

CATALAN CLASSIC



Located just 20 miles south of Barcelona, Sitges is renowned for its expanse of sand beaches and vibrant cultural scene.

FOR AUTHENTIC FLAVORS AND SIGHTS, GO SOUTH
OF BARCELONA TO CATALONIA'S COSTA DORADA

BY ROBERT CAMUTO
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SIVAN ASKAYO





The cathedral in Tarragona is one of Catalonia's finest examples of Gothic architecture.

Slipping a glass of chilled cava on the sandy coast southwest of Barcelona, or a bold, complex red in the hinterlands of Priorat or Penedès, you're likely to ask, "Why haven't I been here before?"

This vast, varied stretch of Catalonia's Costa Daurada, or "Gold Coast" (*Costa Daurada* in Catalan), is off the beaten path for most Americans, who often visit Barcelona for a few days before heading off to other parts of Spain or Europe at large.

But this 130-mile stretch along the Mediterranean deserves more attention for its inviting sandy beaches, stunning natural parks, both on the coast and in the mountains, ancient cultural and historic sights, and terrific fresh seafood and Catalan specialties at prices that are a bargain by any standard. Add to these charms the area's proximity to ruggedly compelling inland wine regions such as Priorat and Penedès, and you may start planning your next visit.

Less sophisticated than the celebrated Costa Brava to Barcelona's north, the south attracts a younger crowd to accommodations and restaurants that tend to be simpler, family-run enterprises. The best restaurants serve beautifully prepared Catalan cuisine that gets creative without going all-out avant-garde.

"When you go south [of Barcelona], you go deep into Catalan roots—especially when you go inland," says Ferran Centelles, beverage director of cutting-edge chef Ferran Adrià's El Bulli Foundation, in Barcelona. Centelles, who worked for years at the revolutionary, now-defunct El Bulli restaurant on the Costa Brava, adds, "South, it's more authentic and less perfect than north."

Still, going south requires a road map: The region is vast and democratic, with varying quality.

For Mediterranean-food lovers, at the right spots, eating doesn't get much better. Catalan cooks traditionally like to mix surf and turf in surprising combinations in which seafood, meat, nuts and vegetables mingle in a single dish.

Prized local ingredients include red prawns and baby squid, creamy white beans and chickpeas, lamb, kid goat, Iberian pork products, spring onions, asparagus, and a variety of tomatoes, peppers, wild mushrooms and single-varietal olive oils.

A slice of heaven can be as simple as an artfully prepared *pa amb tomàquet*—a piece of toasted country bread rubbed with tomato and seasoned with olive oil and salt.

To see and taste the region, take at least three to five days for a road trip that zigzags between the coast and the interior. Starting in Barcelona, head southwest along the wild coastal cliffs of the Garraf



PETER UNGER/GETTY IMAGES; MAP: HENRY ENG

Mountains. At the other end of a nature preserve, the land flattens at Sitges with 3 miles of pristine sandy beaches, 2 miles of which are connected by a continuous, palm-lined pedestrian *rambla*.

Sitges is often called the St.-Tropez of Spain—at a fraction of the price of the south of France—with its 17 beaches; hundreds of boutiques, cafés and restaurants; film festival; extravagant August carnival; and bubbling nightlife. The attitude here is libertine live-and-let-live, making Sitges simultaneously gay-friendly, family-friendly, nudist-friendly (on the beaches just west of the port) and surfer-friendly.

Beyond the beach, Sitges is a highly attractive town, with a medieval quarter and a stock of well-preserved, fanciful 19th-century buildings constructed during the age of the “Americanos”—locals like the Bacardi rum family who made their fortunes in Cuba. The ornate seaside Maricel Palace and its adjacent museum, built by American businessman and art collector Charles Deering in 1910 to house his art collection, are not to be missed.

This is a good base from which to explore Penedès and its sprawling wine region, which includes some of Spain’s largest cava and dry wine producers as well as more offbeat local vintners. One of the region’s biggest names in wine, Bodegas Torres, offers a range of well-organized estate walking tours, winery visits and tastings.

About 40 miles down the coast is Tarragona, a modest city with a major cultural past as the regional capital during the Roman Empire. Tarragona is home to one of the area’s most elaborate Gothic cathedrals, in the cliff-perched old town, and a well-preserved seaside amphitheater that dates to antiquity. The city is also the capital of human castling, a serious traditional Catalan sport in which teammates build complex human towers by standing on one another’s shoulders.

