



Lightly marinated warm oyster with iced cucumber slush, K5 and spicy apple from Martin Berasategui.

EATING EUSKADI

Whether you want to eat your way through Michelin temples of haute gastronomy, salt-of-the-earth establishments proffering classic Basque fare, undiscovered gems in the culinary landscape, or a plethora of pintxo bars, the traversable Basque region of northern Spain can provide it all.

by **joyceelyn shu**

DELICACIES

It was not until relatively recently that umami was recognised (by western scientists) as the fifth taste, after salt, sweet, sour and bitter. The diner who has supped at a table in Victor Arguinoniz's obsessive universe may well become convinced of smoke as a contender for the sixth, that surely the mouth contains taste receptors for smoke, a flavour homo sapiens have evolved to crave since the discovery of fire.

While plotting a trip to the Spanish Basque Country, before I secured flights, before accommodations were booked, my foremost concern was meal reservations. The first confirmation I made sure to tie down is tucked far away from the madding crowd in the bucolic setting of the Atxondo Hills, an hour's drive from San Sebastián in Axpe. Here resides a very special place, where one very special man gives true meaning to locavore, farm-to-table and made-from-scratch, descriptions today woefully co-opted by trite marketeering speak and so oft-banded as to be nothing more than jabberwocky.

If San Sebastián is Spain's food Mecca, then to eat at Asador Etxebarri is the equivalent of a pilgrimage to the Hajj. Here, Arguinoniz has created a microcosm of all that is good and great about Basque food while quietly redefining what it means to cook with fire in the 21st century. Besides merely churning his own goat butter, pulling his own buffalo mozzarella, baking his own sourdough, and curing his own chorizo, the high priest of the wood grill insists on crafting every other conceivable object in-house, from cooking his own coals from a variety of locally sourced woods such as oak, apple and olive (selected based on the ingredient he believes the wood best suits) to constructing his own machinist fantasy grill replete with pulley-controlled platforms (for precise control of distance from heat source) and custom-designed utensils (for minute calibration of type and level of smoke permeation).

The most striking aspect of a meal at Etxebarri is not how pervasively smoky everything tastes, but the exact opposite, such is the deftness with which smoke is used. Smoke, or the fragrance of wood (as Arguinoniz prefers to call it), is applied with reverential circumspection as befits the ingredient at hand, enhancing every ingredient it caresses the same way judicious salting would — by amplifying inherent flavours without a declaration of existence.

Nothing within Arguinoniz's control is left to chance, not even the kind of ember for the type of wood species, both tailored to the particularity of a single ingredient or dish. An oyster, for instance, would be waved for moments over a dying ember of orange wood, just long enough for its briny juices to concentrate into a kind of *au naturel* mollusc jus. Served with spinach to underscore its minerality, the result is an oyster that tastes more like an oyster than any other oyster. On the other

hand, beef demands grapevines that burn infernally hot and fragrant. The *chuleta de vaca* of Fred Flintstonian proportions, hewn from a 14-year-old dairy cow and dry-aged for beefy savour of haunting depth, thus acquires the ideal burnt ends-to-tender scarlet gradation, with every bite fascinatingly different, marbled and seamed with just the right amount of complex tasty fat.

A meal at Etxebarri is living, fire-exhaling proof that the culinary artistry that prevails in the dramatically beautiful Euskadi landscape is still, by and large, of a naturalist bent. This steadfast traditionalism — take the best possible ingredients and do the minimal to maximally heighten their deliciousness — comes as no surprise. The Basques are the oldest indigenous ethnic group in Europe. They have lived uninterrupted in the region since the beginning of recorded history. They speak a language with no linguistic relation to any other Indo-European tongue, one dating back to before the Roman conquest. The Basques are fiercely and famously independent, and nowhere is this more apparent than in their food.

