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A Family Tradition of Innovation: Q&A with Elena Arzak



Chefs Elena Arzak and Juan Mari Arzak, the father and daughter team behind Arzak, the groundbreaking Basque restaurant. (Photo courtesy of Arzak)

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Saying that cooking runs in Elena Arzak's blood would be an understatement. The chef is the fourth generation member of her family to work in the kitchen at Arzak restaurant, a three-star Michelin eatery near San Sebastian, in the heart of Northeastern Spain's Basque country. Elena, who first learned to cook at the age of 11, when her grandmother was the restaurant's head chef, now works as joint head chef alongside her father, the 71-year-old Juan Mari Arzak, who is one of the founders of the New Basque cuisine. After studying hospitality in Switzerland and apprenticing at restaurants such as Le Gavroche in London and Ferran Adrià's famed elBulli, among others, she returned to the family fold in 1995.

Seafood has long been at the heart of Basque cuisine – hake with clams and *bacalao*, or salt cod, are staples. That hasn't changed, but the New Basque movement has refined and extended its traditions by introducing new ingredients as well as modern cooking techniques such as molecular gastronomy. The result: while still anchored in Basque gastronomic tradition, Elena and Juan Mari's creations are not only inventive and playful, they're also thoroughly modern. At Arzak, traditional hake with green parsley sauce has been transformed into 'hake with green sorceress' – a ball of greens with containing not just the fish and some rice but also seaweed, thereby enhancing a straight-from-the-sea impression.

The restaurant is still in the same building that Elena's great-grandfather built, but has been modernized along with the food. Arzak's wine cellar is digitally managed, as is its catalog of more than 1,500 ingredients. And while the food is sophisticated, the atmosphere is still homey – one of the Arzaks usually emerges from the kitchen after a meal to chat with guests.

The Financialist recently sat down with Elena Arzak, winner of the coveted Veuve Clicquot Award for Best Female Chef in 2012, to chat not just about being a woman in a male-dominated

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industry but also how to get the people who taught you how to cook to cook another way.

The Financialist: When did you decide you wanted to go into the family business and be a chef?

Elena Arzak: When I was 11, my sister Marta and I started coming to the restaurant during the summer holidays. My grandmother and aunt were working in the kitchen at the time. They didn't allow us to stay more than an hour or two, and we only helped a little bit because we were small. We helped at first with the pastry, making balls of chocolate, doing juliennes and slicing very thin slivers of oranges. And little by little, we learned more, like how to clean squid or cut onions. I always liked it very much.

Marta always liked art history, and when we finished secondary school, she decided to study it in college. Today, she works at the Guggenheim in Bilbao, not far from San Sebastian. I, on the other hand, had no idea what I might study. But the one thing I was completely sure of was that I liked gastronomy. It wasn't as though I felt any pressure to work in the field. My parents always told me that it was one thing to come in over the summer holiday and stay two hours, but another thing entirely to be here the whole day. I listened to them, so I was prepared for the possibility that I might not like it. But it turned out that I did. Very much.



Hake with green sorceress (Photo courtesy of Arzak)

TF: It's interesting that a restaurant with such a long and rich history became such an innovative forerunner of the New Basque cuisine. Tell us about your father's involvement in the movement.

EA: The New Basque movement started in the 1970s. It was influenced by French nouvelle cuisine, which started in the 1960s in France. My father and his close friend, Pedro Subijana, who is head chef at a restaurant in San Sebastian called Akelafe, went to the first roundtable of the Spanish magazine "Gourmets" in Madrid for people in the gastronomic trade and were introduced to nouvelle cuisine. The ideology of the movement appealed to them, and they came back to San Sebastian and started applying the principles that would eventually lead to New Basque cooking with the other chefs here. One of the first things they did was to modify old recipes that they thought weren't being done the right way. Sometimes a recipe can stay the same forever without anyone giving any conscious thought to whether it's actually the best it can be.



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TF: How do you balance building on your father's reputation for innovation while staying true to your Basque heritage?

EA: The legacy that my father's generation left us is very important, and we are proud of it. But my father's generation is also very open-minded. When we try something new, we go forward with both generations in agreement. My father and I are always going to be Basque chefs because Basque tastes are always in our minds, and the flavors of this place are always present in our cooking. For example, we use a lot of parsley and garlic in all the plates, which is very Basque, whereas we don't use coconut and ginger as much. So while we are open to the world, we're still rooted in Basque flavors. But we don't cook like 25 years ago, and we won't cook the same way in 20 years. Our techniques are always changing.

TF: How has your food evolved over the years?

EA: Tastes have changed, and we listen closely to what people want. People like lighter plates than they did when my grandmother was cooking, and they eat more vegetables. At the same time, our cooking is multisensory, which means that the food is very important, but so is the presentation. We want the food to be both serious and fun, and we want the guests' own tastes to be reflected in the experience.

TF: From dessert served on a plate made of flowers and miniature stoves transported to diners at their tables, you think of extremely creative ways to present your food. How do you get your ideas?

EA: When you are a chef, you are always thinking of food. You go out on the street and see something and think of a garnish you might make. You see a painting, and you like the colors, and you think, "I will create food with these colors." But most important for us is the flavor. You can have a fantastic idea, but if it doesn't taste good, you can't use it.



Smoked cinnamon with tuna (Photo courtesy of Arzak).

TF: The cutting-edge presentation and techniques that New Basque cuisine is famous for have spread all over the world. San Sebastian is also an immensely popular destination for serious foodies. How do you explain this influence and popularity?

EA: I think San Sebastian is a gastronomic destination because it has great restaurants for all budgets, from Michelin-starred restaurants to *pintxos* (Basque tapas) bars. But I think we are also

lucky to be located in a very special place: we have the sea, the land and plenty of local farmers. The local ingredients are fantastic. I also think that the tastes present in Basque cooking put it in the same category as Italian and Asiatic cuisines, which nearly everyone likes.

TF: Have there been times where you have disagreed with your father?

EA: We can argue, but in a good way. I'm lucky, because my father believed in me from the beginning, and he saw how much I liked cooking. He encouraged me to share my ideas. That being said, if I wanted to change something, I had to convince him first. For example, in the 1990s my father used to mix a lot of ingredients on one plate. I told him I liked his style very much, but I suggested that we could use fewer ingredients and play up the elements that we did use. He said, "Okay, make me an example." I did, and from then on he wanted to make plates with only three ingredients.

TF: How do you view your position as a woman in an industry where it is notoriously difficult for women to rise to the top?

EA: Here at Arzak, 80 percent of the staff is female. The service crew is almost all women, and there are six female chefs in the kitchen. The year my first child, Nora, who is now 8, was born, five other children were born in Arzak and we survived without a problem. In fact, the mothers of those five children are still with us. When my father was a child, he was sometimes the only man in the kitchen. Basque culture is a matriarchal culture, and women have a lot of power. I feel very fortunate to have grown up in that environment. I know a lot of female chefs have not had an experience like mine, and I wish they could have.

TF: You have two children of your own. Do you think they will embrace the family legacy?

EA: I want them to have the same opportunities I did, but I want them to choose what they want to do. I'm teaching them to cook, though, so even if they don't enter my profession, they'll at least know how to cook for themselves. To me, cooking is about the happy moments when you invite friends and family over – cooking is sharing. But it would be unfair to force them to join the business. There are no timetables, no set hours – so it has to be your passion. Maybe it will be theirs. But if they choose something else, I will respect that, too.



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