

ROAD TRIP

While Alinea was undergoing renovations for a 10th anniversary reboot, Grant Achatz headed to Madrid for a dazzling six-week pop-up. We had to see it for ourselves.

By Lisa Shames

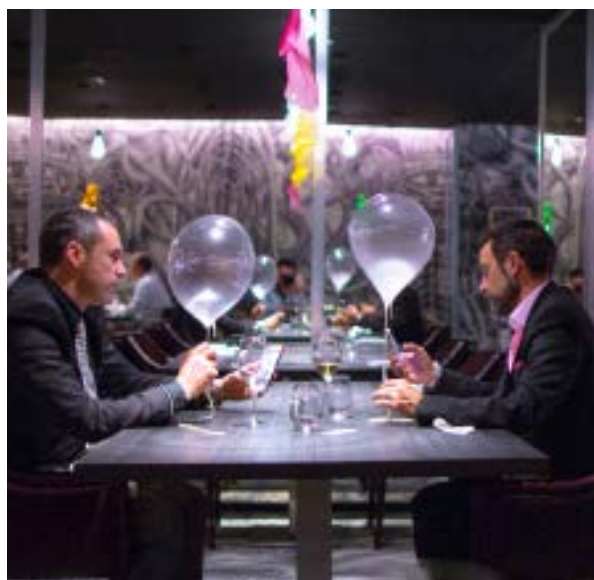
It's the dessert that launched a thousand YouTube videos and lured millions of viewers, and Grant Achatz, the world-renowned chef who created it, is making it in front of me. "This," he says, drawing a teardrop of white sauce on a silicon mat covering the table, "is allspice." Then, mandarin orange puree, hazelnuts, sherry-flavored caramels (in edible wrappers) and a frozen milk-chocolate log become part of the delicious work of art. Finally, Achatz showers the table in what looks like fairy dust—"Vanilla," he says, simply—and then grabs the orange-colored mobile hanging above my head and shatters it on top. "*Todos los sentidos* [all the senses]," says my dinner companion. "*Si*," is all I can reply.

This performance was taking place not in Achatz' kitchen in Lincoln Park's Alinea, which celebrates its 10th anniversary this year, but in a stunning subterranean space in the NH Collection Eurobuilding Hotel in a tony neighborhood in Madrid. From mid-January to early February, as Alinea went through a major renovation, Achatz, along with 47 staff members from his three Michelin-starred restaurant, moved to the city for a six-week pop-up. Spaniards—and anyone else lucky enough to nab a coveted reservation—got a taste of what Chicagoans have known for years: Achatz and his culinary creations are a force to be reckoned with.

IT WILL COME as no surprise to those who know the chef that even though he'd been in the Spanish capital for a month, he hadn't seen much of it. "I've only left the hotel twice," says Achatz. "I'm having a different kind of fun." Fun: That's just the word I would use to describe my overall experience at Alinea Madrid too.

Over 20 or so courses, Achatz mixed new dishes inspired by his Spanish surroundings with some of his signature items, including Black Truffle Explosion (a raviolo filled with liquified truffles and butter) and Hot Potato Cold Potato (a truffled potato and Parmesan shooter of sorts), one-bite wonders that have been on the Alinea menu from its early days. "We felt a responsibility to bring part of Chicago to Spain," he says. Even some of the innovative serving pieces created by Crucial Detail, a longtime Alinea collaborator, made the trip overseas.

The Windy City love, though, was evident even



WHERE THERE'S SMOKE
From top: Moqueca with sea bass, lobster, tiger's milk, coconut and citrus vapor; diners contemplating the edible green apple helium balloons; artist Joan Miró served as plating inspiration for the rouget course.

before diners sat down. Just inside the entrance of the 40-seat restaurant was a table topped with "Greetings from Chicago" postcards depicting hot dogs, the flavors of which—no ketchup, of course—were captured perfectly in a small gel-like treat. That whimsical and delicious bite set the tone for the rest of the meal.

Jar Can Jar paid homage to the wonderful preserved seafood of Spain and included caviar, razor clams and octopus. A beautiful plating of rouget, a Mediterranean fish, was inspired by Barcelona artist Joan Miró. Chicago's urban feel came back into the meal with Graffiti, a mix of wild



PHOTOS BY SPANISH HIPSTER



JUST DESSERTS
Clockwise from top left: Alinea Madrid's dessert course is created on top of the table; Grant Achatz (front) and his Chicago team in Madrid; Alinea Head Chef Mike Bagale preparing the rouget course; a server spray paints a green parsley sauce onto the plate for the Grattifi wild mushroom course.

«*“I was worried that when an American restaurant that did progressive cuisine came onto their turf [Spain], they might resist and rebel against it. But everyone was very receptive and the reviews were really great.”*

—GRANT ACHATZ, ALINEA, CHEF-PARTNER >>

...CONTINUED mushrooms and herbs topped with a thin cement-colored meringue made out of porcini. “Some restaurants have a garden outside their back door; we have an alley,” said the server as he began spray-painting the plate with a bright green parsley sauce. When my dining companion said she was chilly, a ceramic bowl of what looked like burning charcoal was brought to the table. It turned out to be the Wagyu course, which was later carved tableside.

THE INITIAL IDEA for the pop-up came about through Achatz’s friendship with acclaimed Spanish chef Dani García, top toque at the Dani García and BiBo restaurants in the coastal resort city of Marbella. “Spain has always been close to my culinary heart,” says Achatz, who often credits the time he spent at Ferran Adrià’s legendary El Bulli, on the country’s northeast coast, as a major source of inspiration. García connected Achatz with Patricia Mateo of Spanish communications agency Mateo & Co. and Hugo Rovira, managing director of NH Hotel Group for Spain and Portugal—and within

less than a year the idea became a reality. “You have to find partners who are able to open those doors for you,” says Achatz, “and we found that.”

While Achatz and his business compatriot Nick Kokonas are no strangers to pop-ups—in the fall of 2012, Alinea and New York City’s Eleven Madison Park traded places for a week—this one was especially tricky. “There are so many variables when you think about the logistics of a pop-up,” says Achatz. “But when you do one outside the U.S., the complexities are absolutely incredible.”

With Alinea slated to reopen early next month and with details limited, one can’t help but wonder how the Madrid experience will come into play. “The interesting thing with the position we’re in now is that the environment, products and diners are different. All of this is informing what we do every day, and will inform what we do when we get home,” says Achatz, adding that he and his staff learned a lot from the challenges of working in a kitchen and space not their own. “It gives me confidence that when we reopen, the new Alinea is going to be radically different.” ■

DESSERT AND GRAFFITI PHOTOS BY SPANISH HIPSTER; ALINEA TEAM PHOTO BY IULIU GASPAR;