

Quique Dacosta



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A driving force behind produce-led dining in the autonomous community of Valencia, Quique Dacosta has revolutionised the region's dining scene, and is now spreading his influence further afield.

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Quique Dacosta is a phenomenal force within the Valencian restaurant industry. His eponymous restaurant in the coastal town of Dénia, which only seats twenty-two, has held three Michelin stars for nearly a decade, and sits at number forty-two on the list of the World's 50 Best Restaurants. Deessa, his restaurant in Madrid, has recently gained its second star. He has four restaurants in the city of Valencia: the two-Michelin-starred El Poblet (the original name of the Dénia restaurant), Mercatbar, Vuelve Carolina and Llisa Negra. And as if all that wasn't enough, in June 2019, six months before the pandemic hit, he opened Arros QD in London, bringing a taste of Valencia to the U.K.'s capital.

Dacosta started cooking at fourteen years old, working in a local pizzeria and studying cookbooks written by the best French chefs of the time. In 1986, at the age of eighteen, he began working in what is now his own restaurant in Dénia. Unlike many other top chefs, Dacosta has never trained under anyone else; instead he has gained his knowledge studying books and travelling to the world's top restaurants.

The result was a desire to produce his own fine dining experience, using the very best produce that was around him, something no one else was doing in the late eighties and early nineties, 'I would look around and see our fantastic citrus fruits, the rice we have, our olive oil, the red prawns in Dénia and think: why isn't this what we use in our high-end cooking?' he tells me. 'It's easy to forget now, but people just didn't think of our own produce as suitable for a grand occasion, and I really wanted that to change.'



Almond blossom
by Quique Dacosta



Piluka's box
by Quique Dacosta

To say he has been successful would be to sell him short; the whole of the autonomous community of Valencia is now full of restaurants showcasing the best of local produce. Twenty-two of them have a Michelin star, with many of them boasting experience at Dacosta's flagship. The esteem in which he is held in Valencia was made obvious in 2009 when he was named 'Valencian of the 21st Century' by the Valencian newspaper Las Provincias, but what is really noticeable is the effect mentioning his name has on other people in Valencia today. Restaurant owners smile and talk in awed tones about their experience in the Dénia restaurant, while others show off about using the same supplier as Dacosta. Winemakers talk about the support and encouragement they received from him when they started out, and there is a strong sense of respect and affection.

This affection is partly a reaction to Dacosta's own character. While extremely debonair, dressed in designer suits, crisp white shirts (his name embossed on them), gelled hair and designer glasses, one gets the impression that his style is a conscious branding decision rather than personal vanity. When asked about how highly he is regarded in Valencia, he avoids answering the question and takes a while to admit that it's a bonus for his suppliers to mention his restaurant as one of their customers. On the subject of red prawns, however, he has plenty to say, 'the thing about red prawns is they are not all the same. The ones from here in Dénia are very different to the ones in, say, Sicily. Then you have to think about who has fished them and how they have treated them. Then if you are not eating them in the area they were caught, in what state have they reached you, how long have they taken to get to you. What is it you are actually eating?'

In the Dénia restaurant he works very closely with Head of Development Juanfra Valiente and head chef Carolina Alvarez, and before our interview Dacosta had been spending time with Alvarez's family who were visiting from Mexico. The result of such close collaboration is a menu that is a distillation of their experiences and ideas about food, the surrounding area and life in general. Eating the rice stuffed peppers feels like being immersed in the fields nearby, while the music box dessert developed by Valiente is a tribute to his mother, making you understand the essence of his love for her as you eat.

While his flagship restaurant is in Dénia with Valiente and Alvarez at the helm, his other restaurants have a very clear Dacosta vision and their own characters. As the man who successfully brought Valencia to appreciate its own produce and food culture, he has now taken his vision to Madrid with the two-Michelin-starred Deessa in the Ritz. The menu features signature dishes from the Dénia restaurant recreated in the Spanish capital while ArrosQD in London showcases authentic Valencian paellas for a U.K. audience. 'Everybody in Valencia always says that the paellas in the rest of the world aren't good, so we are bringing good paellas to show them,' he explains. If Dacosta's trajectory so far is any measure of the likely success of these new ventures, the world will soon be eating - and appreciating - authentic paellas.

