



TRAVEL 8 minutes 29 MAY 2022

Eat Like a Chef: Follow Zén's Tristin Farmer as He Dines His Way Through Spain

In an intimate chat with Tristin Farmer of three-MICHELIN-Starred Zén, the chef shares his personal restaurant list and dining experiences from a recent trip to Spain.

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Trishin Farmer of three-MICHELIN-Starred [Zén](#) describes himself as someone who is always hungry, not only for food but also for adventure. According to him, [Zén](#) closes twice every year for a period of time to allow its staff to take a well-deserved break. "This year, we decided to shut down for three-and-a-half weeks, especially since we wanted to provide that allowance for our staff to travel and spend time with their families," he says.

After two years of uncertainty and restrictions, the world is slowly transitioning back to normal. "After this challenging period, we thought that the best way to celebrate was, of course, to travel. I can tell you, it felt almost surreal," says Farmer. With the three-and-a-half week vacation period, Farmer decided to take advantage of the opportunity to travel — and eat — wide and far.

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"I decided to do three weeks in three different countries. A week resting under the sun in Dubai, a week of dining around in Spain, and a week spent with family in Scotland."

In today's MICHELIN Guide exclusive, Farmer takes us to Spain and shows us in great detail the restaurants he visited and dined at.

"Just so you can get a clear picture of what you are about to read, here is a quick snapshot of my Spanish adventure," Farmer excitedly says. "One week, 14 restaurants, 170 dishes, too many glasses of wine, MICHELIN Stars, and a road journey of around 1,500 kilometres in total." Let's go.



Three-MICHELIN-Starred restaurant chefs Tristin Farmer of Zén and Eneko Atxa Azurmendi of Azurmendi

Planning the "Restaurant Pilgrimage"

"In the beginning, I was supposed to try out only a couple of restaurants in Spain," admits Farmer. This quickly transpired into what Farmer coins a "restaurant pilgrimage" of some of the finest restaurants; a bucket list hunt for the best restaurants in the world.

"I realised that I couldn't go all the way to Spain just for one dinner, so I decided to might as well go all in."

In early January, Farmer reached out to his good friend Eneko Atxa Azurmendi of three-MICHELIN-Starred [Azurmendi](#) and one-MICHELIN-Starred [Eneko](#). "First on my list was, of course, [Azurmendi](#). When I asked him to help me make a lunch reservation, we started talking about the other restaurants I wanted to visit. I also asked him for some recommendations," says Farmer. "All I have to say is wow. Eneko did not disappoint, and within no time, all the restaurants were booked! All I had to do now was to show up and eat," he laughs.

Farmer at El Celler de Can Roca; Jordi Roca's iconic Bosque lluvioso

L-R: Farmer at El Celler de Can Roca; Jordi Roca's iconic Bosque lluvioso

El Celler de Can Roca

Farmer recalls that after a seven-hour flight from Dubai to Barcelona, coupled with all the excitement of the upcoming week's activities, arriving at Spain and being greeted by 15°C weather was surprising. "It might seem like I have gone soft living in the Lion City, but apart from a few humidity challenges in our kitchen in Singapore, it's easy to forget that it isn't a constant 25-30 degrees all year round for many other parts of the world," he shares.

"I thought it was a good idea to travel without any sort of winter clothes or overcoat," Farmer confesses with a tinge of regret. "The wind and cold went right through me, but no need to feel sorry just yet. The week ahead had me so excited, I just put it down as part of the experience. We collected a car to use for the week, and off we went!"

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Straight from the airport, the first address placed in the navigation system used by Farmer was Girona. This could only mean one thing: dinner at three-MICHELIN-Starred [El Celler de Can Roca](#). "It was a last-minute booking sorted by Eneko," shares Farmer. "Walking up to the front door and being welcomed by Josep Roca himself, sitting down, sipping on champagne, excited for dinner...it felt like I was in a daze. I wasn't sure if it was the jet lag, or the fact that it was my first time to take a vacation in two years, or being simply stunned by making it to [El Celler de Can Roca](#) finally."

According to Farmer, he found the level of cooking, food, knowledge, and passion from [El Celler de Can Roca](#) to be truly excellent. "I was blown away by the hospitality and the love. [El Celler de Can Roca](#) was a true gastronomic experience with some very clever cooking and delicious food. It is humbling to see a restaurant that has been at the top of its game for over 30 years still make its guests feel truly special."

