

# Enigma literally & figuratively

*Changing both chef and concept every few months,  
Engima at Palazzo Versace is perfectly named*

By CARLA DABIS



Frantzén's dish of French toast with Alba truffle and 100-year old vinegar.  
(Opposite) Dacosta's Cream of foie gras

**Dubai's latest culinary phenomenon** blurs the line between restaurant and theatre with its four-act show changing its chef, menu and theme every quarter. The concept challenges the conventional dining experience, starting with an online ticketing system that replaces the traditional phone reservation line. The unconformity continues with menus narrated by waiters.

Sourcing chefs from the world's 50 best restaurants, Enigma essentially provides a stage and a blank canvas for four chefs per year to unveil their versions of what's been coined The Untold Story. Tucked away in the elegant Palazzo Versace Hotel, Enigma is seductive and mysterious, a discerning experience that leaves its audience in the dark, delivering a world of paradox on a plate, think snow in the desert or a forest in the middle of the city.

"Enigma was conceptualised to emulate the very nature of our current lifestyle; fast-paced, versatile and dynamic," says Patrick Robineau, Hotel Manager, Palazzo Versace Dubai.

An unorthodox approach and a risky concept, Enigma's survival is contingent on the magnitude of its chefs.

The debut chef had to be one who took pride in thinking outside the box – a chef who told a story every time he put something on a plate, a chef who wasn't afraid to turn off the lights and send his waiters out into Enigma's intimate dining room in Minotaur masks to serve Breakfast at Tiffany's, a glowing diamond-shaped palate cleanser composed of lemon compote, meringue and crystallised apple. Cue Quique Dacosta.

## THE OPENING ACT

The brainchild behind the three-Michelin star Quique Dacosta Restaurant, currently ranked the 39th best restaurant in the world, Dacosta is just as avant-garde as Dubai was hoping. An obvious choice for the opening act, his menu, a collision of drama and science entitled Vanguard, was reflective of his free and independent style. One bite of his multi-sensory Foggy Forest Floor revealed the importance of botany to Dacosta. It was a theatrical dish that unfolded as a journey through the forest, incorporating fog, plants and



Quique Dacosta

faux soil before revealing beef, truffles and wild mushrooms. As eloquent as his dishes, Dacosta claims the profession chose him, not vice versa.

His love of storytelling is a constant theme running throughout all his dishes.

An example is Rice with Ashes, an entrée of black rice with pigeon that denotes the story of burnt rice fields post-harvest in Valencia.

He elaborates, "There are times when a certain scenography helps the sensory transmission of the dish and can also amplify what we're achieving with the dish. Why not go along with the possibilities of the narrative, with its theatrical aspect and artistic expression. I love exploring those paths. They're beautiful and culturally marvellous."

Technique was at the heart of Dacosta's Dubai kitchen, an interactive workshop where ingredients were freeze-dried, roasted, grilled, dehydrated, imitated, injected and candied in the name of gastronomy. "I brought to this everything that I am, both my latest moments and my well-travelled paths. We've created something independent and we want to seduce and surprise diners with experiences that they've never tried before. We're presenting them with authenticity," Dacosta said. From a rose that unravelled as an apple to a dish of squid ink that morphed into a charcoal meringue with pericana and dollops of Parmesan disguised as black stones, his foray into Dubai, albeit temporarily, certainly enlivened the culinary scene.

## THE SECOND ACT

**After a brief intermission**, the second and current act commenced on April 20 with a facelift and a new chef. Enter Björn Frantzén. The Swedish chef, whose occupational fate was sealed at the mere age of 11 upon tasting his first steak with béarnaise sauce, offers The Journey of a Nordic Chef.

After a short-lived career as a footballer and time spent in the kitchens of the Swedish army, Chef Bjorn now sits at the helm of a half dozen restaurants including his two-Michelin-star treasure currently ranked the 31st best restaurant in the world, Restaurant Frantzén. Trained at the hands of many, French Chef Alain Passard made the biggest impact on Frantzén, who describes his cooking style as, "Nordic ingredients with a base in classic French cooking, with Japanese aesthetics." Weird and wonderful ingredients are at the epicentre of Frantzén's cuisine; he divulges his current favourite – Fallow deer. When asked about the most creative dish he's ever made, he confesses, "I have made many crazy combinations in my years as a chef, but the combination that seems to have stuck is a savoury dish with onions, liquorice and almonds." A peculiar combination and one he reinvents periodically.

Chef Bjorn reveals that many of the dishes he serves at Enigma come directly from his restaurant in Stockholm. Of course, the element of surprise is at the centre of the restaurant's ethos, and in that spirit we won't reveal his menu here, but we can say it will be an interactive experience with a prologue and subsequent chapters unfolding like a book ●



Björn Frantzén