




The rooftop pool at Barcelona's Mandarin Oriental hotel.

BOUNDLESS

BARCELONA

In the sizzling Catalan capital, creativity and imagination rule supreme. From innovative chefs to new art galleries, museums, nightclubs and design stores, this city is one of the world's most confident. BY Ingrid K. Williams ● PHOTOS BY Siqui Sánchez





Clockwise from top left: The W Hotel's 26th-floor Eclipse bar; Seeking bubó's one-of-a-kind sweet confections; The essence of olives at Tickets; Palau de la Música Catalana; A fish out of water at Pez Vela restaurant.

HERE IS SOMETHING SPECIAL IN THE AIR in Barcelona. Not the faint hint of maritime brine wafting inland over the beach. Not the intoxicating aromas rising from the bustling tapas bars. Not the echoing cheers after yet another dominating soccer performance on the international stage. True, those are all present—and in no short supply—but they are not what makes Barcelona the vibrant, exciting city that it is today.

“It’s something that one is not conscious of, but in Barcelona you breathe design and creativity,” says Tomás Tarruella, co-owner of the local Grupo Tragaluz hospitality group, which runs the chic Hotel Omm and several stylish restaurants around town. And that respiratory revelation must be true.

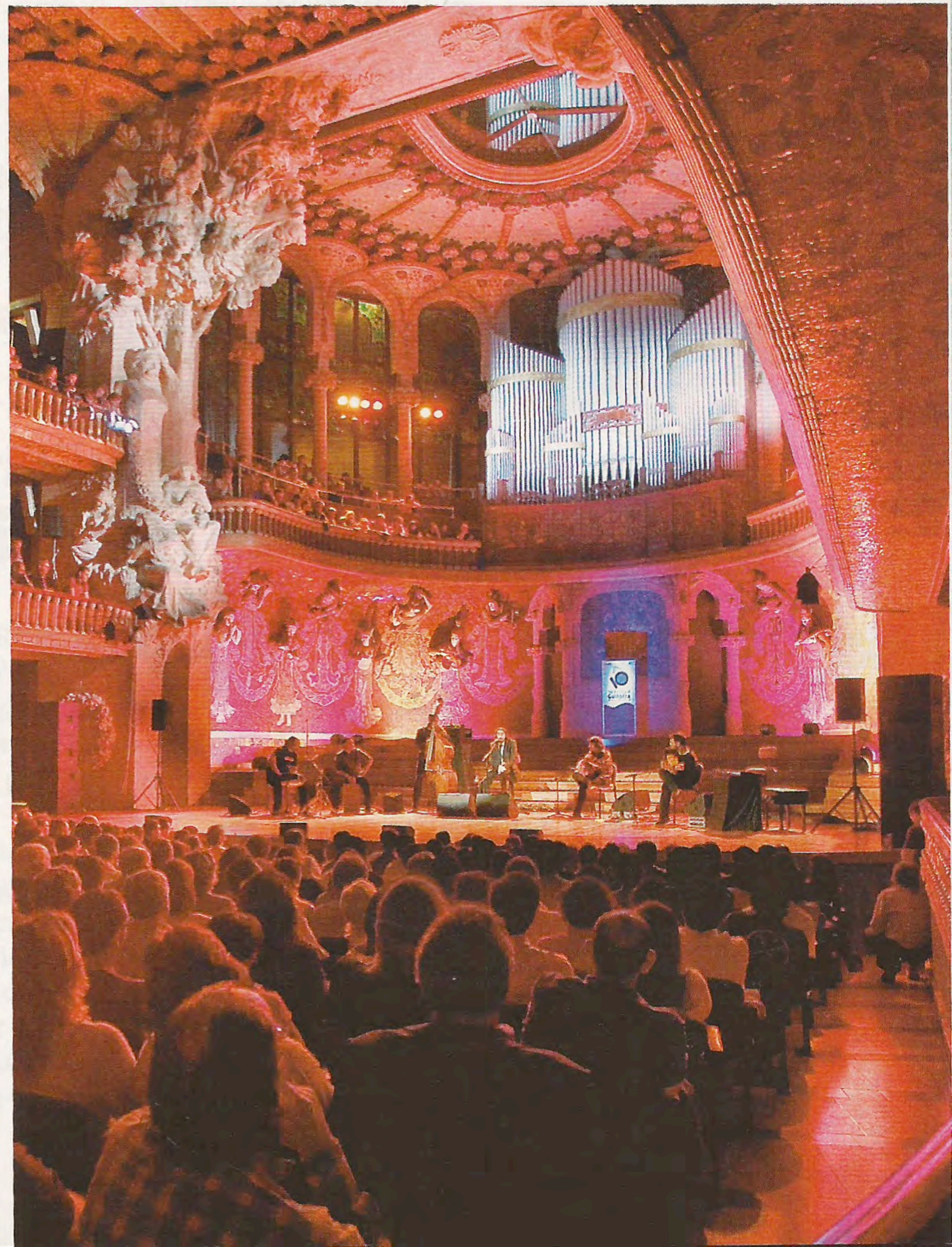
How else to explain the ingenuity and innovation found at every turn in Barcelona? In the groundbreaking art, in the mind-bending architecture, in the jaw-dropping cuisine? Here, a church is not just a church, and an olive is not just an olive.