From Tarragona, the hills of Falset lie to the west, in the Montsant appellation, at the door of the more rugged—and famous—Priorat, with its vineyards and Parc Natural. Though wine tourism here has expanded with the boom in Priorat’s reputation, the region remains low-key and relatively remote—still primarily a destination for hikers, rock climbers and cyclists. One of the more rewarding wine trail experiences is Les Figueres, the restaurant of noted wine producer Clos Figueras, in Gratallops, which pairs tours of its winery with meals made from local olive oils and farm products, matched with wines from the estate.

From Priorat, the coast reemerges at the Ebro Delta, where Spain’s longest river spills into 120 square miles of protected wetlands, rice fields and dunes. Visitors heading northeast on their way back to Barcelona might enjoy a lunch in the popular restaurant-lined fishing port of Cambrils.

If you go: Make reservations on Catalan time. Many restaurants start lunch at 1 p.m. (aperitivo hour is typically noon), and dinner is after 9 p.m.

Experiment with wines recommended by local proprietors. Outside of the most collected Priorats, there is a surprising diversity of well-made local wines priced from \$20 to \$40.

Note that for many locals, the first language is Catalan, with Spanish second. While people here are generally quite friendly, there



Chef Ana Ruiz and her sommelier husband, Quintín Quinsac, own and run AQ.

are usually few in any given place who speak English.

The best period to travel is April through October, avoiding the peak holiday crowds of August. We recommend contacting restaurants and hotels in advance to confirm hours of operation and/or any seasonal closures. When calling the following establishments from North America, dial 011 and then the telephone number.

Prices in this story have been converted to U.S. dollars using the exchange rate at press time (\$1 equals 0.91 euro) and rounded to the nearest dollar. All hotel prices are for double rooms and include complimentary breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT

AQ

7 Carrer de les Coques, Tarragona **Telephone** 34-977-215-954 **Website** www.aq-restaurant.com **Open** Lunch and dinner, Tuesday to Saturday **Cost** Tasting menus, \$55 **Credit cards** Visa, MasterCard

“Seasonal, local” cuisine is everywhere. Yet rarely does a chef bring such laser focus and intensity to the concept as does Ana Ruiz, who opened AQ a decade ago with husband Quintín Quinsac. In a stylish, loftlike setting next to Tarragona’s Gothic cathedral, AQ seats up to 60 diners in three rooms with dark wood floors, black and ochre walls, retro plastic Eames-style chairs and soft spotlighting. Quinsac leads the wine program and blue-jeans-casual service while Ruiz and her

team deliver a seasonal tasting menu that changes regularly and is sometimes built around a single ingredient. This spring, Ruiz's menu featured seven courses of Tarragona's prized red prawns—a *gamba* symphony that began with a curried cream of crustaceans and progressed through a series of raw dishes including a "falso ravioli" (layers of prawn carpaccio sandwiching a puree of roasted garlic, topped with aromatic Siurana olive oil) before hitting its rich, meaty finale with a single *plancha*-seared prawn served on onion puree and topped with rare-cooked slices of duck magret. In summer, Ruiz builds a tasting menu based on her own garden tomatoes. AQ features some 30 recommended wines of the moment, but consider skipping the list in favor of a tour of Quinsac's refrigerated wine cellar, whose 150 Catalan wines include rare gems such as the saline Sicus Xarel-lo Vermell Rosé 2012 (\$20) and peppery, light red Succés La Cuca de Llum Conca de Barbera 2013 (\$15).

CAL XIM

4 Plaça de Subirats, Sant Pau d'Ordal
Telephone 34-938-993-092 **Website** www.calxim.com **Open** Lunch, daily; dinner, Friday and Saturday **Cost** Entrées \$14–\$25 **Credit cards** Visa, MasterCard

Over 30 years, brothers Santi and Fidel Amigó have transformed their family's bar, off a tiny, tree-lined square in the heart of the Alt Penedès, into a go-to restaurant for authentic food and local wines. A popular spot with winemakers, who often drop in to eat lunch at the family common table, Cal Xim is all about Catalan country traditions simply but expertly executed. It starts with Fidel, who masterfully tends the coals of an open wood-fired grill that he uses to bring out the best of meats and fish, such as local lamb chops served over Penedès chickpeas or moist bacalao served with Catalonia's prized, creamy white Mongeta del Ganxet beans. When in season, a specialty appetizer of grilled artichokes cooked in oil and salt is a good start, as are other grilled vegetables such as eggplant, tomato, onion and garlic, and asparagus, doused in aromatic local oil and served with the house romesco. The 250-selection wine list is dominated by Penedès-area wines—cavas, rosés, whites and reds—with small-production rarities like light cherry-and-spice Mas Candi Víncl Mando 2013 (\$17) and a deep, dark Parés Baltà Garnaxta Penedès Hisenda Miret 2012 (\$29).

