

## FOOD.WINE.COFFEE

# A Walk Before Dinner in San Sebastian

BY DAVID SLY

Medieval pilgrim trails across northern Spain took devout Christians to the town of Santiago de Compostela, to worship before what are believed to be the remains of St James. Modern travellers have different intentions for taking the two surviving Camino routes (as they are known), either through the hilly heart of the Basque region, or skirting a high ridge beside the Atlantic Ocean. Many walkers now cherry-pick only favourite sections of the epic walks for their scenic beauty or access to famed gastronomic indulgences, and it's hard to argue with such logic.

Indeed, my walking destination is a specific modern shrine – Arzak Restaurant in San Sebastian, ranked number seven in San Pellegrino's world best 50 restaurants.

It required diligent effort to reach this destination in time for dinner. Ridiculous amounts of spring rain forced us to juggle our walking plans, but we were not thwarted. We set off west from the surfing town of Zarautz, across the hills to Zamaia, then Deba. When the walk was done, we planned to board an eastbound train to San Sebastian (Donostia, as the Basques call it), then quickly check into our hotel and refresh ourselves before arriving in splendour at the restaurant. It should have all run like clockwork. Of course, it didn't.

Torrential rains turned much of the undulating Camino trail into a muddy bog, hemmed in by wild clumps of brambles and stout stone walls that prevented us from

cheating by scampering through adjacent properties to evade the most treacherous sections. In the distance, the cool blue water in the Bay of Biscay looked gorgeous; the panoramic views were majestic. Then I looked down and understood the true definition of Bay of Biscay soil, with great clods of heavy, sticky gray clay adhered to my boots, thick like lumps of concrete. The walking was slow, slippery and laborious. As the rain returned with serious purpose, we deviated down the wrong muddy path, found ourselves sliding down especially steep embankments, then quit the romantic trail for a sensible bitumen roadway, which took us many kilometres further than we expect.

Time was running against us. So were the train timetables. We eventually jogged through the streets of San Sebastian hauling soggy backpacks, anxious that our dream dinner, booked six months earlier, was teetering on the verge of ruin. I dragged out crumpled clothes, failed to procure a hotel iron, and wrapped my sorry attire beneath a heavy coat. We urged a taxi driver to speed us across town.

We need not have worried, for nobody else in Donostia worries. Dining is revered as a celebration, to be enjoyed above everything else. Even among the waiting staff, the mood is festive, in eager anticipation of what is headed for the table.

The Arzak degustation meal unfolds as a procession of 16 tastes of surreal splendour; pigeon with pineapple and black pine nuts,



anchovy with strawberry. Fish and chips comprises a fillet of gin-marinated sea bass and brilliantly coloured crisps of potato on a glass plate, footage of the ocean surf rolling in beneath thanks to a video tablet specifically designed by Phillips. It highlights a culinary journey of delight that sears into your memory.

We meet the creator, Elena Arzak – voted world's best female chef in 2012 – but rather than bask in the glory of her three-star Michelin restaurant, she insists that there are other aspects of the proud Basque food culture that we must also taste, so she busily writes a list of essential *pintxos* bars to visit. *Pintxos* is the Basque region's particular take on tapas, more outlandish and ambitious than elsewhere in Spain: foie gras with caramelised cheese and mustard reduction; cod toast with piquillo pepper, peach and sweet foie gras; mushroom, cheese mousse filled with ham and garlic mayonnaise.

"This is our celebration of life," explains Elena of the extravagant Basque food culture. She is especially delighted to hear that Adelaide has its own interpretation of a Basque *pintxo* bar: Udaberri, in Leigh St, opened by Rob Dinnan in 2012 after he returned from a year working in San Sebastian. Elena remembers him asking a lot of specific questions. "Yes, yes – the Australian," she recalls, nodding and



smiling. "And the people in Adelaide, they like the *pintxos*?"

Elena is thrilled that an important appreciation of Basque culture is spreading.

Mindful that the Basque Separatist movement tried through violent political means from the 1970s to underscore the region's fierce independent spirit, the power of what is served on the plate makes a more telling impression. Basque food is traversing the world, identifying a culture that is proudly worth celebrating and preserving.



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