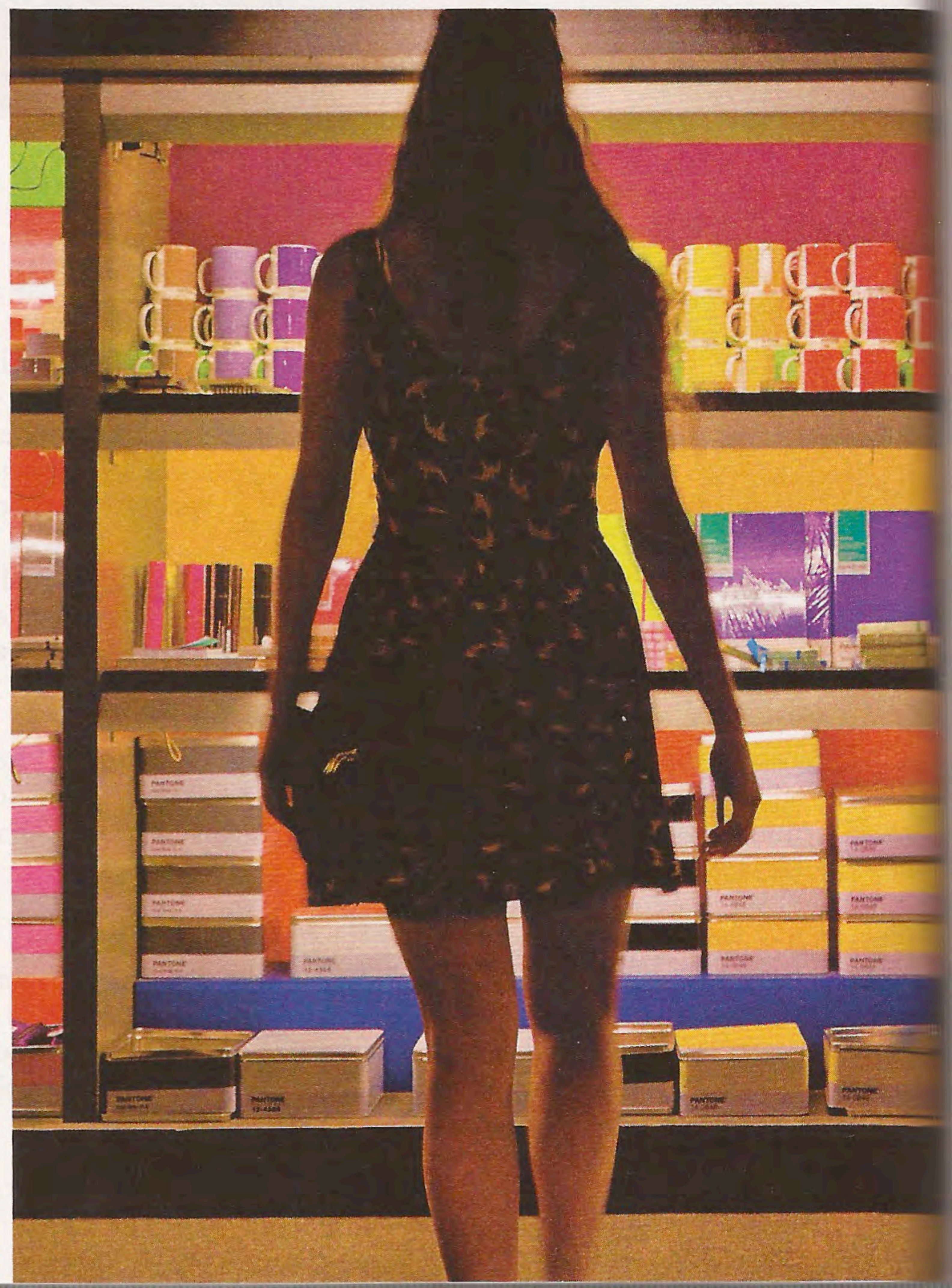
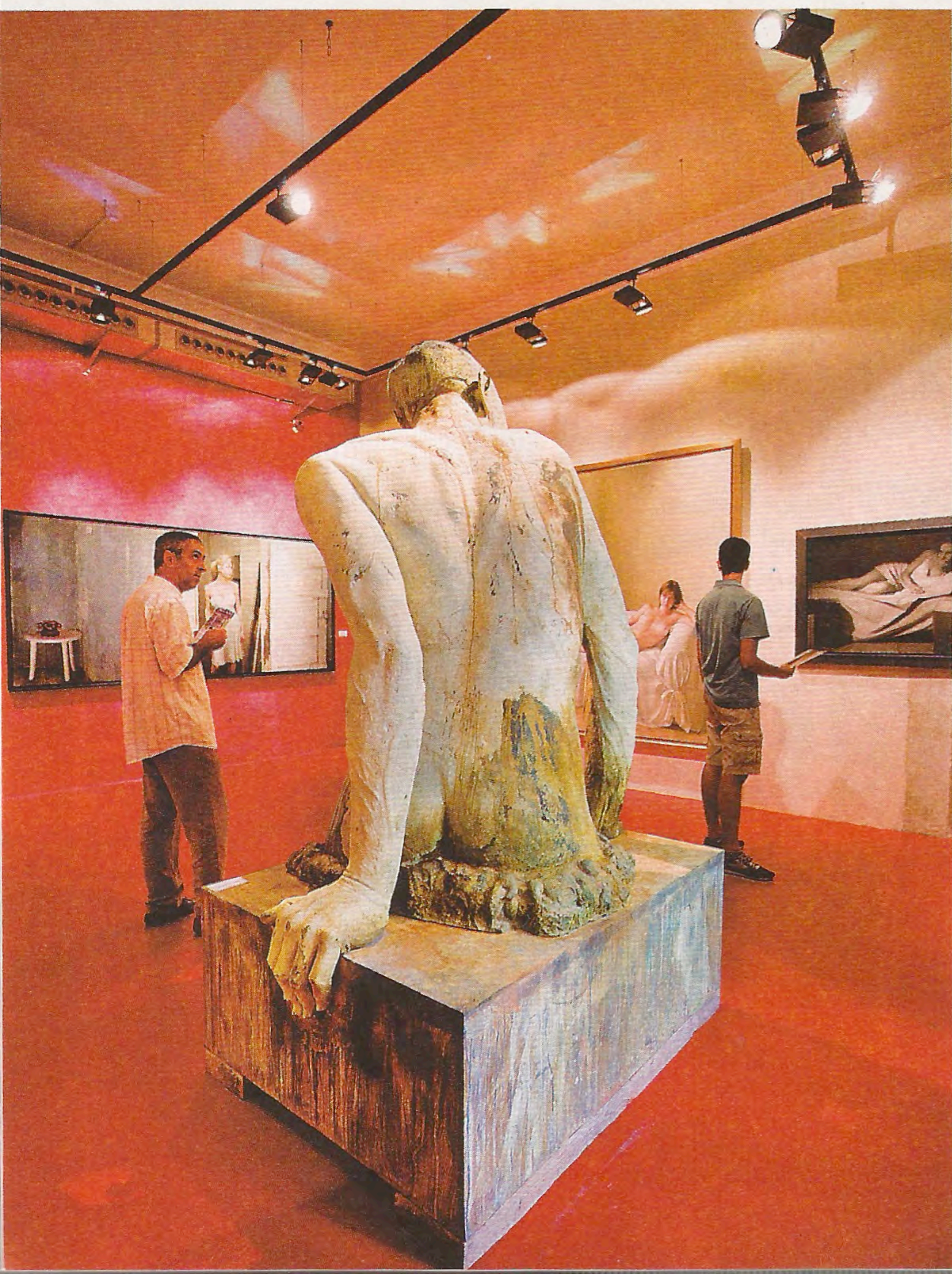


