



Occupying part of a 16th-century stone *masía*, or farmhouse (this page, top, and opposite), the main dining room opens onto a garden (above).

# At Restaurante **LES COLS**, a daring menu meets its match with interiors served up by **RCR Arquitectos** and featuring steel as the key ingredient

By David Cohn

**L**ike its adventurous menu—including duck baked in chocolate—the extravagant interiors of Restaurante Les Cols were designed to engage all the senses, provoking “strong sensations,” as its architect, Ramón Vilalta of RCR Arquitectos, puts it. Drawing on RCR’s previous experience with the material and tapping into the expertise of local fabricators, Vilalta and his partners, Carme Pigem and Rafael Aranda, chose steel for the restaurant’s floors, walls, and furniture as “a challenge, a venture into unknown territory.” Despite steel’s cost and practical disadvantages, the architects aimed to see how many different qualities they could distill from this single material and the spaces it shaped. They wanted to push it beyond its normal sensory limits, toward effects more typically associated with earth, wood, foliage, water, or shimmering, evanescent light.

Located on the outskirts of Olot, a remote town in the picturesque Garrotxa Volcanic district of Catalonia, Spain, this luxury restaurant was established in 1990 by chef-owner Fina Puigdeval. It occupies the former ground floor of her family’s 16th-century stone *masía*, or farmhouse, in spaces originally used as stables, with a modern, one-story addition. In 2001, Puigdeval approached the

## THEY WANTED TO PUSH STEEL BEYOND ITS NORMAL SENSORY LIMITS, TOWARD EFFECTS MORE TYPICALLY ASSOCIATED WITH EARTH, WOOD, FOLIAGE, OR WATER.

local firm of RCR to transform the 6,500-square-foot interior into a unique and memorable setting befitting Les Cols’s growing culinary reputation and signature 12-course meals. The architectural partners, all in their early 40s, had built several widely published houses and public facilities around Olot, with finely detailed designs that drew on the group’s early immersion in traditional Japanese culture and the Minimalist sculpture of Richard Serra, Donald Judd, and others.

At Les Cols, RCR streamlined the confused amalgam of existing spaces into a clear axial organization in the shape of a T. Following a gar-

David Cohn is RECORD’s correspondent in Spain.

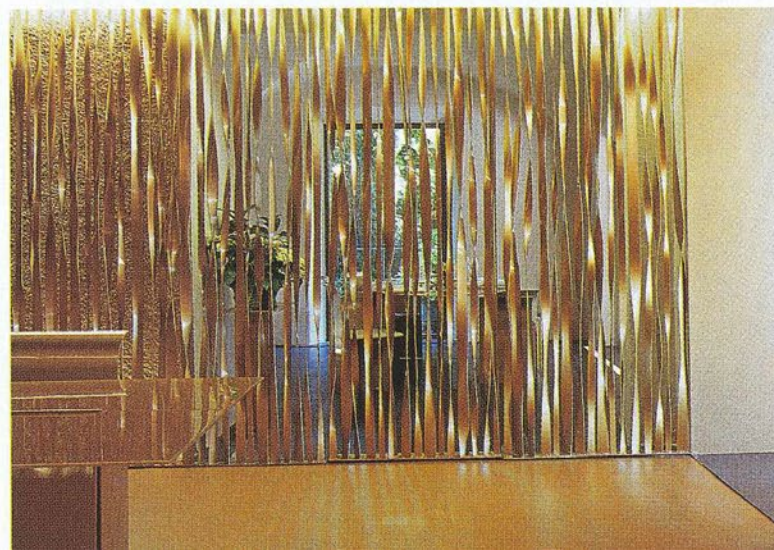
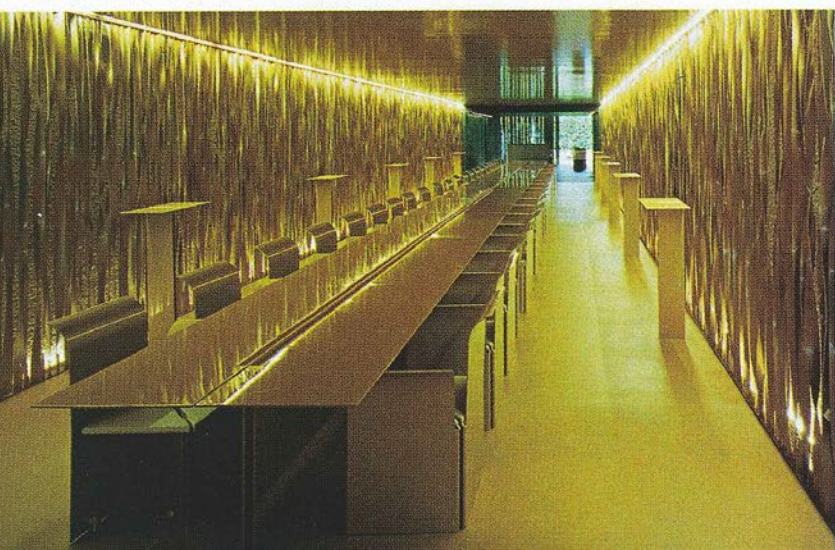