A taste of purist Basque cooking, of home-style cooking, can be found behind the most appropriately inscrutable of shop fronts within the city of San Sebastián. If visceral satisfaction outranks all else in your idea of a great meal, it is highly likely a meal in this soporific no-frills basement will hit the spot more than at most of the much-vaunted, multi-starred, list-listed establishments that abound in the area. There is no mention in the *guide rouge*. It is cash only. No English is spoken, although if you look pitifully ravenous enough, a crib sheet might be slipped to you. A menu does not exist, as it all depends on what's best from the market that day. Open only at lunch, it also chooses to be closed throughout the weekend. Still undeterred? Good. Ibai may take your reservation. And if you speak neither Spanish nor Euskera, your best bet is to nicely ask your hotel concierge to call.

Jump through the hoops, respect the protocol, and one is rewarded with the kind of soul-salving comfort food you imagine the *amama* you never had might have lovingly cooked for you.

If you are there in early spring, a bowl of the season's first vegetal treasures may await — baby artichokes, *guisantes de lágrima*, white asparagus and *borrajas* (borage), bathed in a light vegetable broth slicked with a generous slug of grassy olive oil. Fleeting available from mid March to early June, *guisantes de lágrima* are picked early and painstakingly laborious to shell. These tear-shaped peas encapsulate the essence of spring, popping in the mouth and flooding the palate with fresh, herbaceous sweetness, heightened by a unique savouriness thanks to the Basque growing region's



The signature broken jar of yogurt dessert at Akelafe, to be eaten jar and all.

proximity to the sea. It's no wonder they are locally known as the caviar of vegetables.

If available, *angulas* (elvers or baby eels) are a must. They are revered in this region, where they are also known as *txitxardin*. Notoriously elusive, they not only demand Basque fortitude to capture, but, more importantly, an almost ascetic restraint in the kitchen so as not to ruin their subtle flavour and delicate texture. The supple meatiness, with the barely perceptible toothsome-ness of the tiny spines, is best enhanced by olive oil infused with a couple of caramelised garlic slices and a dried red chili pepper, warmed just enough to firm up the flesh a touch.

Percebes (goose barnacles, or gooseneck barnacles), timorous beasties of unreal tastiness, are available sporadically throughout the year, for the tide and luck determine the haul of the intrepid *percebeiros* who harvest them by hand. It's wise not to judge a book by its cover — dig past their bizarre scaly appearance to discover an elixir distilled from tempestuous sea spray, treacherous currents and the craggy granite rocks of a storm-bashed coastline.

Another perennial amply demonstrates that in Basque cooking, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. At Ibai, *kokotxas* (hake throats, a beloved Basque delicacy) prepared *al pil pil* are nonpareil. Emulsification — the liaison of nothing more than the hake throats' naturally gelatine-rich juices and garlic-scented olive oil — wrought through agitation of the earthenware *cazuela* creates a glossy sauce of unctuous coating consistency. The *kokotxas al pil pil* at Ibai are of such superlative

quality and so expertly cooked that without chewing, they dissolve in the mouth and glide down the throat.

To culminate, make room for the magnificent *lenguado* (sole), carved tableside. And if this style of whole fish grilled on the bone speaks to you, make the trek out to nearby Getaria. More known for being the hometown of the brilliant Cristóbal Balenciaga (and today the home of the first museum exclusively dedicated to the fashion designer), this picturesque fishing village has been put on the food tourist's map thanks to Elkano, and, to a lesser extent, Kaia Kaibe — both are owned by the same family but independently run, with Elkano currently in the hands of Aitor Arregui, son of the legendary fish grill master Pedro Arregui. The specialty is *rodaballo* or turbot, cooked whole on the grill to render a stunning edible palette of variegated textural and flavour delights. Fillet aside, the nape (*morrillo*), cheek, belly (*ventresca*), brains and bones all provide ample excuse to eat with your fingers — all the better to noisily savour all that succulent, lip-smackingly gelatinous goodness.