WHEN A WAITER has that conspiratorial twinkle in his eye, you know that mischievous look means precisely one thing: This is going to be good. “These olives are different,” he confides. “They’re special.”

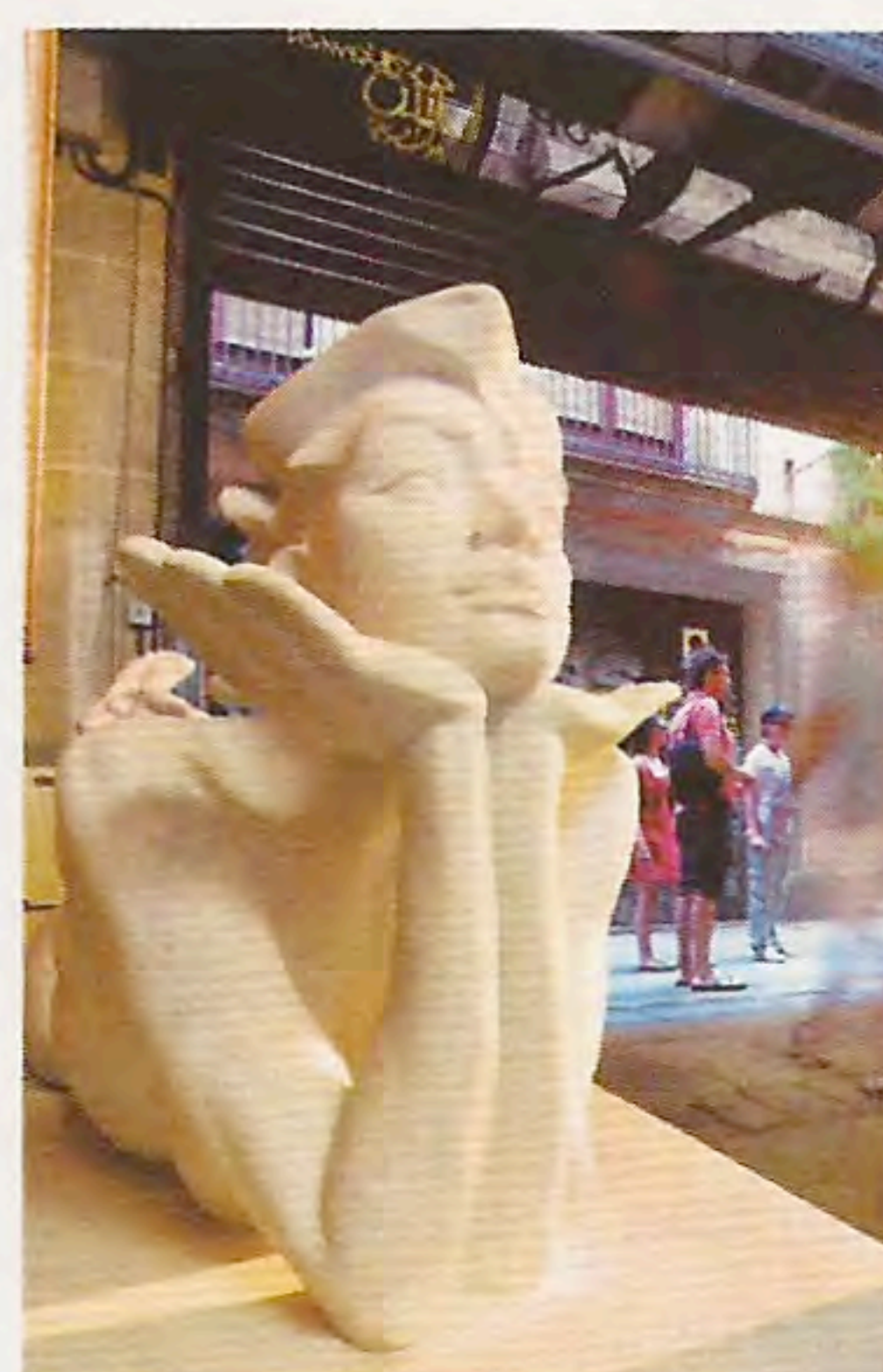
Dipping a spoon into an unmarked Mason jar, he carefully fishes out a single spherical olive, balancing it delicately on the spoon. Slowly the olive-cradling spoon is lowered to the table. He pauses for a second, satisfied, and then motions with his chin toward the spoon—go ahead—and there’s that twinkle again.

You lift the spoon gingerly, and the olive jiggles around in a glistening pool of olive oil. You raise the spoon to your lips and slide the sphere into your mouth. It balances momentarily on your tongue. You close your mouth. You close your eyes. You gently press the olive to the roof of your mouth, applying the slightest of pressure, and then—pop!—it bursts like a water balloon, exploding with the briny taste of what can only be called “oliveness.” It is the purest taste of an olive, its distilled essence. Yet it is like no olive





Left page, clockwise from top: A fresh meal at Pinotxo bar in the La Boqueria market; High design at Vinçon home emporium; A gallery at the Museu Europeu d'Art Modern. This page, from left: Inspecting flowers at La Boqueria; MEAM; A selection of pastries at bubó.



you have ever eaten.