When it comes to tapas in Barcelona, El Celler de Can Roca's Josep Roca recommends MICHELIN-listed Paco Meralgo

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Paco Meralgo

"Chatting with Josep [Roca] at [El Celler de Can Roca](#), I asked if he could recommend a few spots for some traditional tapas. Most fine dining restaurants are closed on Sundays, so I thought it was the perfect day for some casual food," says Farmer.

Roca recommended [Paco Meralgo](#), a MICHELIN-listed restaurant in Barcelona, commended by our MICHELIN Guide inspectors for its impressive display cabinets filled with fresh, varied, top-quality seafood.

"My partner and I sat at the counter as we had no reservation, and we started ordering *jamón*, wine, and a few small plates. Suddenly, a couple sat right next to us at the corner of the bar. Chatting in Spanish, I took a look at what they were ordering, only to realise after my fifth plate that the couple was Ferran Adrià and his wife! Of course, I did not miss this opportunity to take a photo with a culinary legend!" Farmer exclaims.

Ferran Adrià and Tristin Farmer

Ferran Adrià and Tristin Farmer

"On that same day, I received a message from chef Paulo Airaudo of two-MICHELIN-Starred [Amelia](#) on Instagram. I have never met him before, and this is one of the moments where I really appreciate how social media makes everything easier when it comes to connecting with people. After a quick chat, I immediately found myself changing hotel reservations and adding [Amelia by Paulo Airaudo](#) in San Sebastián to my list," he shares.

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Disfrutar

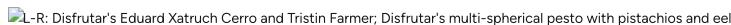
"Our last day in Barcelona was for two-MICHELIN-Starred [Disfrutar](#)," says Farmer. "It was one of the main reasons for staying in Barcelona an extra night, and we were so excited! But first, I had to make a trip to check out Bar Pinotxo inside Mercado de la Boqueria, as recommended by chef Carlos Montobbio of MICHELIN-listed [Esquina](#) in Singapore. Run by three family generations, the food was absolutely delicious — you have to order the chickpeas with braised pork!"

As work never stops for Farmer, he went back to his hotel for some coffee and to respond to some messages when he realised that he overlooked what was supposed to be the highlight of his day.

"I let out the biggest 'oh no!'" says Farmer. "The only thing I was responsible for on this trip was taking charge of restaurant reservations, and right there in my inbox were three emails from [Disfrutar](#)."

"Sitting in my inbox were three emails from Disfrutar, each asking why I did not make it to my lunch reservation. I thought my reservation was for dinner."

Farmer describes his mood evolving from shock to guilt. "Working in the industry, I understand how turning up to restaurants late has a huge impact. After receiving the emails, I called the restaurant and messaged chef Eduard [Xatruch Cerro], apologising profusely. They were very kind and said they understood. Unfortunately, they were fully booked for the rest of the week. Of course, they were full. And I didn't really expect that they would suddenly have a free seat a few hours before dinner."

 L-R: Disfrutar's Eduard Xatruch Cerro and Tristin Farmer; Disfrutar's multi-spherical pesto with pistachios and eel

L-R: Disfrutar's Eduard Xatruch Cerro and Tristin Farmer; Disfrutar's multi-spherical pesto with pistachios and eel

Feeling deflated, Farmer started packing for the drive to San Sebastián in the morning when redemption came. "[Disfrutar](#) called me and told me that they managed to fix a table for me. I asked myself, 'Was it luck? Was it meant to be?' I didn't question the opportunity and headed straightaway to the restaurant. And wow, what a dinner it indeed was."

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 San Sebastián is extremely popular for its tapas culture.

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When in San Sebastián

Farmer recounts the seven-hour drive from Barcelona to San Sebastián, stopping for coffee every so often. "It was already dark before we arrived at San Sebastián. As soon as my partner and I arrived at our hotel, we dropped off our bags and met up with Paulo [Airaudo] of [Amelia](#) for some tapas and beer. It was our first time meeting, and he welcomed me with such warmth and affection. At the end of the evening, it felt like Paulo and I were old friends. We also managed to visit tapas places on my list such as [Ganbara](#)."

