

ANDRÉS TORRES

# THE PIONEER





AT HIS RESTAURANT IN CATALONIA, CHEF ANDRÉS TORRES CREATES FOOD WITH A MINIMAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT – AND FUNDS HUMANITARIAN WORK IN THE PROCESS. WORDS: PETER YEUNG. PHOTOGRAPHS: MARGARET STEPIEN

Andrés Torres has strong opinions on sustainability. The war correspondent-turned-chef has seen enough of the world to know how vital it is to preserve the planet's resources, and he has no time for empty gestures. "Sustainability is all the rage in restaurants all over the world," he says. "But there's a lot of bullshit out there. For me, sustainability is something very basic. It's very simple." His restaurant, Casa Nova, a farmhouse in the hills west of Barcelona, is a temple to slow, soulful cooking. Torres relies on age-old methods and the particularities of the region's terrain, climate and cultures, using only what's naturally abundant.

Inspired by traditional and Indigenous communities he met during his many globetrotting expeditions, the chef combines ancient processes with exquisite modern execution. There's baked potato in a crust of herbs and a pool of spiced butter; egg yolk suffused with, and warmed by, injected chicken stock; *mojama* (filleted, salt-cured tuna — a dish typical of coastal Spain); and a lettuce sorbet with marinated and roasted lettuce leaves.

"I've created and improved my dishes based on the experiences I've had visiting communities around the world," Torres says. He bakes bread in a wood-fired oven like the Quechua-speaking peoples of Peru, roasts coffee like Colombian tribes do and produces chocolate using methods he learnt in Guatemala.

Many of these methods fit in with the chef's commitment to sustainability. He claims Casa Nova is 98% self-sufficient, with everything else sourced from local producers. Naturally, the restaurant has egg-laying hens, beehives to make lavender- and rosemary-infused honey, and a prodigious vegetable plot. Scraps from the kitchen are composted and used to fertilise the next season's crops. A modest amount of timber is foraged for firewood, but most of the power comes from solar panels.

So far, admittedly, these are fairly standard eco practices. But Torres even produces his own salt, venturing out in a boat to collect Mediterranean seawater. He's created a stone 'insect hotel' to support pest-eating bugs that protect crops without the need for pesticides. Rainwater is collected in barrels previously used to mature wine, and then used on the vegetables. Plates and other tableware are made by Torres's wife. And instead of using dehydrators, as many high-end restaurants and industrial producers do, Torres built his own drying room and smokehouse. "The big factories cut tuna into slices and dry them with devices that control the temperature and humidity," he says. "Not me — I put it under the sun and it dries naturally. It's delicious."

Self-taught Torres, who grew up in Barcelona during the 1970s, was interested from an early age in his mother's hearty Spanish soul food (fried eggs with crispy potatoes and ham remains his favourite dish).

Andrés Torres worked as a war reporter before establishing his restaurant near Barcelona

## STARTERS



The family would rarely go out to eat and so Torres would often watch her cook at home. "I was very curious," he says. "I asked her many questions: What's that ingredient? Why are you cooking it like this? I learned without going to university or to cooking schools. For me, university is the street."

As a teenager, Torres was already cooking for his siblings and friends. But by the age of 17, he had begun working as a freelance war reporter and went on to cover conflicts in Libya, Afghanistan, Colombia, Iraq and the former Yugoslavia. He also spent time living in India, Cambodia and the Peruvian Andes. "What I learned most is humility and gratitude," he says.

Torres's next chapter arrived about 20 years ago when he bought an old chicken farm surrounded by vineyards near Barcelona as a place to recuperate after his travels. He would cook from time to time for visiting friends and acquaintances — things like Peruvian chuños (freeze-dried potatoes) — and the reputation of his cooking spread by word of mouth until even strangers began knocking on his door asking to be fed. So, in 2015, Torres opened Casa Nova. And last year, another unexpected visitor came knocking: the Michelin Guide, which awarded Casa Nova a Green Star for sustainability.

Torres has kept the intimate feel of those pre-restaurant meals with friends — diners are given a tour of the grounds, where his philosophy and processes are explained. Starters are served in a cosy room with a crackling fireplace, then there's a visit to the kitchen to meet staff. Just seven people farm, cook, deliver and explain all the food — there

are no waiters — in a dining room with six tables and a capacity of 22. "It's like you're coming to my house to eat," says Torres. "If I set up a party at my house with 200 diners, I'd not be able to greet them all. This is not a business. I want it to be a place of pilgrimage, where you eat and think about the world."

Environmentalism is only part of the story he wants to tell. The restaurant helps fund Global Humanitaria, a nonprofit he set up in 1999 to support food security, education and children's rights across the world and provide emergency relief for victims of conflict and natural disasters. Torres claims to have been the first chef to enter Ukraine after the war broke out, driving from Poland with 500 bags of groceries. He's since returned 10 times.

At Casa Nova, Torres shares stories of his travels with his guests and encourages socially conscious discussions. "They think they're going to eat — and obviously they are — but we have conversations about what happens every day: what happened to your neighbour, your father, what happened in the world," he says. "And 90% of diners leave saying 'Well, what can I do? Can I make a donation?'"

In June, Torres won the prestigious Basque Culinary World Prize — often called the 'Nobel Prize of gastronomy' — when he was acknowledged for his combined work with Casa Nova and Global Humanitaria.

Yet, for all this, Torres's view of food remains — like his approach to sustainability — quite simple. "Food is first of all nourishment, it is sensations in sight, in smell, in taste, even in hearing," he says. "When there's a sauce that you love, you pick up the spoon, you start to scrape the plate — that sound, that's glory." □



### Signature dishes

#### ONIONS

Torres's take on French onion soup (above) is a homage to the enormous onions grown in the restaurant's vegetable plot. The skins are baked for a long time until they become very soft, while the onion flesh is boiled down until it becomes creamy, and the water it was cooked in becomes a sweet, oniony infusion. These are served with a crispy biscuit, also made of onion.

#### CHOCOLATE

Torres works with a women's cooperative in Guatemala, from which the cacao is sourced, to make his own chocolate dessert. The cacao seeds are toasted alongside branches from the restaurant's vineyards, which impart some of their aroma. The seeds' skins are then removed by hand, before the cacao mass is blended together and a little bit of sugar is added.

#### POTATOES

Inspired by the tuber-loving Indigenous peoples of the Peruvian highlands, Torres has created his own take on a baked potato — coated in herbs and spices, baked in a wood-fired oven and then served in a pool of spiced butter. After eating it, diners are invited to place the remaining herb-and-spice crust inside a flowerpot on the table and take it to a composting booth — a gesture intended to encapsulate Casa Nova's sustainable philosophy.

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