These eye-widening “liquid” olives were originally dreamed up at what was arguably the most famous restaurant in the history of the world, elBulli, in the small town of Roses up the coast from Barcelona. It was there that superstar chef Ferran Adrià applied his boundless imagination and experimental techniques to create fantastical, edible creations like those olives, and in the process pioneered the rising movement of modernist cuisine. At his side, his talented brother Albert concocted elBulli’s magical sweets and desserts.

In July 2011, with fanfare more biblical than typical, elBulli served its last supper. But the creative soul of the restaurant lives on at Tickets and 41^o Experience, a unique pair of establishments that the Adrià brothers, both Barcelona natives, opened last year in the city’s former theater district, now a resurgent neighborhood.

Albert Adrià now runs the show, and at the informal tapas bar Tickets, dinner is indeed a show: bright marquee lights, a red-carpeted entrance and a host in a top hat and tails welcome the open-minded gastronome. Then come those olives, and a parade of other arresting, pleasure-inducing bites.

“Barcelona has historically been considered a creative city from where a multitude of professionals known around the world have emerged,” Albert Adrià says. And even though current culinary trends have shifted northward to embrace Scandinavia’s “new Nordic” movement, Barcelona remains one of the world’s greatest

culinary capitals. From the many high-tech Michelin-starred kitchens down to the stellar bare-bones tapas joints, there runs a confluence of ideas, inspiration and flat-out passion for food.

And the catalyst for that synergy? “There are two important factors: the quality of our products and the skill of the chefs,” Adrià declares. In gastronomy, as in bicycle riding, if you have the fundamentals down, you can go far.



“HIS IS NOT SPAIN. This is Catalunya.” So goes the refrain that echoes across Barcelona. And yet the capital of Catalunya is also Spain’s second-largest city—a point proven in the heady heat of July when crowds danced in the streets, waving Spanish flags and roaring in patriotic jubilation as Spain’s national soccer team defeated Italy to win the European football championship. It was a replay of the celebratory scenes that followed La Roja (as the Spanish team is known), winning the FIFA World Cup in 2010 and the previous European football championship in 2008. In Barcelona, it seems, football bridges all boundaries.

Still, Catalunya’s dedication to separateness, a pride in its otherness, is a value deeply felt among Catalans both young and old in Barcelona. Many still recall life under the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco, a dark time in the city’s history during which public expressions of Catalan culture, language and nationalism were banned. It was not until after Franco’s death in 1975 that Catalunya’s political and cultural autonomy was reinstated.

The can-do attitude of dreaming big and thinking differently hints at Barcelona’s original fount of creativity: MODERNISME.

Swedish expat René Lönngren, who in 2003 founded *le cool* magazine, a guide to Barcelona’s great alternative culture, is quick to point out that the recent cultural revival has its roots in projects that began two decades ago. “The Olympics weren’t just a sports event,” he explains. “It was also very much about redesigning parts of the city and expanding the city and opening the city toward the sea.”

In addition to building sites for sporting events, the city reclaimed the area around its long-neglected port, resurrecting nearby neighborhoods such as Barceloneta and adjacent El Born. The latter, with its quiet, villagelike atmosphere, is now a trendy district packed with charming shops and intimate restaurants. The former is one of the most appealing areas in town, its quiet lanes opening up to a grand beachfront promenade that stretches along miles of Barcelona’s golden coastline and teems with skateboarders, dog walkers, joggers, cyclists and lazy afternoon strollers—the entire city on parade.

The transformation into a flourishing city, however, did not begin in earnest until Barcelona hosted the 1992 Summer Olympics. In the run-up to the games, the city embarked on massive revitalization projects.

For the past nine years, *le cool* has been documenting the city's burgeoning brand of urban vitality: the opening of independent design shops and art galleries, the spread of avant-garde tapas bars, the growth of offbeat music festivals and the evolution of the thumping underground nightclub scene. Recently, elegant new hotels and high-end restaurants have joined the mix, providing polish to the wide spectrum of options available to the growing influx of visitors.

IT IS A UNIVERSALLY accepted truth that there is no blueprint for generating creativity, whether working with poetry or food, music or art. But one newly opened museum seems intent on challenging that view. The *raison d'être* of the Museum of Ideas and Inventions of Barcelona is, simply, to inspire.

MIBA is filled with prototypes from Catalan and Spanish inventors and with exhibitions of founder Pep Torres' own imagined inventions, such as a "secret" postcard bearing a scratch-off silver coating to foil prying eyes. But Torres says that MIBA is more than just a museum: "It's a big metaphor about encouraging people to take their ideas one step further, making people believe again in their capacity of doing things."

This can-do attitude of dreaming big and thinking differently hints at Barcelona's original fount of creativity: *modernisme*. And if the envelope-pushing ideas flooding the narrow alleys and grand boulevards these days are any indication, the city still sips from this source of inspiration today.