Of course, to those who dine with little but star-spangled bragging rights in sight, or who are visiting the País Vasco for the first time, the above may be of secondary concern. What is astonishing is the number of two- and three-Michelin-starred establishments that crowd the area. San Sebastián itself boasts the highest concentration of Michelin stars per square metre than any other city in the world, including three of Spain's eight three-star restaurants (Arzak, Akelafe and Berasategui). Neighbouring Bilbao is home to the fourth (Azurmendi). That's 50 percent of Spain's most revered

Clockwise from left:
Bogavante (lobster)
'Mar y Huerta';
Manzana Sanguina
(apple cooked in
beet juice); Trufon de
Chocolate (chocolate
truffle); and chefs
Juan Mari Arzak and
Elena Arzak.



cities — so there is less socio-economic disparity, a fairly substantial middle-class population, and sufficient disposable income to make eating well and eating out a priority.

As for the nurture bit, there is great cultural emphasis placed on good food. Or to put it simply: to say the Euskaldunak are food-obsessed is an understatement. It doesn't matter whether your means are modest or you're as wealthy as Croesus. Modest means by no means means having to settle for poor food — the enviable *pintxo* scene (another story for another time; see our sidebar on page 199 for a teaser) makes eating well every day for every man a heartwarmingly democratic pursuit. With regards to the high end, Juan Mari Arzak has said, referring to his restaurant, Arzak: "People save their money to come here — ordinary people. Some people come once every month or two if they have the money; others once a year." And of course, only a culture this food-fixated could have raised a cadre of gastronomic demigods such as Arzak and Pedro Subijana (of Akelaré). That they have chosen to remain in and cook from their beloved Euskadi in turn translates into more tourism dollars while attracting ambitious and creative young talent.

dining establishments conveniently located in one eminently traversable area. If looking at the other popular annual survey, the region boasts four of the top 20 restaurants in the world (the world according to The World's 50 Best Restaurants list, anyway): Mugaritz currently weighs in at No.6, Asador Etxebarri at No.13, Arzak at No.17, and Azurmendi at No.19.

What is it about the region that has enabled it to become the gastronome's dream destination, with the kind of culinary cachet most tourism authorities elsewhere couldn't engineer even if they tried? Nature and nurture in equal parts.

There are three things vital to the nature bit of the equation: location, location, location. Euskadi (the union of the three provinces of Gipuzkoa, Biscay and Álava), also known as the Basque Autonomous Community, is part of the larger Basque Country (or Euskal Herria, which includes the territory of Navarre). It may be the heart of Spanish Basque culture, yet its cuisine has subsumed Spanish and French sensibilities, sitting as it does on the border next to Ipparalde, the *pays basque français* (or French Basque Country). The coastal location and verdant, hilly terrain means an abundance of beautiful seafood, meats, vegetables and other ingredients, a veritable cornucopia to make even Abundantia blush. Euskadi is one of Spain's more prosperous regions — the repute of her otherworldly beaches as well as incomparable cuisine have ensured a steady influx of foreign cash to her comely coastal



Clockwise from top:
 Eucalyptus smoked loin of lamb with its 'wool';
 Bocadillo (sandwich) of kokotxas (hake throats);
 Pañuelo ('handkerchief') of fruits and flowers;
 chicken puff with roasted garlic and sorrel.

All dishes from Mugaritz.



So what to make of the hallowed three-star temples of haute gastronomy — namely, Arzak, Akelaíe and Berasategui — today? I won't dwell too much on the details here, because this isn't that kind of story, except to say the simple question of 'Will I return?' as litmus test throws up a panoply of reactions. In the case of Arzak, the very charismatic presence of the iconoclastic Juan Mari Arzak would be reason itself (see *The Rake* issue 36 for a full feature on Arzak). Besides the man being the jocular host with the most, in the food you can see, taste and understand the undertaking and manifesto of *la nueva cocina vasca*: why it came about when it did, and how it paved the way so that others — at, say, elBulli, El Celler de Can Roca, and Mugaritz — could flourish. At Akelaíe, there were moments that felt like perhaps the panoramic view of the Bay of Biscay from the breathtaking vantage point on Monte Igueldo may be the saving grace of a recent lunch. But that may be an unfair judgment, given as what we had ordered were the contemporary Aranori and Bekarki dégustation menus. The off-menu specials we additionally

ordered — *croquetas* and braised tripe, both traditionally prepared and presented — were unimpeachable, leading one to infer that perhaps a sounder choice may have been the Akelaíe Classics menu. As for Martín Berasategui's, no other institution seems to incite such extremes of response from the dining public. Perhaps we lucked out. But of all the stalwart three-starred establishments in the region, this provided us with the most delicious meal, in the conventional sense. Partake in the beloved signature dishes created in the Berasategui heyday, and it is not hard to see why the restaurant developed the devoted following it has.

