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May 2015



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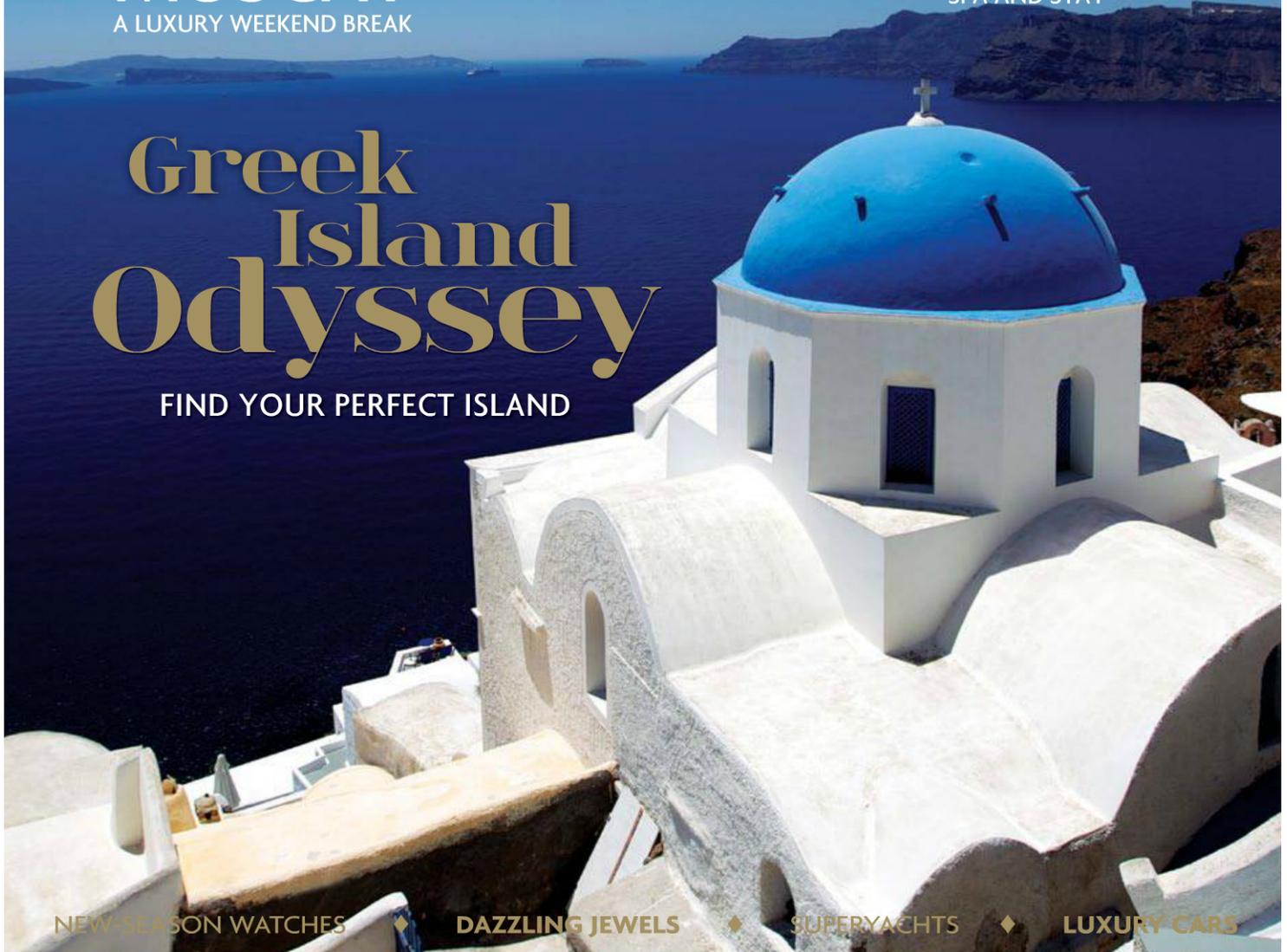
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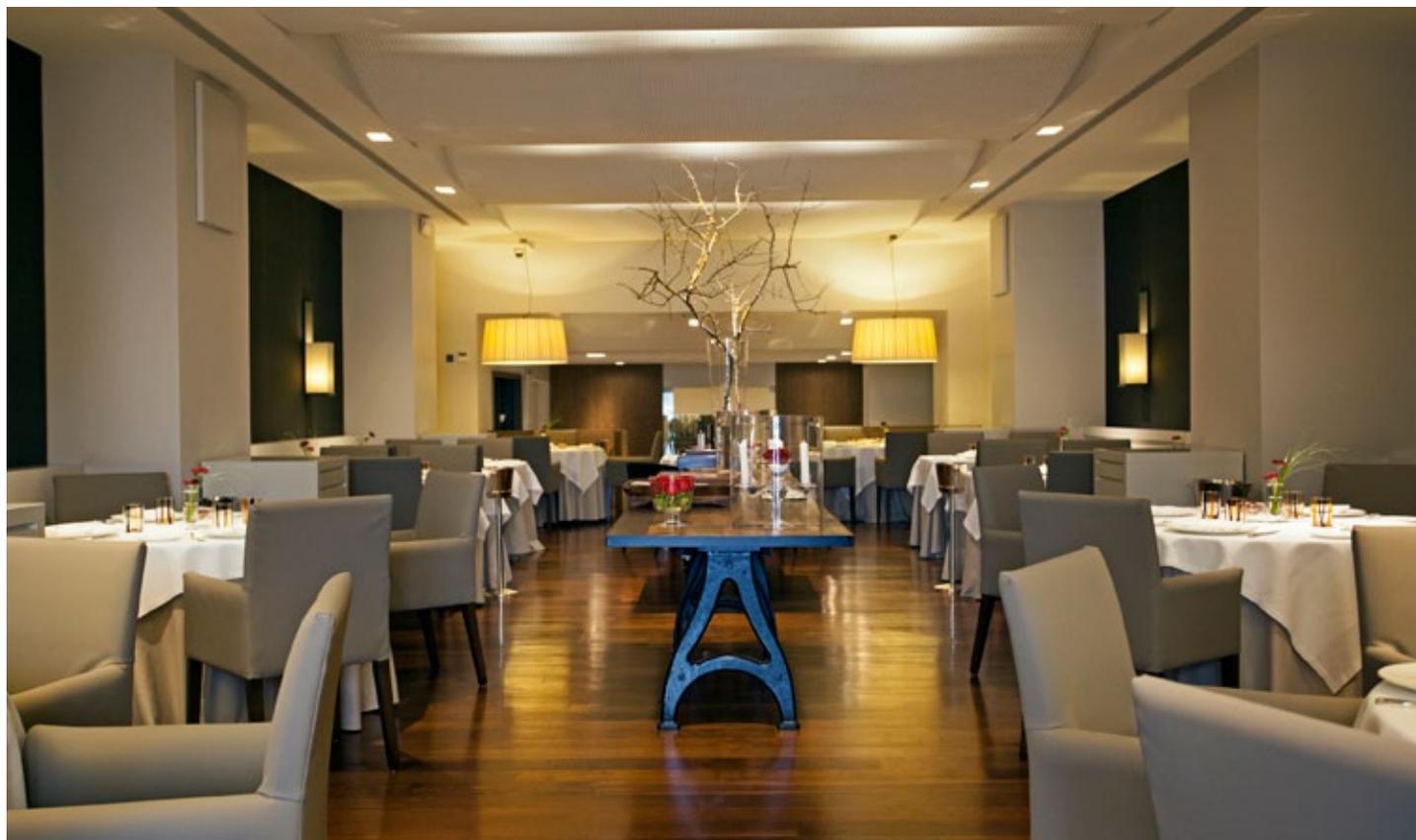
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# Culinary Catalan