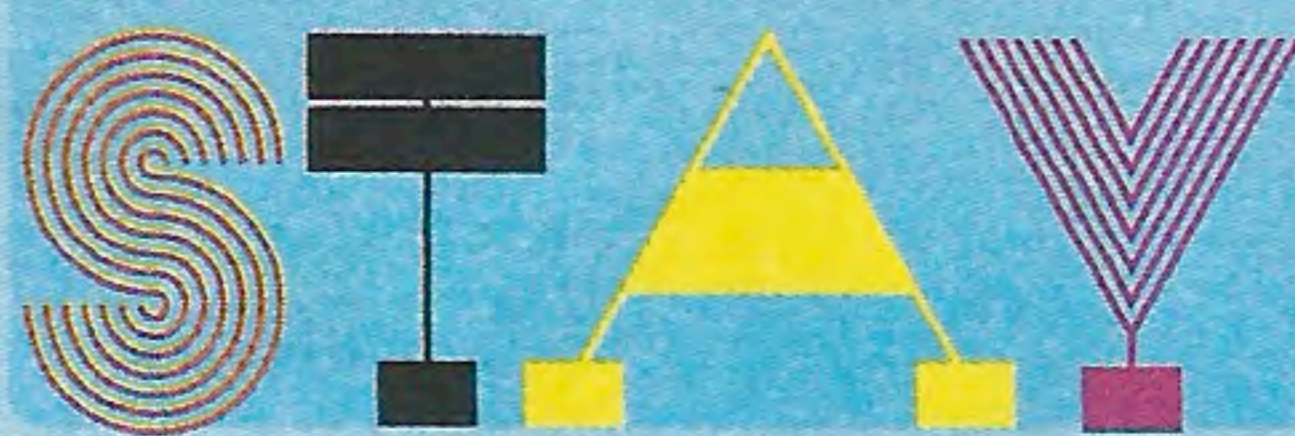
Modernisme was a *fin-de-siècle* creative movement—Catalunya's branch of art nouveau—closely associated with Catalan nationalism. In many ways, Barcelona is defined
(Continued on page 86)

BOS

OF BARCELONA

A guide to the creative spots in red-hot Barcelona that will quicken the pulse and waken the senses. Surprises are a given, so arrive with an open mind—and mouth. By Ingrid K. Williams

WHERE TO



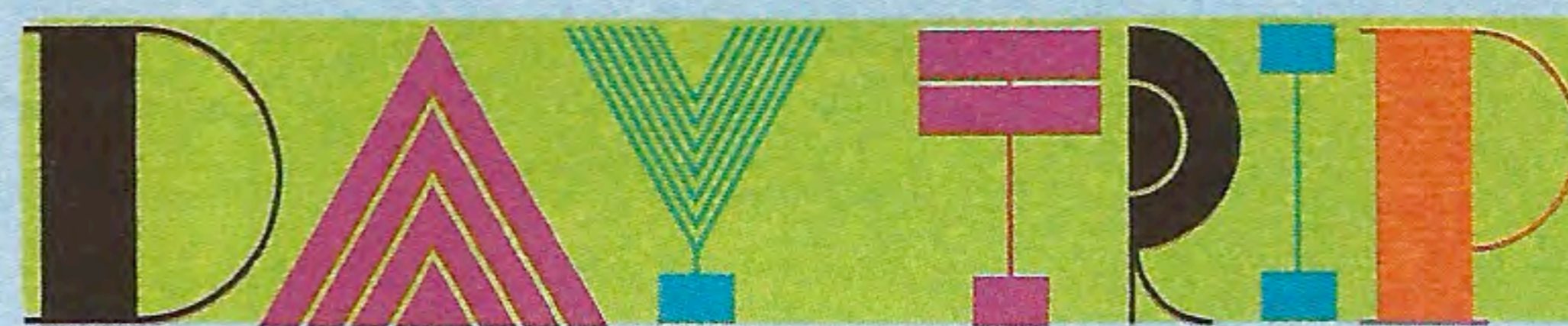
HOTEL CASA FUSTER: This modernist mansion, the work of the great Catalan architect Lluís Domènech i Montaner, sits atop the city's most elegant esplanade, the Passeig de Gràcia. After renovations, it reopened as a 105-room luxury hotel replete with vaulted ceilings, art nouveau columns and a sultry jazz lounge that served as a backdrop in the movie *Vicky Cristina Barcelona*, Woody Allen's 2008 homage to the city. hotelescenter.es/casafuster

OHLA HOTEL: Near Plaça de Catalunya, this new boutique hotel has glass eyeballs jutting from its neoclassical façade, a gastrobar and Michelin-starred restaurant, a rooftop terrace and 74 minimalist rooms, some of which sport cheeky peek-a-boo showers. ohlahotel.com

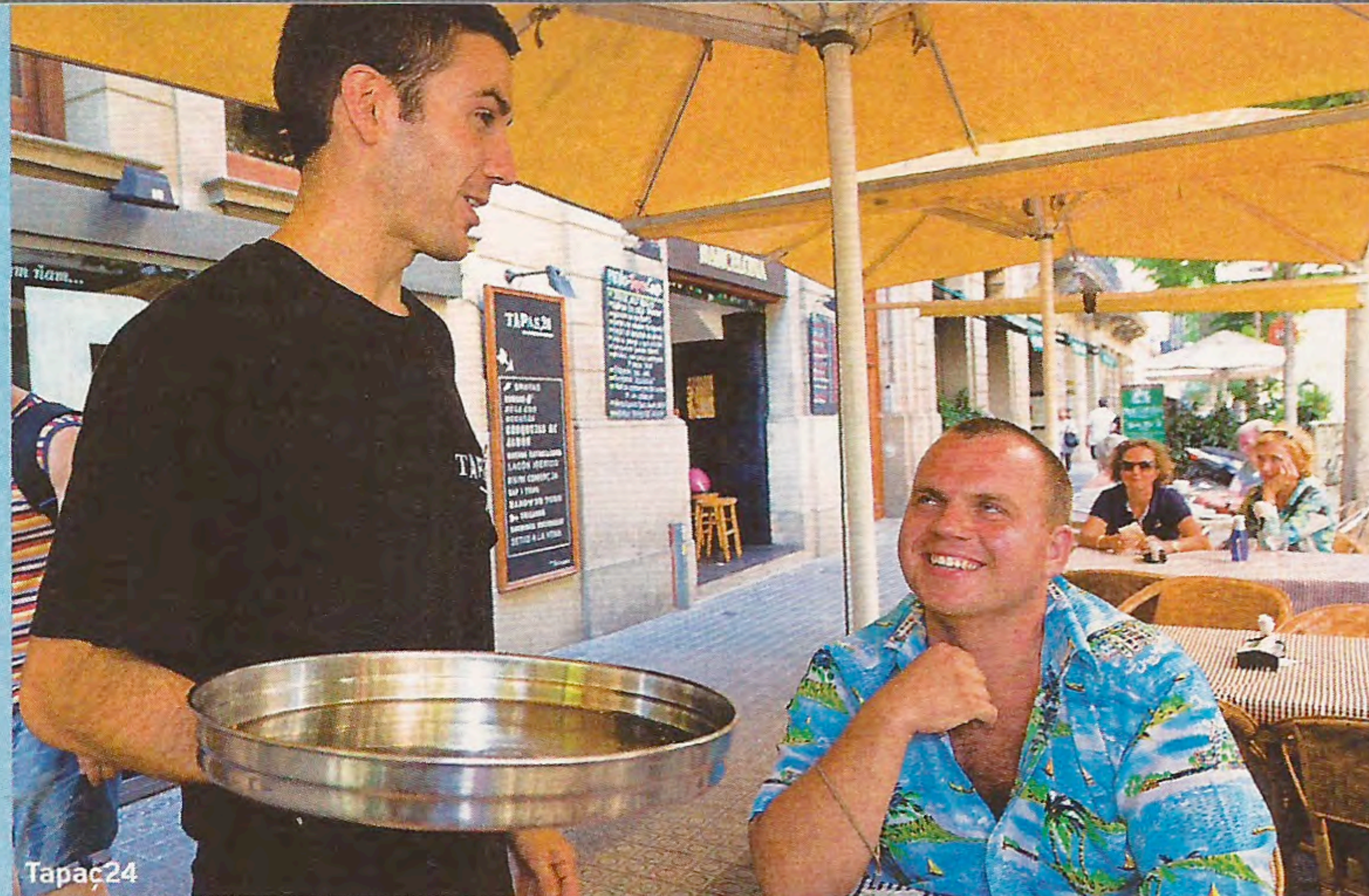
W HOTEL: Designed by Catalan architect Ricardo Bofill, this singular hotel (and the city's newest architectural landmark) appears like a shimmering sail at the tail end of the Barceloneta boardwalk. Unwind with a "blissage"