CAN BOSCH

19 Rambla Jaume I, Cambrils **Telephone** 34-977-360-019 **Website** www.canbosch.com **Open** Lunch, Tuesday to Sunday; dinner, Tuesday to Saturday **Cost** Entrées \$30–\$36; tasting menus \$42–\$82 **Credit cards** All major

On a backstreet behind Cambrils' bustling, restaurant-packed fishing port, the father-son team of Joan and Arnau Bosch cooks up a perfect storm of fresh, local seafood at this family institution that first received its Michelin star 31 years ago. A light, elegant, modern restaurant divided into small, intimate dining areas, Can Bosch is packed on weekends by well-heeled local families who come for the inventive tasting menus, topped by a market-price lobster menu. Wine lovers come for sommelier Manel Subirà's impressive 1,500-label list, featuring seven



At Can Bosch, sommelier Manel Subirà (left) and chefs Joan and Arnau Bosch discuss food and wine pairings.



Can Bosch serves a ceviche of scallops, organic tomato and mote corn.

vintages of Daphne Glorian Priorat Clos Erasmus, from 2003 (\$143) to 2012 (\$165), and white Priorats such as Terroir al Límit Pedra de Guix 2010 (\$59). Amuses bouches such as watermelon-strawberry gazpacho whet the appetite before the arrival of signature starters such as the intensely flavorful “fake chickpea stew”—tiny potato gnocchi served in a deep, earthy reduction of mushrooms and chorizo, topped with lightly fried sea cucumber. A main course of moist monkfish is seared, with a slight taste of the grill, and served on top of roasted artichokes. Sweet potato fritters arrive on a creamy emulsion of olive oil and rosemary. It's worth forgoing dessert in favor of Subirà's guidance through a list of Catalan dessert wines by the glass, which recently included a rich and coffeelike *solera*-aged De Muller Rubi Asoleado Solera 1904 (\$7 a glass).

COSTA DORADA

27 Carrer de Port Alegre, Sitges **Telephone** 34-938-943-543 **Website** www.restaurantecostadorada.com **Open** Lunch, Friday to Wednesday; dinner, Friday to Tuesday **Cost** Entrées \$12–\$59 **Credit cards** All major

This nearly 50-year-old institution offers a memorable lazy-afternoon experience: eating seafood a few steps from Sitges' San Sebastian beach while nursing a bottle of cool cava. Run by second-generation owner Montse Bigaire and her chef husband, Joan Vidal, Costa Dorada has two elaborate blue-and-white-tiled dining rooms as well as tables that spill onto the promenade out front. The beach scene is accompanied by the sounds of clanking plates and silverware, Catalan chatter and the splashing of waves. The specialty here is paella, fresh and cooked to order, done in several different versions, including classic mixed-seafood paella of cuttlefish-specked rice adorned with mussels, prawns, clams and langoustine, and a black-rice version, colored with cuttlefish ink and served with cuttlefish and clams. Start with a local iconic specialty of Xató salad—a fresh, cold mix of marinated tuna, cod, anchovies, olives and greens tossed in a romesco sauce made with spicy nuts, garlic and red pepper. A list of 50 Spanish wines includes cavas such as Juvé y Camps Brut Nature Cava Gran Reserva de la Familia (\$25) and the small-production Bolet Brut Nature Cava (\$16).

EL CELLER DE L'ASPIC

31 Carrer Miquel Barceló, Falset **Telephone** 34-977-831-246 **Website** www.cellardelaspic.com **Open** Lunch, Thursday to Tuesday; dinner, Thursday to Saturday **Cost** Entrées \$18–\$22; tasting menu \$33 (\$66 with wine pairings) **Credit cards** All major

If only the rest of the world worked this way: a restaurant where you pay less for wine than you would at a local wineshop. Owner, sommelier, chef and Priorat native Toni Bru offers wines at producer prices—adding only sales tax and a \$2.75-per-person service fee for those Schott Zwiesel crystal wineglasses. Naturally, this modern, casual, loft-like space at the edge of Priorat is a must for Priorat wine lovers, who come in T-shirts and shorts and select from such classics as Álvaro Palacios Priorat Finca Dofi 2011 (\$66). Bru, who spent years cooking along the Ebro Delta and returned here in 2003, expertly celebrates the Catalan larder. A starter of coca, a regional flatbread, covered with



