 30 July, 2011 when elBulli closed. A huge screen shows footage of Adrià at the restaurant on that historical night along with other displays. This was Catterall's favourite section. "I love the giant-sized meringue bulldog sculpture unveiled on the closing day of elBulli. In Barcelona this section was at the end of the exhibition, but we flipped it around so it was at the beginning. We thought it was important to let people who weren't familiar with elBulli understand how well thought of it was and how the chefs worked together to

create that last meal." Staff were vitally important to elBulli's success and "The Last Supper" section includes a list of all the chefs and service staff who worked at the restaurant.

Further into the exhibition, other screens dominate the walls revealing daily life in the restaurant, so that you feel part of the dining experience. Visitors are able to experience table service at elBulli at one display, as two people could sit at a table and be served 'virtually' by means of an overhead projector.

Bulldog spirit

Founded in 1956 by Dr Hans Schilling and his wife Marketta at Cala Montjoi in Costa Brava, Spain, the restaurant was named after Marketta's French bulldogs or "bullis". Incredibly, as pictures and early menus show, elBulli started life as a mini golf centre, grill room and bar, but by the mid 1970s, Jean-Louis Neichel had secured the first Michelin star.

As the original appointment letter shows, Ferran Adrià arrived at elBulli on work experience in 1983 but soon joined the payroll and within six months was appointed co-head chef. In 1987, at the age of 25, Adrià took charge of the kitchen and after meeting Jacques Maximin, one of the chefs of the nouvelle cuisine movement, he adopted his philosophy of "creativity means not copying". Glass cases and display boards illustrate examples of the dishes he created, such as vanilla potatoes with crayfish and avocado pear shavings with brown crab.

Catterall says: "It's incredible elBulli kept so much information, photographs



Top left: Food items made out of plasticine – used to see how new dishes will look on the plate



Middle left: A chronological display of every dish the restaurant has ever served



Bottom left: The symbols created to represent various foods and, in the cabinet below, a display of elBulli artefacts

Top right: A montage of magazine covers featuring elBulli above the boxes of sweet treats served with every dish.

Right: Ferran Adrià poses with the statue of a French bulldog ("elBulli") that stood in the restaurant

The exhibition can be seen in Boston from February 2014 and in Madrid from June 2014



and documents, and fascinating to learn how Adrià created the concepts. They were light years ahead. You don't get a sense of this until you see the timeline. Adrià, who was instrumental in curating it for Barcelona, loved the exhibition here and was pleased it came to London."

The year 1990 marked a change for elBulli as Adrià and Juli Soler, the long-serving restaurant manager became co-owners.

Theory and practice

Adrià opened a laboratory to train his team in the theory and practice of creativity, to share his philosophy and invent new methods. Here in 1994 he invented the 'panaché' – puréed vegetable, an iconic dish. The displays show creating new dishes was a meticulous process. Pictures were taken of every dish and plasticine models of the food made to see what it looked like on the plate.

Astonishingly, elBulli has catalogued every dish served since 1987, all 1,846. Thumbnail pictures of every dish can be seen in an illuminated montage. Along one wall is an interactive display of recipes with a picture of the dish, the date and a video screen showing the food being prepared. It is a fascinating insight into how the restaurant's cuisine developed.

A strong message from the exhibition is that the restaurant will leave its legacy. The elBullifoundation will include the conversion of the restaurant into a museum and visitor centre and 'elBulli DNA' where experts will experiment in creativity and post the results online. We were treated to a preview of Bullipedia, another Foundation project, comprising online mindmaps of food and recipes that people can share.

As Adrià says: "Even though elBulli restaurant is closed, its spirit is very much alive and this exhibition is one of the ways of keeping it so."

So it seems that the ethos of elBulli will be with us for many years to come. ■