Has time been suspended in amber at these most famous of the Basque all-star line-up, helmed by men popularly thought of as the founding fathers of *nueva cocina vasca*? Have the trappings of success — complacency and the catch-22 of creating dishes so well known and so crowd-pleasing you can never take them off the menu — stalled the march of progress? These are questions best answered by those who can make an informed judgment based on multiple return visits over the

Clockwise from top:
Spider crab with sea urchin;
fusion of artichokes and pesto;
chef Eneko Atxa of Azurmendi.

All dishes from Azurmendi.



years. The rest of us would do well to remember that Euskadi gastronomy owes its Eureka moment to these visionary men. Originally inspired by *nouvelle cuisine* — the New French Cuisine — in the 1970s, Arzak and Subijana were fired up to create a style of cooking the world had never seen before: *la nueva cocina vasca*, the New Basque Cuisine. A lot of thought, reflection, study and experimentation were required to create something of enduring significance and value within the larger context of Basque history, tradition and future. This new cuisine was emphatically not meant to be a mere reinvention of *la cocina de mama* classics; as Arzak has said, “We are always looking forwards; never backwards”. At the same time, this new cuisine was not about bringing global ideas, French or otherwise, back to the Basque Country. Instead, the key takeaway these chefs gleaned from *nouvelle cuisine* was the idea that a chef could examine his roots and engender an evolution of cuisine and gastronomic culture without losing sight of tradition. *La nueva cocina vasca* would be progressive, forward-looking and experimental yet rooted in the regional identity. It was not about

modernising traditional dishes or assimilating international influences. It was about creating the Basque cuisine of the future.

What is astounding is that, decades after the fact, this essential spirit continues to thrive. As the old guard, benevolent and patriarchal, stands watch, a new generation continues to uphold the ideals, writing the next chapter in the story of Basque gastronomic evolution.

Take Mugaritz and chef Andoni Luis Aduriz. If you’re looking for a clear picture of this next chapter, you may well come away with more prevarications than answers. A darling of The World’s 50 Best Restaurants panel with its modernist predilections, Mugaritz will no doubt continue to scale greater heights on the list, which is inclined to reward the kind of ‘techno-emotional’ food (the list’s own description) that Mugaritz specialises in. A meal here reads and eats like a gallimaufry of the modern chef’s most phantasmagorical intellectual conceits. Provocative? Absolutely. Entertaining? Beyond a shadow of a doubt. Delicious? Sometimes, and only incidentally. Asking if a good meal must be delicious is perhaps not too different



from asking if good art must be beautiful; much depends on whether the artist's ultimate goal was beauty. If beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and as a diner you'll take straight-up delicious over cogitation on the human condition, then perhaps you'll do well to give Mugaritz a wide berth in your peregrination across the region, for it has far loftier ambitions than mere corporeal pleasure.

Much more reassuring is time spent at Azurmendi, the most recently crowned in the Basque three-starred firmament. There is no question as to where chef Eneko Atxa stands on the uniquely First World pontification as to whether a meal can be good without being delicious. The overture to a meal of operatic sweep at Azurmendi begins with a whimsical (and snack-punctuated) greenhouse tour culminating in a picnic basket of treats such as anchovy millefeuille, *caipiritxa* (the truffles contain their take on the classic cocktail using *txacoli* wine instead of *cachaça*), and fish roe on dill crackers. Once seated, one can't help but smile at the opening spoonful of cheeky post-deconstructivism. As diners we have been virtually conditioned by a generation of chefs that if it walks like a duck and quacks like a duck, it probably isn't. Well, this being Spain, you almost expect what looks like an egg yolk to be some spherification widget. Except this, like a Duchampian Readymade, actually is a hen's yolk, warmed by an injection of hot truffle broth.