At El Celler de l'Aspic, Toni Bru offers noted regional wines at friendly prices.

marinated artichokes, asparagus and greens and topped with a layer of buttery, marinated Iberian pork-neck cuts is not to be missed. A Priorat red is well matched to a main course of fall-apart-tender, savory local *cabrito* (kid goat), slow roasted with red wine and Mediterranean herbs. A lighter red like Priorat winemaker Sara Pérez's juicy Carignan-Garnacha-Syrah blend Venus la Universal Montsant Dido la Universal 2010 (\$23) pairs well with still-tasting-of-the-sea fresh *chipirones* (baby squid) cooked in their own ink with caramelized onions.

WHERE TO STAY

HOSTAL SPORT

4–6 Carrer Miquel Barceló, Falset **Telephone** 34-977-830-078 **Website** www.hotelpriorat-hostalsport.com/ca/hotel **Rooms** 28 **Suites** 1 **Rates** \$85–\$160

Opened in 1923 by the Domènech family, which has now operated the hotel for four generations, the Sport is an updated country inn

on the main drag of Falset (population 2,800) and an essential address from which to tour Priorat. Inside, rustic old-wood fixtures, farm implements and country antiques mix with modern art and amenities. Outside, the hotel bar spills onto the tree-shaded sidewalk. Rooms face either the street or a leafy courtyard and are well-appointed, with jute-covered walls, comfortable bedding, and marble and tile bathrooms with bathtub-shower combinations. The restaurant serves regional cuisine of stewed and grilled meats and fish, with a list of 230 Spanish wines starring Priorat verticals such as Álvaro Palacios Priorat L'Ermita from 1993 (\$605) to 2004 (\$660) as well as a changing selection of micro "limited editions" by local producers. The Sport offers varied wine tastings throughout the season and organizes wine and olive oil tours, as well as hiking, biking and kayaking outings in Priorat.

HOTEL PLATJADOR

35 Paseo de la Ribera, Sitges **Telephone** 34-938-945-054 **Website** www.en.hotelsitges.com **Rooms** 59 **Rates** \$47-\$246

Shutters open to the Mediterranean from balconies over Sitges' bustling coastal drag at this updated vintage hotel at the center of everything. A short walk to the old town and a few yards from the beach, the Platjador is a modest-size classic beach hotel that does what it does very well and fills up fast in summer. The hotel's 16 sea-facing rooms with balconies offer the full experience; most other rooms have balconies that look out over the small pool and garden. All are light and spotless, featuring oversize beds, whirlpool showers, blond wood floors and bright modern paintings. The English-speaking staff is eager to help, and the complimentary breakfasts (fresh-squeezed juices and made-to-order omelets, Iberian charcuterie and fresh fruit) are some of the best on the coast. The roof deck and sidewalk terrace are ideal for taking in the sunset with a selection from the hotel restaurant's 200-label wine list, which features cavas such as Agustí Torelló Brut Nature Cava Mata Gran Reserva 2008 (\$22).

MAS LA BOELLA

Autovía T-11, exit 12, Tarragona **Telephone** 34-977-771-515 **Website** www.laboella.com/en **Suites** 13 **Rates** \$166-\$320

A verdant, bird-filled oasis on the plains outside the urban sprawl of Tarragona covers 370 acres with seas of olive trees, vineyards and elaborate, shaded gardens with fountains and a swimming pool. Within this paradise sits Mas La Boella, one of the most luxurious experiences on the coast, with a historic and charming 12th-century building that was converted into a hotel six years ago. Six suites are housed in a pair of old farm buildings (two with private garden terraces), but the seven suites in the modern pagoda deliver light and views, offering garden balconies and large glass windows with electric wood shutters. Topping the three-story pagoda is a glass-walled deluxe suite with an oversize terrace looking out over the coast and mountains. The plush interiors have wide-plank oak floors, light wood furniture and fabrics, and wall tones in shades of olive groves and red wine. The bathrooms feature long,

double-faucet sinks and large slate showers. The hotel provides free tours of the modern oil mill with tastings of the estate's varietal oils, and the elegant restaurant in the old mill features a list of 180 wines, including small-production Montsant reds such as Acústic Celler Montsant Acústic 2011 (\$25).



Hostal Sport combines cottagelike charm with modern amenities.



With its lush gardens, Mas La Boella is an oasis of green.