massage at the in-house Bliss Spa or curl up in a cabana beside the pool. The 473 stylish rooms and suites boast picture windows framing stupendous sea and city views. w-barcelona.com

MANDARIN ORIENTAL: Extravagance is still in style in L'Eixample, the former neighborhood of Barcelona's bourgeoisie that is now home to designer emporiums and upscale hotels, including this luxurious lodging with 98 airy rooms. Check out the elegant Banker's Bar, where champagne cocktails are poured beneath a shiny ceiling lined with golden safety deposit boxes. mandarinoriental.com/barcelona



It takes less than two hours by car or train to get to Figueres, a small



Tapac24

WHERE TO



TICKETS/41° EXPERIENCE: Adrià brothers Ferran and Albert focus their boundless culinary creativity on tapas at these adjacent restaurants. Tapas bar Tickets is a favorite of celebrity chefs and food-world glitterati (José Andrés and Anthony Bourdain are fans). Next door, find 41° Experience, an intimate genre-busting spot with a 41-course snacks-only tasting menu. ticketsbar.es, 41grados.es

PEZ VELA: After a day at the beach, retreat to this stylish new beachside restaurant tucked beneath the W Hotel for a romantic sunset meal on the terrace. Locals first flocked here for the terrific views, but they have been returning for the studded rice with cuttlefish and prawns. grupotragaluz.com/rest-pezvela.php

ESPAISUCRE: Located in the newly hip El Born neighborhood, this innovative restaurant serves every child's dream: desserts for every evening course. Tasting menus balance confections both sweet and savory for a truly unique dining experience. espaisucres.com

TAPAÇ24: Carles Abellán is a Michelin-starred chef, elBulli alum and local superstar who also happens to have perfected tapas—from *patatas bravas* and Iberian ham croquettes to bite-sized foie gras burgers—at this bustling subterranean restaurant. carlesabellan.com/tapac24



MIBA Museum

WHAT TO

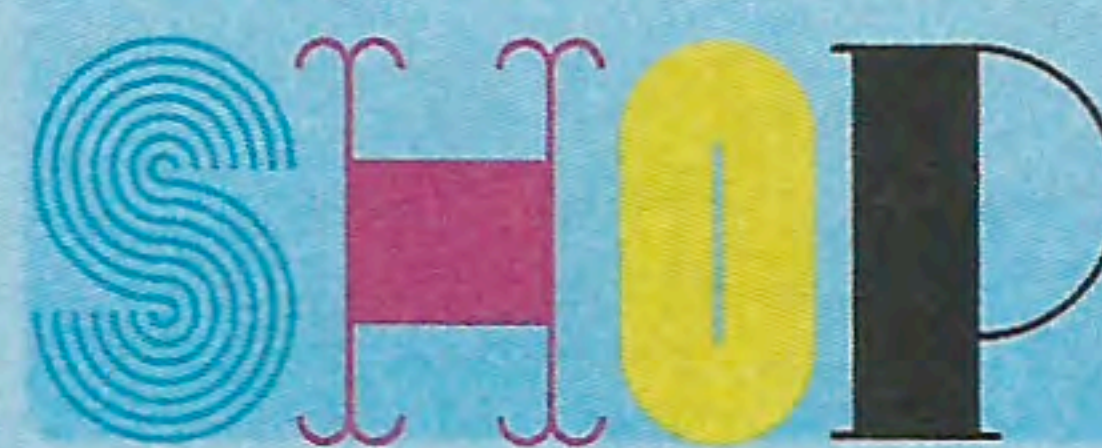


MIBA MUSEUM: Step into a world of boundless possibilities at Pep Torres' new museum of ideas and inventions, where a fresh perspective, inspiration and a sense of humor are all on display. mibamuseum.com

FUNDACIÓ JOAN MIRÓ: The world's largest collection of paintings and sculptures by famed Barcelona native Joan Miró can be found in this museum atop Montjuïc, a rambling wooded hill that rises just south of the city center. fundaciomiro-bcn.org

MUSEU EUROPEU D'ART MODERN: Steps from the popular Museu Picasso, step inside this newly opened museum filled with Catalan sculptures and contemporary figurative paintings and lose the crowds. meam.es

