



ELENA ARZAK

AND THE SEARCH FOR TOMORROW

To discuss her achievements is to speak of the most talented woman in the culinary world. Here, however, the prodigious Arzak chef speaks with **Michelle V. Ayuyao** about the balance of taste and technique, living up to diners' expectations, and transcending her gendered title

PHOTOGRAPHED BY NEAL OSHIMA

You've probably been asked a lot about Arzak. What I'd like to know is how you would describe your personal identity within Arzak.

Describing yourself isn't easy, is it? When someone asks, "How are you?" it goes so much deeper. It is difficult to talk about myself without talking about my family. After years, we have found a way to describe ourselves. We say we have "Signature cuisine with Basque roots, evolving avant-garde, and cutting edge." So, "Signature cuisine," because dishes are uniquely Arzak. "Basque roots," because we unconsciously cook with the coat of flavors we grew up with. I'm from San Sebastian, I like parsley, garlic, fish that's not very cooked. Then again we are so open to what the world has—like pili nuts! Fantastic! But, it's always in harmony with our Basque roots. We are evolving because we don't cook like we did 20 years ago, or 10 years ago. Then again we also do not want to be so misunderstood that we try to think what will cooking be like five years from now! We are evolving, but at the same time, we are relevant.

Are you focused more on uncovering new ingredients to use, or discovering new technique?

It's a mixture. My grandmother always used to say to my father and me, "Buy the best ingredients otherwise you will not be able to make a good meal." It's simple but it has been true and still is. Technique helps you have results that produce better plates. For example we can use freeze-drying, vacuum, steamers, distillation, aromas, we can use the best machines but if you don't use good products and you don't have taste . . .

It's useless.

Precisely. But the technique and the science helps you create a result that, without them, you will never hope to get. For example, you will not be able to get a sphere of chocolate if you don't know how to temper chocolate, or how to mold it. You cannot freeze dry things without the machine that can freeze dry. In the restaurant, we sometimes freeze-dry small pieces of hake, a fish in San Sebastian, and turn it into a powder. We then sprinkle it on a piece of fish on the

grill, and it seems to bring out more flavor. But if the fish you use isn't good, it won't be good. They work together.

There are so many techniques that exist, but what else can be done to food that hasn't been done before?

There are many chefs in the world that have discovered new techniques in the world, but I think with the combinations of flavors, and methods of cooking, and time things are cooked, when you alter those things, it makes all the difference. Combinations change. If you are a creative person, imagination is endless. A congress such as Madrid Fusion is important because I can come here to Filipinas, see what the cooks from here do, and see it as very new things. Then, I can adapt this to my way of cooking. And also there is always new technology.

A large percentage of your diners must come from all over the world. How do you manage to live up to their inevitable expectations?

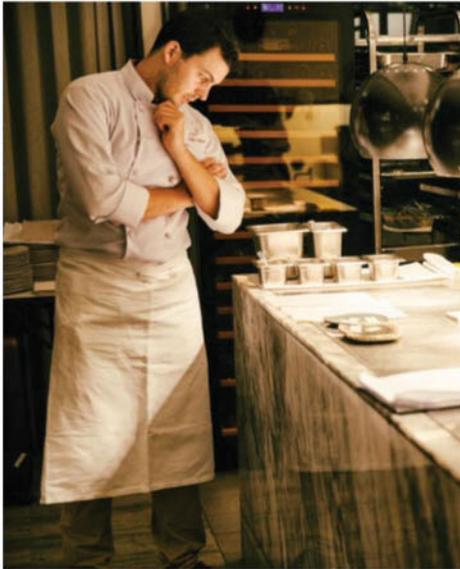
We continue what we've been doing—but





WOMAN ON TOP

Clockwise, from left: Chef Elena Arzak in the Vask kitchen last April 24, where she and Vask chef Chele Gonzalez prepared a special charity dinner for 40 people; Chele Gonzalez; chef Igor Zalakain, who is responsible for Arzak's laboratory; crispy *manioc* hydrated with *huitlacoche* stuffed with a preparation of onion, green tea, and foie gras; large cocoa and sugar truffle with a creamy chocolate and carob filling; the cocoa truffle before being doused in its sauce.





“IF YOU ARE MAN OR WOMAN, SO WHAT? DID YOU KNOW, IN ARZAK, 80 PERCENT OF US ARE WOMEN. FOR US IN SAN SEBASTIAN, IN BASQUE SOCIETY, WE’VE ALWAYS BEEN MATRIARCHAL.”

have you noticed that it is not just about the food anymore?

It’s about the entire dining experience.

True, from the plating, the set-up, the wine, the cutlery. Eating, not just in Arzak but for other restaurants, is now like a festival of the different senses. In the Basque society, food is very important, but there is no social class for food. We’re built mostly by the middle class, but even if they make just enough, they seem to be able to put aside to be able to go to the restaurant. Also we have guests from all over the world. But everyone eats the original version. We get a lot of people from Filipinas, you know why?

Because we eat too much for our own good!

It is true! So many Filipinos that love to eat!

It goes without saying that to speak of Elena Arzak is to speak of the Best Woman Chef. But, ultimately, does it matter if you’re male or female in a world where plates of food are its stars?

I’m the fourth generation in my family. When my father was a child, he was surrounded by women. His mother and grandmother were chefs. When he was a child, he was the only man in the house. He took care of the bottles in the wine cellar. There were roles and

standards that were set. That’s him. For me, it depends on the person.

If you cook, you cook.

Yes, if you are man or woman, so what? Did you know, in Arzak, 80 percent of us are women. Maybe it is most important being a woman cook when you talk about being a mother in the kitchen. I have two children. Nora, my daughter, is 10. Matteo, my son, is eight. For us in San Sebastian, Basque society, we’ve always been matriarchal.

Here in Manila, we have a lot of women who cook. My mother, for instance, is simply thrilled by the kitchen.

At home I cook with my children. We are doing basic things right now. We cook at home, soups, fish grilled, chicken, vegetables. Being a child now, growing up in the kitchen, there are so many things from all over the place that they can try. It’s funny making them try unusual things and seeing how they react. You know what I was surprised with? How many women chefs are here, participating and also watching. I have learned so much listening to Myrna [Segismundo] and Margarita [Fores]. I know I said this, but I am so happy with the pili nut. I have also discovered how nice these things like camachile, paho mangoes, and the vinegars!

So many choices! I’m so excited to bring these things back to our test kitchen in Arzak. It’s my first time in Filipinas even if I’ve wanted to come for many years.

Are you heading back immediately to San Sebastian?

I am going to New York for just two days to receive an award from the Culinary Institute of America.

I’ll be heading there in a few days!

It’s so exciting! Where do you plan to eat?

Momofuku, to understand all the hype around it.

I was actually just going to say Momofuku. Also Eleven Madison.

I love sweets so there’s definitely Momofuku Milk Bar.

I love too many sweets also. I have no time to go around because it is just two days that I will be there.

I can just eat all that food for you instead!

You should try everything.

Lucky for me, I have time to. I don’t need to receive an award from the CIA.

Yes, not you. That’s me. ■