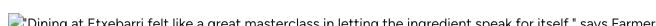
 Mornings in San Sebastián through the eyes of Tristin Farmer

Mornings in San Sebastián through the eyes of Tristin Farmer

Etxebarri

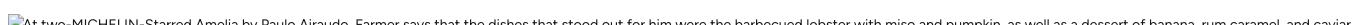
"After the tapas-filled evening I had with Paulo, I decided to go for a morning run along the coastal road. I was already in love with San Sebastián. I finally understood the hype around the location, the people, and most importantly, the restaurants," reminisces Farmer.

His next stop: one-MICHELIN-Starred [Etxebarri](#). "What can I say? Believe the hype, it's all true," Farmer quips. "Getting there, you drive along the most amazing, scenic coastal drive and then head up the mountain. I was looking forward to this lunch."

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The waitlist at [Etxebarri](#) can run for up to six months; fortunately for Farmer, Azurmendi was able to reserve on his behalf. "Lunch at [Etxebarri](#) was incredible and so inspiring. You know the chef has amazing talent and skill when a single ingredient on a plate can taste so outstanding. The product's freshness was treated so delicately and simply. Dining here is a great masterclass in letting the ingredient speak for itself," commands Farmer.

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Amelia by Paulo Airaudo

With lunch at [Etxebarri](#) ending at 6:30 in the evening, and with an hour-and-a-half's drive back to San Sebastián, Farmer thankfully made it in time for dinner at two-MICHELIN-Starred [Amelia by Paulo Airaudo](#).

"I have made the mistake of eating large menus for lunch and dinner too often, but this was one exception I was happy to make," says Farmer.

 Tristin Farmer and the team at Amelia by Paulo Airaudo

Tristin Farmer and the team at Amelia by Paulo Airaudo

At two-MICHELIN-Starred [Amelia by Paulo Airaudo](#), Farmer describes everything from the setting, the food, the young chefs, to Airaudo's infectious energy as spectacular. "It's such a cool restaurant space. The energy, the vibe, and the personality of the restaurant is a true reflection of Paulo and his personality. He even managed to translate it into the décor." Farmer says that the dishes that stood out for him here were the barbecued lobster with miso and pumpkin, as well as a dessert of banana, rum caramel, and caviar. "Trust me on this one," he adds.

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Elkano

Farmer was also invited to give a talk to fifth year students taking up their masters at the Basque Culinary Center. "I was so humbled by the daily hospitality and love I had been shown in Spain, and to be able to give back in a small way to the next generation was an amazing opportunity," he shares.

After his talk, Farmer went to one-MICHELIN-Starred [Elkano](#), with the journey to the restaurant encompassing what Farmer describes as a breathtaking drive along the coastal road toward Getaria. "Sitting down at [Elkano](#) with chef Aitor Arregi passionately talking about his seafood, which was caught on that same day, and with him explaining what the must-have dishes are during the changing seasons is pretty impressive," says Farmer.

"We had lobster cooked six ways, using different parts of the shellfish including grilled roe. Aitor also recommended that this was the best time of year for Dover sole. They served its liver and roe grilled on the side. Because of this, I am going to try using grilled sole roe on a dish very soon," he shares. Farmer also says that he was blown away by Elkano's *kokotxas*, a traditional Basque dish made from stewed fish necks, swimming in a sauce of garlic, flour, white wine, and olive oil.

 Tristin Farmer on three-MICHELIN-Starred Azurmendi: "What an experience!"

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Azurmendi

"And off we went to Bilbao," said Farmer. With three MICHELIN Stars, the highest accolade in the MICHELIN Guide, [Azurmendi](#) is praised by our inspectors for its location in a striking glass-fronted property with an impressive layout and superb views, all in the heart of the countryside. The chef, Eneko Atxa Azurmendi, is fully committed to the concept of sustainability, preparing innovative, personalised cuisine that combines quality and unquestionable technical ability. Completing the restaurant is a *txakoli* (very dry white wine that's slightly sparkling) cellar and a vegetable garden.

"What an experience!" exclaims Farmer when asked about his experience at the restaurant. Apart from the stunning location, what impressed Farmer was the kitchen at [Azurmendi](#). "The restaurant serves natural

cuisine with true elegance with precision; a very unique tasting menu and experience. Yet, at the same time, it felt like a relaxed afternoon hanging out with friends," shares Farmer. "I definitely had another spectacular lunch and an extra seven kilograms added to my luggage with Eneko's book," he says with a smile.