Wit and whimsy are never wrought at the expense of deliciousness throughout the *dégustation*. 'Bloody Mar', Atxa's take on the classic cocktail — with a mar ('sea') of spicy Bloody





This page:
 Monkfish liver in sea chlorophyll with anchovies and seaweed salad.

Opposite page:
 (Top) Saffron veil with macaroons and tea flower ice cream; (bottom) 'The Truffle', with fermented wild mushrooms and collard greens.

All dishes from Berasategui.

Mary mix muddled with sea urchin, and toast topped with pickled celery and more sea urchin — is bloody brilliant. Diaphanous ribbons of what look like wide noodles turn out to be shaved squid topped with pickled onion, sauced tableside by a teapot of glossy, slightly viscous and intensely flavoured squid and onion infusion. There's catnip for umamiheads (not to mention non-gratuitous use of spherification) in the form of Idiazabal cheese spheres that burst in the mouth to provide creamy dairy relief to the intense 'Salted Stew' of pork trotter, anchovy and iberico. Profound technical finesse shines through in every course, including the precisely roasted pigeon cooked to *en pointe* rareness, presented with liver pâté, duxelles and cauliflower.

As aforementioned, for first-time visitors to the region, a trip to the Michelin magnet that is the fair coastal city of San Sebastián is often synonymous with a journey to the obvious top-billing names. But having done the mandatory multistar-

struck tour, you may find yourself seeking an experience less tailored to the expectations of the typical food tourist, a more authentic experience, so to speak — authenticity being a relative concept. In which case, Zuberoa fits the bill perfectly. Occupying a charming 15th-century Basque country house located in the ancient village of Oiartzun, Zuberoa has 'only' one star and has no place on that other list, if you care about that sort of thing. Here, it's all about good old-fashioned delicious food, like the roasted lobster with its bisque; seared ravioli of veal trotter and cheek in a ham and beetroot broth; and slow poached egg with minced oily *bacalao* and naturally syrupy sweet onions, a riff on *pil pil*. To end, there is cheesecake worthy of a cult following. Chef Hilario Arbelaitz's singular *tarta de queso* is spellbinding: a very short, crisp and thin *pâte brisée* tart shell cradles an *onctueuse* cheese custard, golden-brown skin bewitchingly giving way to a magma core as molten as ripe brie. It is a rapturous end befitting a great meal.

Another sleeper-hit San Sebastián meal can be found at Casa Urola. Bypass the bland street-level *pintxo* bar façade and head for the restaurant upstairs (reservations are a good idea). Self-reward with a goodly wodge of blush-pink buttery house mi-cuit foie. Follow with ham: the decision to serve the rare Carrasco Guijuelo jamón ibérico bellota (and lomo) — versus, say, Joselito or 5J Cinco Jotas — speaks volumes for this underrated, over-delivering gem of a restaurant run by chef Pablo Loureiro Rodil. Expertly shaved wafer-fine, the ham is served at correct cool room temperature to best showcase Carrasco's melt-in-mouth texture and nutty, oaky, oleic-acid rich character. There are plump oysters swaddled in cured ibérico lardo, with cauliflower cream, crab broth and lemon oil. Humble looks deceive with piquillo peppers, confit-ed to über-capsicumness. In spring, delight in sautéed baby broad beans and artichokes on a cloud-soft potato purée pillow, crowned with a warm coddled egg yolk. Don't miss the mega carabinero prawns. Larger than a small lobster — sweeter and tenderer, too — decapitation yields a jigger's worth of deep-sea umami gold in the form of brains.