Both rustic and avant-garde, the Michelin-starred cuisine at **Gaig** in Barcelona gives Becca Hensley a celestial experience

**M**ention Catalan food, and most people think of Ferran Adria, and his science laboratory experiments of foam and subatomic fusion, a gastronomy so magical and mysterious, it has to be the stuff of dreams. But without the rich traditions from Catalonia, an autonomous region in northeastern Spain that includes Barcelona, such high-tech concoctions would never have existed.

This region drew from the cuisine of its myriad invaders, from the French to the Visigoths, resulting in an open-minded framework that embraces both cookery and winemaking, respects both the past and present, and celebrates both the rustic and the avant-garde. And that's where Carles Gaig comes in. His Michelin-starred, eponymous restaurant, Gaig, draws on the recipes of his grandmother and borrows from the spirit of the taverna his family operated in Barcelona for more than a hundred years.

Trained in that restaurant, Gaig took over in 1989 and began delivering his own twist on the unflinching, unpretentious

dishes. For that, he won a Michelin star in 1993. As time passed, he experimented more, but stayed true to an obsession for fresh, market ingredients. With a passion for local wine, he has partnered with families like the Ferrers, who own the Freixenet Group, and a vast number of estates in wine regions worldwide. Both Gaig, the Freixenet Group and indeed most of the chefs and winemakers in the region stay true to the past. But, they dabble with innovation, never afraid to push the edge of the envelope.

I visit Gaig on a warm night in spring after a day of wine tasting and seasonal, rustic fare at Freixenet's winery,

**“THE EVOLVING MENUS, BOTH SET AND A LA CARTE, ARE BASED ON GAIG’S DAILY FORAYS TO BARCELONA’S FAMOUS BOQUERIA FOOD MARKET ON LAS RAMBLAS”**



just outside of Barcelona. I've been smitten by calcots, an indigenous leek, grilled, then dipped festively into romesco sauce. Honestly, I don't think food can get better than this – but it does, at Gaig. Awash in neutral tones, the two-tiered, contemporary restaurant is a symphony of sleek urbanity, a haven from the city's buzz without a hint of pretention.

The evolving menus both set and a la carte, are based on Gaig's daily forays to Barcelona's famous Boqueria food market on Las Ramblas. We trust his suggestions, especially when he bursts from the kitchen to take the order himself. Sincere, affable and low key, he has the demeanour of a priest.

Over seven-courses, we are lost in the reverie of brilliant plates and Freixenet wine pairings. Peas from Maresme, one of Chef Gaig's classics, have a cannonade of umami, the piquant, gamey sausage adrift with silky peas and sea cucumbers. Truffle-sauced cannelloni, based on the way Gaig's grandmother served it, turns celestial with a filling that includes cubed foie gras and veal. A confit of cod melts in our mouths.

For the finale, the Catalan creme brûlée with foam, ice cream and crackly toffee redefines the genre, while a chocolate cocotte, rum-laden with orange seals the deal. Even the tea and coffee at the end of the meal is accompanied by a plate of Turkish Delight and other tiny, sweet bites.

As the Catalan character looks inside itself for inspiration, so does Gaig. A meal at his restaurant unravels the prodigious layers of the region, and takes you on a journey from the past to the present with every bite. ☘

### The important bit

**WHAT:** Gaig

**WHERE:** Carrer de Córcega, 200, Barcelona

**PRICE:** Seven-course degustation for two, 130 Euros (US\$141), excluding drinks

**TEL:** +34 93 429 1017

restaurantgaig.com