RELATED: MICHELIN Restaurants in San Sebastián

When in Barcelona: Farmer recommends the Mochi de Sobrasada from MICHELIN-listed Mont Bar

When in Barcelona: Farmer recommends the Mochi de Sobrasada from MICHELIN-listed Mont Bar

Mont Bar

Spending a final day back in Barcelona before heading to Scotland, Farmer squeezes in time for a final meal at MICHELIN-listed Mont Bar, as recommended by Disfrutar's Eduard Xatruch Cerro. "It's such an understated yet stunning wine bar, but wow, the food is really delicious. I have already recommended Mont Bar to three friends and colleagues who have asked me where to go in Barcelona. Go check it out and order the *sobrasada* mochi."

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Farmer asks out loud, "How do I sum up such a week? Was it the thrill of finally traveling after two years? Is it the celebratory feeling of life slowly returning to normal?" He smiles to himself, and then adds: "Perhaps it was the epic restaurant lineup, or the love and hospitality from my peers, ex-colleagues, friends, and new friends. Yes, maybe the answer is all of that combined."

He continues and says that it never fails to amaze him how a shared passion for food, beverages, and hospitality can bring people together. "Being able to meet like-minded people and talk for hours about food, drinks, and restaurants — and feel like we are old friends in doing so — has literally touched my soul," he says.

As Farmer heads to Scotland to see his family, and then back to Singapore with a refreshed and inspired perspective, he reflects on his past week in Spain. "I've never thought about any other career except cooking, but how do I get a job as a full-time foodie?" he asks jokingly. "Does that mean I need to start planning my next trip already?"

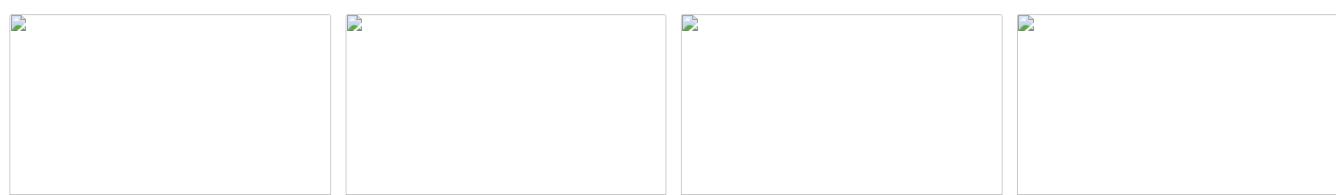
The answer for Farmer has never been so obvious.

Many thanks to Tristin Farmer for the images and the interview.

Written by Mikka Wee

Based in Singapore, Mikka Wee is an Editor of the MICHELIN Guide and a relentless seeker of flavour, adventure, and the stories that bind them together. A curious wanderer, she roams the world with a hungry heart, believing that food is the purest expression of culture — vibrant, soulful, and best shared.

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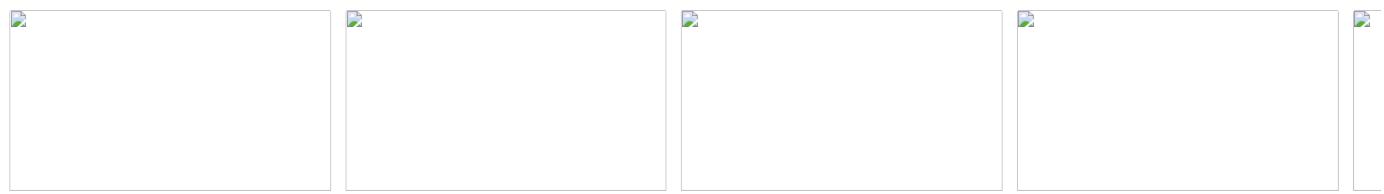
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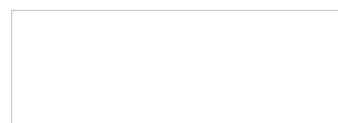
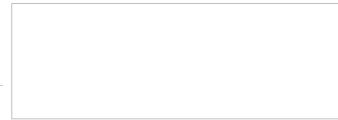
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