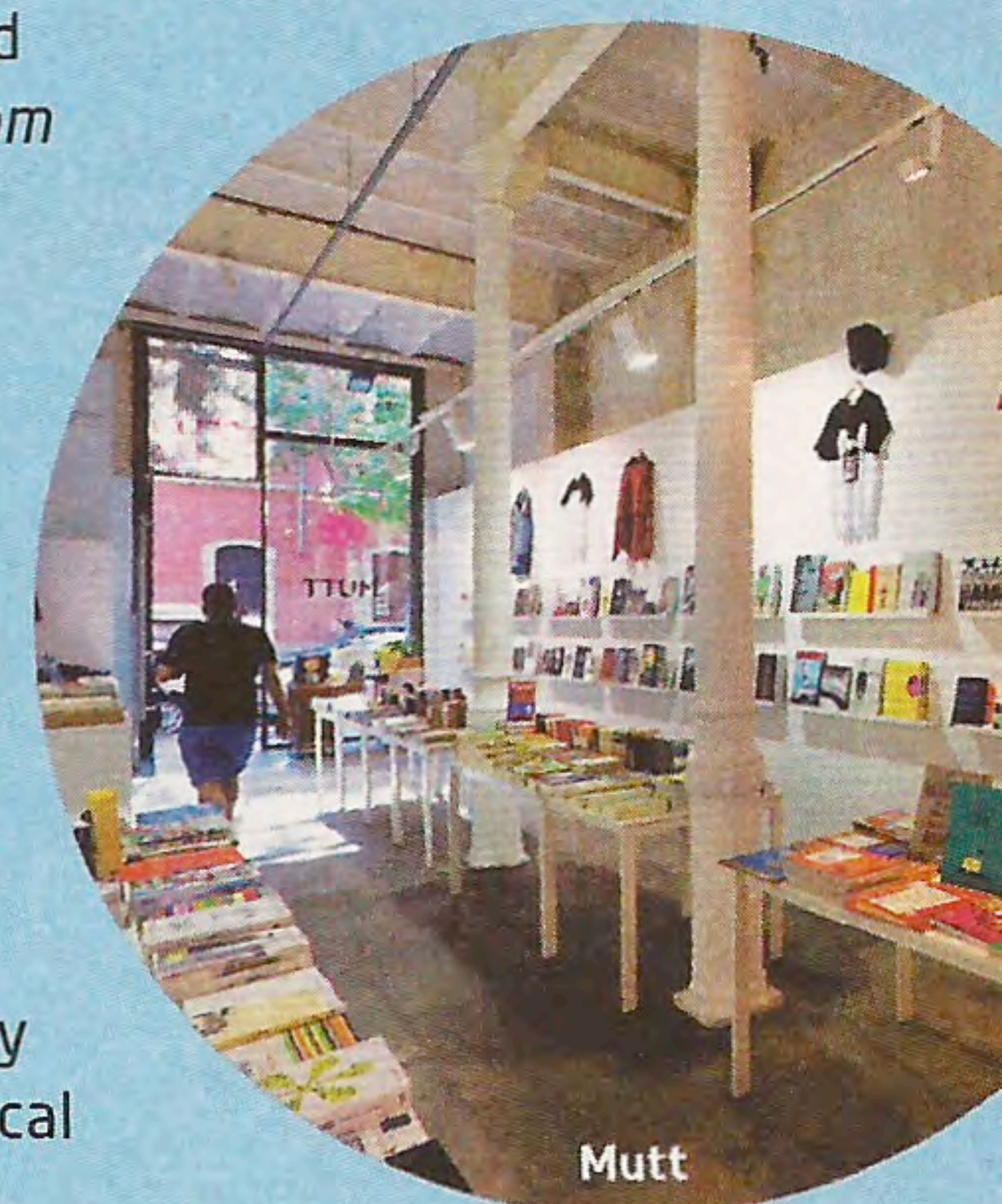
WHERE TO



AMATOSOLE: Some of Barcelona's most interesting shops have sprouted in Raval, the edgy multicultural neighborhood west of Las Ramblas. One of the best is AmatoSole, a workshop and showroom where flea market finds are recycled and redesigned into covetable handcrafted housewares. amatosole.com

MUTT: The city's creative class converges at this hybrid bookshop and art gallery to browse through hard-to-find design tomes, flip through magazines from independent imprints and admire the latest exhibition of contemporary art from up-and-coming local artists. mutt.es

VINÇON: Amid L'Eixample's international designer shops, the city's chicest home emporium is housed in a beautiful fin-de-siècle building. Sprawling across two floors, the store also boasts a design-minded art gallery, La Sala Vinçon. vincon.com