Continuing on the path less travelled, a few relatively recent additions to the dining scene in Donostia are worthy of mention. At Kokotxa, chef Dani López conjures extravagant twists on rustic local dishes, such as lobster in smoked *marmitako* (a local fish stew) and crab with a garlic soup cube in *zurrukutuna* of crab roe. On the whole-beast market menu are such marvels as truffled pig trotter and snout ravioli in Iberian ham broth. Managed by IXO Grupo (which also runs Mugaritz, among other restaurants), Ni Neu offers a contemporary and accessible prix fixe menu in the fantastic setting of the Kursaal. Xarma, on the other hand, resides in an unlikely locale off the beaten path. Aizpea Oihandeder and Xabier Diez cut their teeth working with legends such as Arzak, Berasategui and Michel Bras, and the Arzakian effect is palpable in dishes such as octopus carpaccio with iced *ajoblanco*, and warm artichoke salad with roasted bone marrow. 🍷

Akelarre

Paseo Padre Orcolaga, 56
San Sebastián, Gipuzkoa
+34 943 31 12 09

Arzak

Avenida del Alcalde José Elosegui, 273
San Sebastián, Gipuzkoa
+34 943 27 84 65

Azurmendi

Corredor del Txorierra Salida, 25
Larrabetzu, Bizkaia
+34 944 55 88 66

Casa Urola

Fermin Calbeton Kalea, 20
San Sebastián, Gipuzkoa
+34 943 44 13 71

Ibai

Gueteria, 15
San Sebastián, Gipuzkoa
+34 943 42 87 64

Elkano

Herrerrieta, 2E
Getaria
+34 943 14 00 24

Etxebarri

Plaza de San Juan, 1
Atxondo, Bizkaia
+34 946 58 30 42

Kokotxa

Campanario, 11
San Sebastián, Gipuzkoa
+ 34 943 42 19 04

Martín Berasategui

Loidi Kalea, 4
Lasarte-Oria, Gipuzkoa
+34 943 36 64 71

Mugaritz

Otzazulueta Baserria, Altura Aldea, 20
Errenteria, Gipuzkoa
+34 943 52 24 55

Ni Neu

De Zurriola Hiribidea, 1
San Sebastián, Gipuzkoa
+34 943 00 31 62

Xarma

Tolosa Hiribidea, 123
San Sebastián, Gipuzkoa
+34 943 31 71 62

Zuberoa

Araneder Bidea, Barrio Iturriotz
pl. Bekosoro, 1
Oiartzun, Gipuzkoa
+34 943 49 12 28



THE BEST PINTXOS BARS IN SAN SEBASTIÁN — AND WHAT TO EAT THERE

The bars listed here — besides being very good and rammed to the rafters during peak hours — share in common their convenient location in Parte Vieja, the vibrant old town. Although others lie further afield in less touristy parts of town, the deliberate shortlist is meant to inspire confidence in the idea of an eat-as-you-bar-hop walking itinerary — to do as the locals do, which is savour one or two of the specialities at each bar, accompanied by a drink or two, before moving on to the next.

1. **LA CEPA** (Calle 31 de Agosto 7): Jamón from Jabugo
2. **LA VIÑA** (Calle 31 de Agosto 3): Baked cheesecake with a glass of sherry
3. **LA CUCHARA DE SAN TELMO** (Calle 31 de Agosto 28): Crispy *oreja* (pig's ear); seared foie gras
4. **GANDARIAS** (Calle 31 de Agosto 23): *Solomillo* (steak)
5. **A FUEGO NEGRO** (Calle 31 de Agosto 31): "Makobe" (mini Wagyu burger)
6. **ATARI GASTROTEKA** (Calle Mayor 18): beef cheeks in red wine; steak tartare
7. **ASTELENA** (Calle de Iñigo 1): cod croquetas
8. **TXEPETXA** (Calle Pescaderia 5): anchovies with spider crab cream
9. **NESTOR** (Calle Pescaderia 11): Tortilla; *chuleta* (T-bone)
10. **ZERUKO** (Calle Pescaderia 10): "La Hoguera" (The Bonfire)
11. **TAMBORIL** (Calle Pescaderia 2): *Pimientos de morcilla* (peppers stuffed with black pudding)
12. **GANBARA** (San Jerónimo 21): ceps and egg
13. **BORDA BERRI** (Fermin Calbetón 12): *carrillera* (veal cheek)
14. **GOIZ ARGÍ** (Fermin Calbetón 4): *bola de carne* (fried ball of chopped beef, pimiento and béchamel)