den path of rusted steel plates, guests first approach the one-story wing that forms the head of the T and enter the restaurant at the crossing point of its axes. To the right, a pair of vertical openings reveal the machined precision of the kitchen, completely finished in stainless steel and arranged around a patio, walled in frameless glass, with a reflecting pool that extends into the entry garden below a screen of ivy. To the left of the entry, the earthy enclosure of the main dining room, facing the garden and bathed in daylight, appears with its dark oxidized steel walls and screens of graphite-finished, twisted steel ribbons over the windows, echoing the climbing ivy. Here, floors of lightly waxed, raw steel planks mix natural colors from different mills: deep blues, purples, reds, and browns. These somber hues set off the brilliant reflective finish of the tables and chairs, coated in hard-baked, pale gold enamel.

Straight ahead, the long trunk of the T plunges through the central structural bay of the *masía*, forming a dazzling banquet room

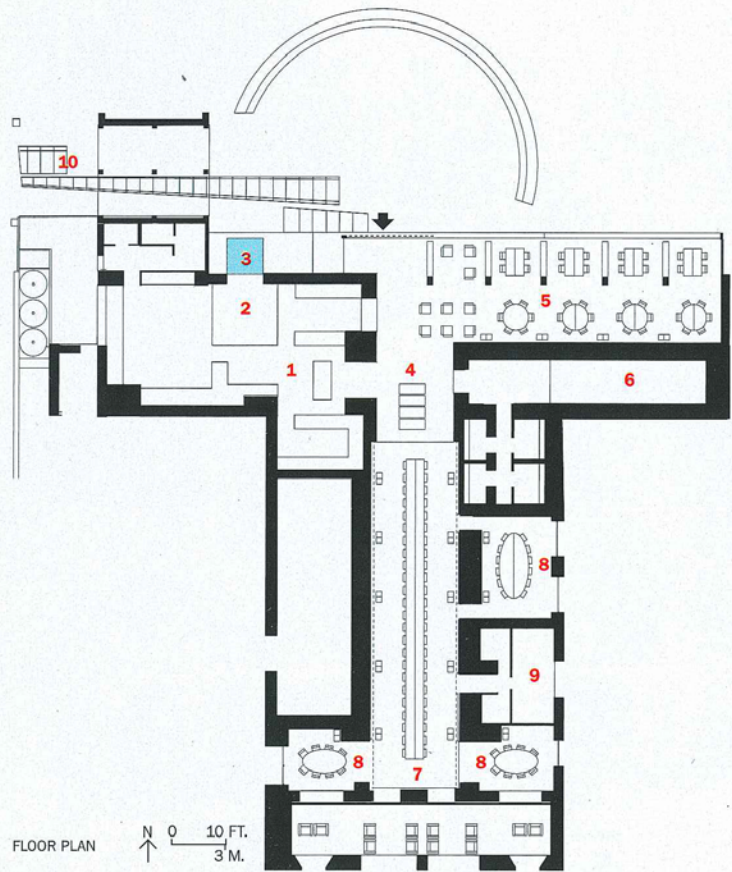
**Project:** *Restaurante Les Cols, Catalonia, Spain*  
**Architects:** *RCR Arquitectos—Ramon Vilalta, Carmen Pigem, Rafael Aranda, principals;*

