

FOOD BASQUE



Family comes first in culinary capital

This father-daughter team in the kitchen is a recipe for brilliance and don't diners know it, writes Rachel Lebihan.

It's 11am and I'm in a bar in San Sebastian, the culinary capital of Spain's Basque region. Despite the in-between meals hour, the bar is laden with plates of pintxos, or tapas.

The locals eat pintxos at all hours, and I'm here to meet one of the locals: Elena Arzak, who runs Arzak restaurant – ranked eighth on the list of the World's 50 Best Restaurants 2013 – with her father, Juan Mari.

She is the fourth generation of the family to run Arzak since it opened in 1897. In 2012 she was crowned the best female chef in the world. Despite her international reputation, she has a laid-back demeanour that is embraced by the food-obsessed population of her home town.

When Arzak arrives, she gets straight down to business: sizing up the pintxos before making her selection. She encourages me to do the same. I select a fluted pastry case filled with crab meat in rich seafood sauce. Arzak takes a wedge of baguette topped with soft blue cheese at least an inch high and a sardine's body draped across it.

"I have to eat a lot," she says, quite seriously, though you wouldn't know this from her petite frame.

"Do you like cod fish?" she asks in between ravenous mouthfuls, and a few minutes later two deep-fried balls of molten cod fish are delivered to our table. I'm just starting to find my pintxos mojo, but she stops me in my tracks.

"[If] you won't eat lunch, Juan Mari will not be happy," she says with a smile. Elena Arzak was an unexpected recruit to the family restaurant. "My parents thought they were the last."

Then, aged 18, she set off to train at La Gavroche in London. After six years working with some of the world's most acclaimed chefs she returned to her clan.

The restaurant is still located in the tavern built by Juan Mari's grandparents. His parents turned it into a simple

restaurant. When the nine-year-old's father died, his mother continued the business until he joined her, after completing his culinary studies and internships abroad, aged 24.

In 1975-76, influenced by the nouvelle cuisine of France, Juan Mari was instrumental in establishing new Basque cuisine, which had its foundation in traditional Basque food but was radically forward-looking in scope. In 1989 Arzak became the first restaurant with three Michelin stars in Spain.

Arzak, aged 44 and married with two young children, has no desire to work anywhere else.

"We are a team," she says of her partnership with her 71-year-old father. "Some people think my father has retired and I run the kitchen. This isn't true."

Her mother, aged 69, is "half the soul of the restaurant", she adds.

She modestly cites the region's fresh produce as one of the reasons the restaurant is so successful.

"Even if we cook very modern, avant-garde, the root is here. We like peppers, we like garlic. When we cook it's unconsciously with those roots."

And then we're off to the market to buy ingredients for the afternoon's menu. First she picks a handful of small green peppers, then a bunch of carrot fronds – for some reason she only wants the leaves.

She spends time with both of her fish suppliers, so as not to offend either. From one she buys barnacles, because I say I haven't tried them before.

She also buys cococha, or hake's throat. At the other stall she buys tuna belly. We visit three stalls before finding squid small enough to please her. Then we bump into an old family friend who wants to know how to make fish pudding.

"The dish made my father famous," Arzak says.

Everywhere we turn someone wants to talk to Arzak, though it appears to be more

Elena Arzak dishes up; Juan Mari Arzak; Arzak in San Sebastian is ranked eighth on the list of the World's 50 Best Restaurants 2013.

PHOTOS: ARZAK



out of neighbourly affection than celebrity infatuation.

I am aghast when she leads me to a taxi. I'd presumed I'd return to my hotel to refresh and change before our rendezvous for lunch, and am casually dressed for a stroll around the market, but no one seems to care.

The family eats together in the kitchen before each shift: Juan Mari, Arzak, her husband, and their children when it's school holidays.

A table is laid with a white cloth. A glossy brown stew is ladled onto plates. Platters of sausage and jamon are served. Because of my impending degustation, I am restricted to steamed barnacles, which Arzak plucks from their shells on my behalf. They're salty, mineral, chewy.

Carrot leaves, from the market, have been doused then fried in tempura batter.



Arzak
Address
Av del Alcalde José Elosegi, 273 20015 Donostia-San Sebastián
Contact
+34 943 27 84 65
Dishes
Hake's throat, white tuna with garlic petals, squid.



They're brought to the table for Arzak to try. She passes me one. It melts on the tongue.

Juan Mari is tender yet tough with his grandchildren. The youngest is tired and whining after a hot morning at holiday camp. "Stop it or go to the office," he tells the boy sternly, then looks at me and winks, a sparkle of good humour in his bright blue eyes.

Meanwhile his granddaughter is enjoying the barnacles, which she plucks adeptly from the shell, splattering herself and the white tablecloth quite obliviously.

The kitchen is getting busy and I'm whisked off on a tour of the wine cellar, spice room and testing kitchen.

It's like having the lottery. If my daughter wasn't here, I would retire.

Juan Mari Arzak

"We're always searching for extremely good taste and flavour," Arzak says. "We strive for balance between good product and technique. If the technique doesn't bring something better to the product, don't use it."

At 2.30pm I'm hustled into the modern dining room, which is an oasis of calm. Overwhelmed by the menu options, I'm pleased when Arzak appears. She suggests the tasting menu, minus some heavier meat dishes. My 12 courses – five of which are bite-sized appetisers – start to roll.

First, hake's throat. It's served *al pil pil* – which is Basque for "bubbling". Arzak takes me to the kitchen to see how it's made. A shallow clay pot of olive oil, parsley and garlic is simmering.

When the hake is added the oil must be kept hot enough to bubble but gentle enough not to fry. The pot is moved constantly to help natural gelatin from the fish create a creamy emulsion. It's comfort on a fork.

My favourites after that include "white tuna with garlic petals" and "squid on leaves". Each squid is carved as a flower and served with potato confit and cream of onion sauce with a hint of kaffir lime and lemongrass. The squid flowers are perfectly al dente. Now I know why Arzak was intent on sourcing the smallest.

White tuna is served with a sauce of garlic that has been poached in milk three times to remove any bitterness. As I pull apart the tuna belly I can see the slightly gelatinous streak, which ensures each mouthful is moist and rich.

By 3.30pm, buoyed by the sight of a fellow diner in shorts and T-shirt, I've got over my casual-clothes embarrassment – I'm in a gastronomic bliss bubble and no longer care. Everywhere I look diners are taking snaps with iPhones, forking one another's food into their mouths and throwing back their heads in laughter.

After two exquisite desserts, I'm told Juan Mari is waiting to have coffee with me.

Having his daughter here at the restaurant "is like having the lottery", he says. "If she wasn't here, I would retire." Like his daughter, he says to be humble is important in his profession.

Also, "you need to think like a child, then the imagination will never end". It's close to 6pm before I take my leave. Arzak hands me a list of her favourite pintxos bars.

I fold it away for another time. Tonight, I'm too full. **L&L**