Mutt



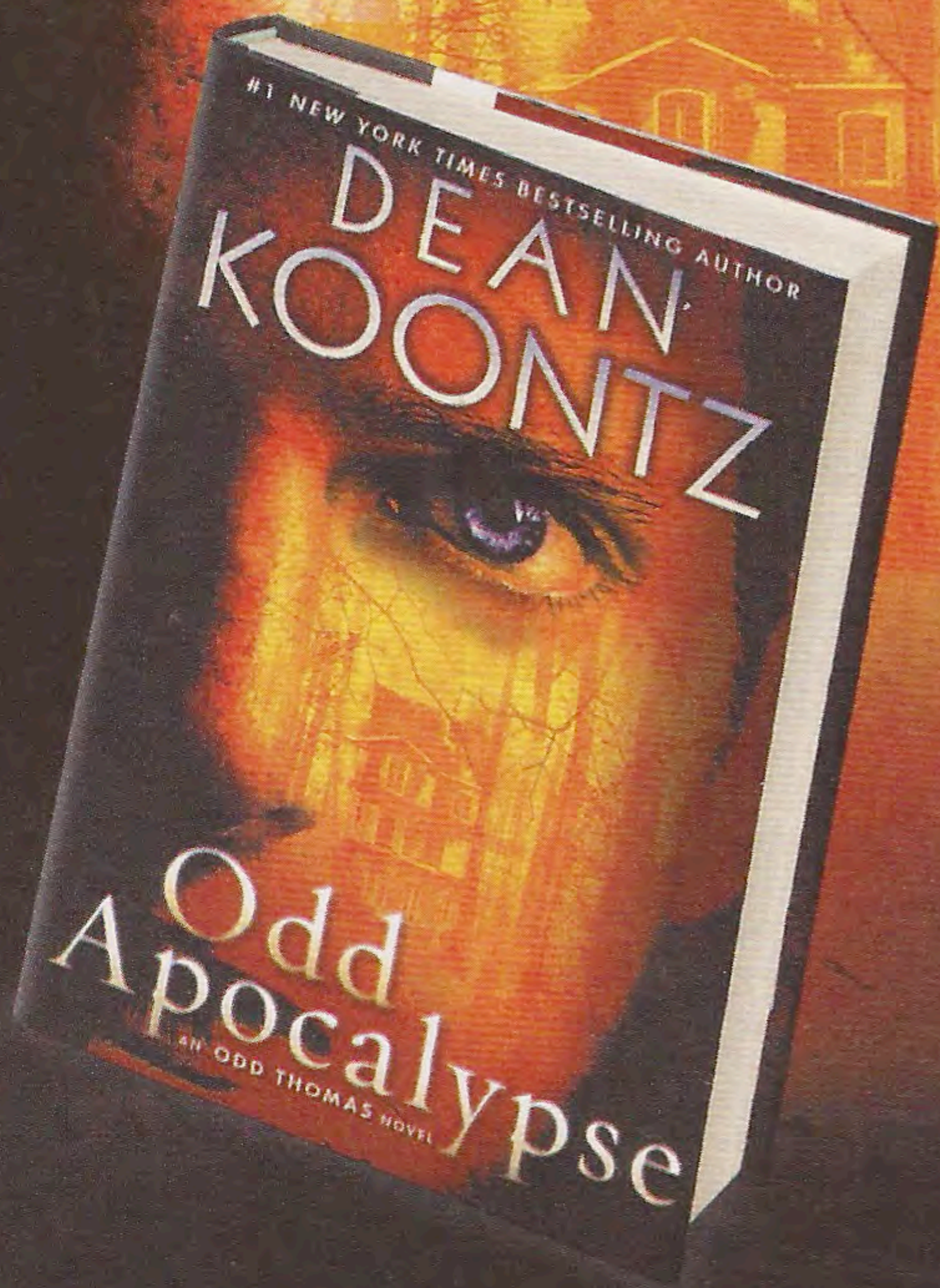
Vinçon

town in northern Catalunya, just south of the French border, and the birthplace of the famous Spanish surrealist painter Salvador Dalí. Catch a glimpse of the world from Dalí's fantastical perspective at the **Dalí Theatre-Museum**, a museum designed by the artist himself and constructed in the ruins of a former theater destroyed at the end of the Spanish Civil War. www.salvador-dali.org/museus/figueres/en_index.html

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*The Virginian-Pilot



La Barceloneta Beach

(Barcelona continued from page 72)

by the architecture created during this period. The city's most spectacular landmarks were produced by modernistas such as Lluís Domènech i Montaner, who drizzled intricate mosaics and ornate stained glass throughout the opulent Palau de la Música Catalana concert auditorium. But the undisputed king of modernism—and Barcelona, for that matter—is Antoni Gaudí.

See, for example, Gaudí's visionary style in Park Güell on a hill in the northern district of Gràcia. Beside the park's wrought-iron entrance, a pair of whimsical houses appear to be plucked from a fairy tale, their rounded, toffee-colored walls and frosted, meringue-hued roofs suggestive of two life-sized gingerbread houses.

Or wander down the Passeig de Gràcia, a broad, elegant esplanade lined with bourgeois mansions, including another pair of Gaudí's buildings. Study the undulating stone façade of Casa Milà (aka, La Pedrera), and, farther south, the mesmerizing mosaics of Casa Batlló. The latter, once a private residence, is now a monument where visitors can inspect all of the minute, fantastical details—the yawning windows and skeletal balconies, the arching staircases and curved wooden doorways—that are indelible proof of Gaudí's genius.

Then continue south, crossing Plaça de Catalunya, the expansive plaza and hub from which the city's grand boulevards radiate, to Las Ramblas, the leafy artery that bisects the old town and pulses with life: a place of painted mimes and troupes of daredevil acrobats, of sidewalk vendors hawking rare orchids and souvenir trinkets, of street artists and beggars and not a few underage pickpockets.

To the east is Barri Gòtic, the Gothic quarter, where the ancient winding alleys are lined with candlelit restaurants, cozy wine bars, artisanal chocolate shops and pint-sized boutiques. To the west is El Raval, where the once-seedy streets still retain a grain of grit, even as luxury hotels, contemporary art museums and trendy cafés have begun sprouting between the cheap beer bars and kebab shops. And forward, down Las Ramblas, just past the chaotic Boqueria market teeming with colorful fresh produce and hulking legs of *jamón*, find Gaudí's Palau Güell, a palatial residence recently reopened to the public after a seven-year restoration.

But if you see only one of Gaudí's masterpieces, it must be the monumental La Sagrada Família. Gaudí's magnum opus, upon which construction began in 1882, is still a work in progress. But what a marvelous work it is. Layers of symbolism that would make James Joyce jealous dovetail with epic feats of construction to create a magnificent cathedral that can shake the resolve of even the most ardent atheist. Afternoon sunlight filters through awe-inspiring stained glass windows, projecting splashes of color on stone columns that soar ever heavenward in a dizzying double helix of artistry and imagination, the city's unique DNA.

In a sense, this is what permeates the atmosphere of Barcelona these days, driving the city to push the bounds of what is possible—in art and architecture, fashion and design, music and food. “We think we are capable of doing almost anything,” says Torres of his fellow Catalans. And from this perspective, in a church like no other, it looks as if they are. //