*M. Subiràs, design team*  
**Consultants:** *Blazquez-Guantier (structural); J. Padrosa (computer renderings); M. Subiràs (construction supervision)*

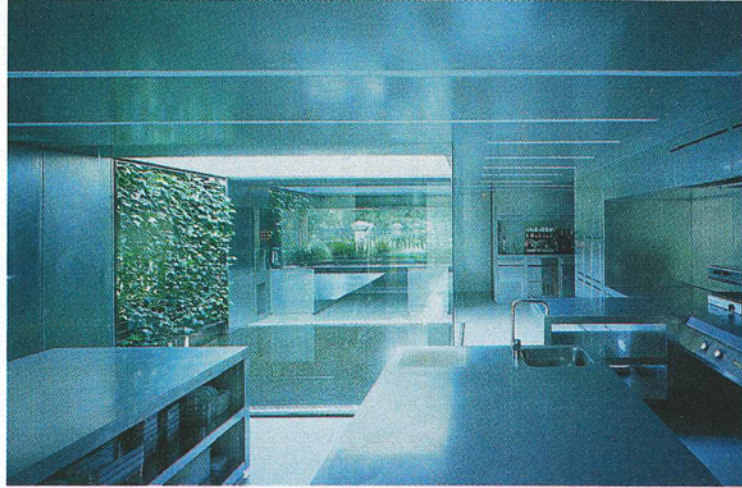


The banquet hall (above and opposite) is like an extremely lavish refectory with a grand table—at more than 55 feet long, it seats 44 diners. The architects designed all the furnishings and twisted screens. Some of the dining areas are set beneath the building's original masonry vaults (right).





- 1. Kitchen
- 2. Patio
- 3. Reflecting pool
- 4. Reception
- 5. Main dining
- 6. Wine cellar
- 7. Banquet
- 8. Private dining
- 9. Office
- 10. Pedestrian access



All stainless steel, the kitchen (top) has a cool, bluish cast and straight-edged precision that contrast with the dining areas' mix of warm, dark oxidized metal (bottom) and gold-enameled, sometimes curvy or twisted forms.

finished entirely in gold, its long table seating 44. In the private dining rooms flanking it, dark steel floors and gold furnishings are set under the original masonry vaults. At the end of the hall, doors open to a stone portico and enclosed garden.

The banquet hall was key to the design: "The original space was windowless, dark, and disagreeable," explains Vilalta. "And the big decision was to open it to the exterior and convert it into a destination." The architects decided to exaggerate its awkward length for dramatic effect, and, in a bold departure from their usual palette of natural finishes, to lacquer its surfaces in multiple, polished coats of gold enamel—maximizing the sense of splendor. Twisting ribbons of gold-painted steel along the long walls, echoing those of the main dining room, seem to vibrate in the light of continuous fluorescent tubes at the floor and ceiling. These steel strips screen out views of air diffusers and acoustic wall material. The table, like the rest of the furnishings, evokes vegetal forms, with two continuous steel plates that fold symmetrically from a central stem to produce twin cantilevered leaves. Tall serving tables line the walls; their small bisecting tops like paired hands proffering a serving platter. The chairs, thin-cushioned and mounted on casters, consist of two symmetrical steel plates, folded like origami around a diagonal cut running across

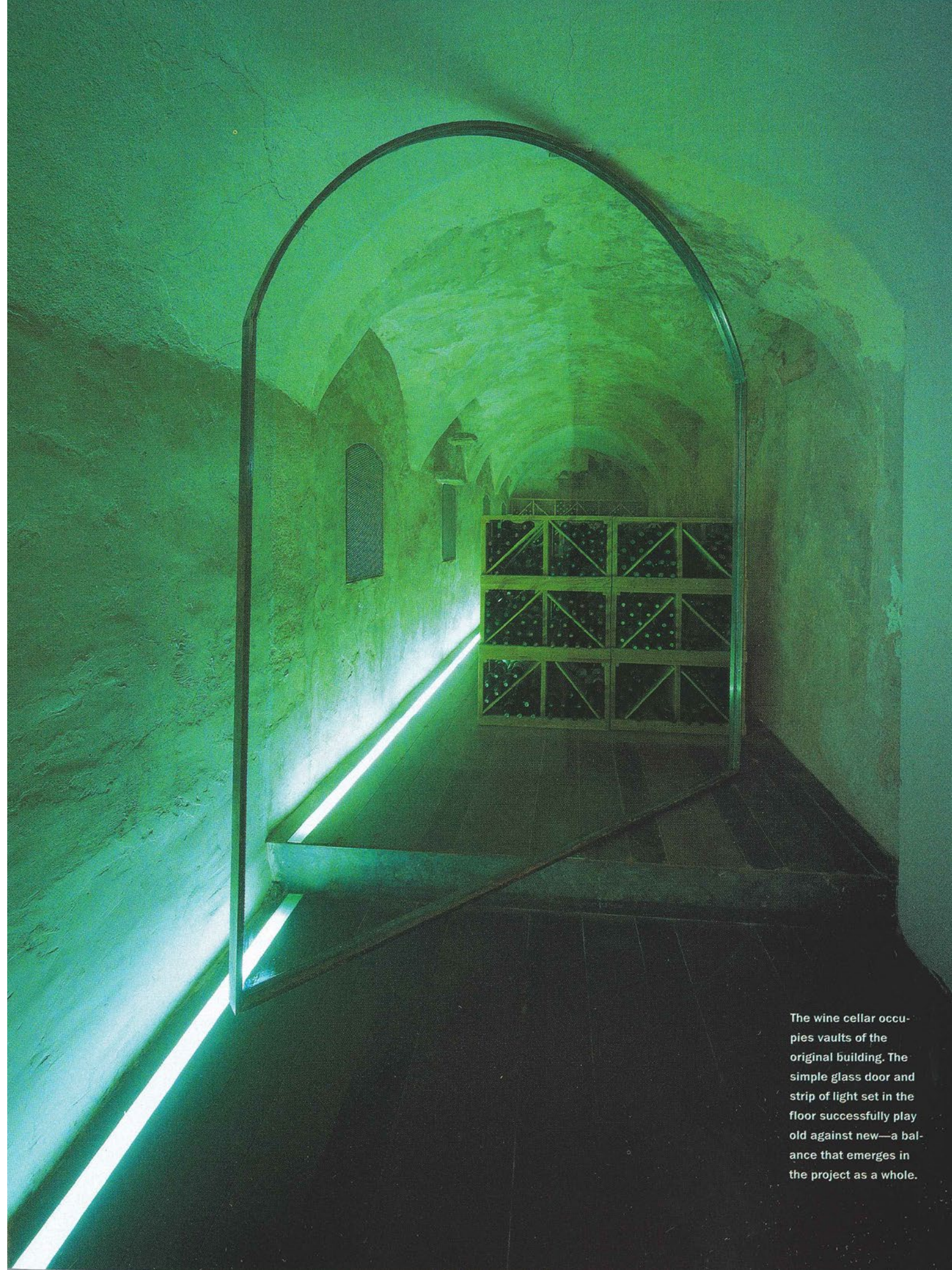
the seat. The steel plates ingeniously open below the seat to produce a curving back and single side arm, inviting diners to assume a relaxed, almost reclining posture, as if at a Roman feast.

More than 55 feet long, the table adds to the sense of ceremony, as does the background music of Gregorian chants, Baroque viols, or Balinese gamelan. Whether it's a banquet or merely an evening with regular diners, the scenario entails a bit of choreography. Couples must separate like partners in a line dance to find facing seats on either side of the table, while the waiters whisk round and round announcing courses. (When patrons arrive in groups smaller than 44 for a meal, not a banquet event, empty chairs typically act as spacers between different clusters of diners.) Despite the drama of the room and its activities, the overall effect is of amplitude and ease, combining the free horizontal flow of modern space with the thick, heavy forms of the *masía*. Once a dark, enclosed chamber buried in the center of the complex, this hall gives new meaning to the notion of an interior world glowing from within. ■

**Sources**

Acoustic ceilings: Knauf Delta  
Urinals: Lagares

For more information on this project, go to Projects at [www.architecturalrecord.com](http://www.architecturalrecord.com).



The wine cellar occupies vaults of the original building. The simple glass door and strip of light set in the floor successfully play old against new—a balance that emerges in the project as a whole.