

Food Matters | The New New Basque Cuisine



FOOD

By TEJAL
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One of only two women chefs named to the 2014 World's 50 Best Restaurants announced yesterday, Elena Arzak is a pioneering force in Spanish cooking, modern innovation with a deep commitment to her region's traditions.



Adrià Cañameras

The chef Elena Arzak chooses fresh seafood from local fishmongers at La Bretxa underground market in downtown San Sebastián.

It's a cloudy morning in the city of San Sebastián, and massive waves batter the promenade on the Bay of Biscay. Underground, sheltered from the gray, Elena Arzak makes her way through La Bretxa market, past Basque fishmongers weighing silver-striped elvers, around locals in wool hats sipping the day's first glasses of txakoli.

At 44, Arzak is an extraordinary chef at the top of her game. She is one of just six women in the world with three Michelin stars to her restaurant's name — **Arzak**, which she runs jointly with her father, Juan Mari Arzak. In 2012, she was named World's Best Female Chef at the annual World's 50 Best Restaurants Awards — the ranking machine that helped turn chefs like René Redzepi and Ferran Adrià into superstars. Yesterday, when this year's 50 Best were announced, she was one of two women to make the list, and the only woman in the top 10.

Arzak's brilliance lies in the balance she has struck with food that can be shockingly beautiful and modern — invented, tested and tweaked in a research lab — but is still deeply rooted in her family's Basque traditions.

She is pale and slender as an elf, and wears rimless glasses that magnify her hazel eyes, which are now focused on a ceramic dish into which she flicks tiny water droplets from her fingertips. Arzak is making kokotxas de merluza: soft, gelatinous cuts of meat carved from the throat of a hake.

"It's about respect," she says, working the fish and olive oil in circles, coaxing fat and water molecules together into a perfect emulsion. Watching Arzak advance the Basque classic, it's easy to see how she has worked in harmony with her father for 20 years.

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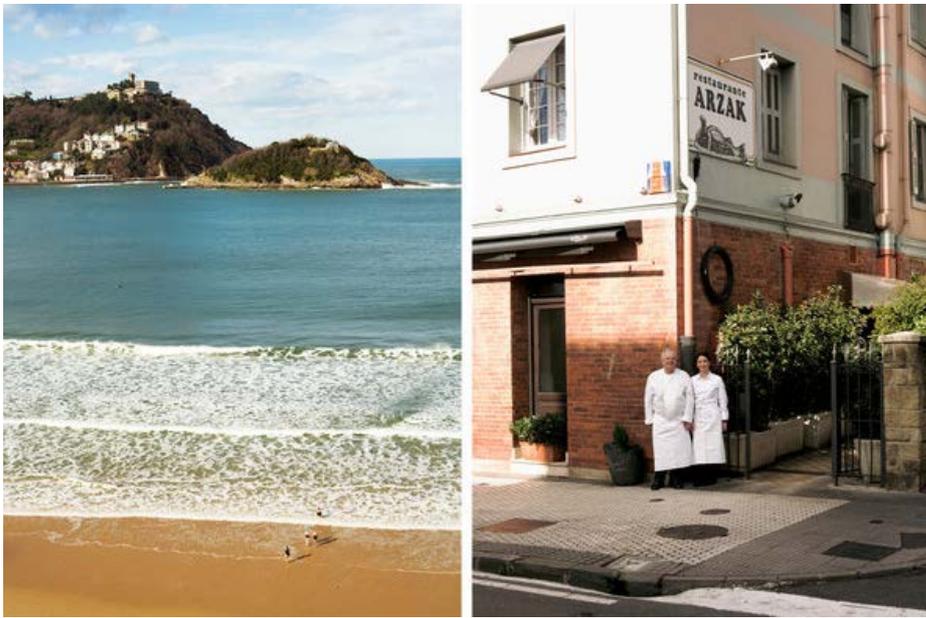
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Adrià Cañameras

From left: the nearby island of Santa Clara is a source for local ingredients; the chef, alongside her father, in front of the family's eponymous restaurant.

The restaurant used to be the family's home. Elena's great-grandparents opened it as a tavern in 1897, which her grandparents ran until Juan Mari, now 71, took over. Inspired by the lighter beauty of 1970s nouvelle cuisine, he led a cadre of chefs who would put Spanish food on the map, and earned Arzak its third Michelin star in 1989. The entire business remains a family affair: Elena's impeccably dressed mother, Maite Espina, manages the books behind the scenes, and her husband, the architect Manu Lamosa, designed the kitchen and wine cellar.

Upstairs is a tiny second kitchen: the headquarters for the restaurant's research lab, painted in bright red, blue, green and orange. A gray, pockmarked rock has been shattered over the counter. "We are working on the plate for a new oyster dish!" Arzak explains.

The room next door is something so strange and wonderful, it seems straight out of a Roald Dahl story: a flavor library, filled with ingredients like Vietnamese green rice, dry seaweeds and vanilla-scented tonka beans. Each of the thousands of items are carefully archived in tiny plastic boxes by color, texture, flavor, aroma.

These two workshops are where the Arzaks dream up items that become megahits in the dining room, like the bubble of rice starch, parsley and seaweed on the current menu. "We shape it like wet newspaper, like children painting papier-mâché at school," Arzak says. "The ideas are in the air, all around, but you have to catch them!"

"Elena is one of the most important chefs in history," Ferran Adrià told me in January. Arzak interned in Adrià's kitchen in 1994, when el Bulli was deep into deconstruction, playing around with warm gelatins and savory ice creams. There, she exercised what Adrià calls her *fuerza mental*—a kind of unrelenting brainy stamina.

As a teenager, Arzak had helped in Juan Mari's kitchen over summer holidays, cleaning slippery baby squid with her sister, Marta, who now works for the Guggenheim in Bilbao. By the time she was 18, Arzak had plotted a formal culinary education, starting with hotel school in Switzerland, followed by internships at some of the grandest restaurants of the early 1990s, from Le Gavroche in London to Le Vivarois, a Parisian kitchen where she was the only woman in whites. Several years later, she brought her "cocktail of ideas" and an interest in "fewer elements, stronger flavors" back home to her father, and to Arzak.



Adrià Cañameras

From left: monkfish plated with Arzak's signature papier-mâché technique, made here with rice starch, parsley and seaweed; the Arzaks tuck into a rustic dish of kokoxtas de merluza at the large marble table in the kitchen.

The kitchen tonight is hot and hellish, and the service goes on late into the night. Arzak strides with urgency from station to station in a long white apron. Juan Mari is plating in the back kitchen. He pauses to taste a cook's mise-en-place, then disappears into the dining room to meet guests. A young couple from France is enthralled by the fish course, which is served on glass over a digital screen that plays San Sebastián's waves crashing on loop.

Instead of working in her father's shadow, Arzak has become his partner, making it her mission, too, to evolve. The two work together so closely that they almost seem more like twins. They tinker with each other's thoughts and ideas, speaking their own private language of flavor and reference. They share a minuscule office, a box about the size of a small elevator, divided by a glass door. On the walls are drawings by Arzak's children; one is neatly captioned in cursive "My mother is a chef."

That Arzak happens to be a woman in charge is hardly noteworthy in Basque country, which she says has always been a matriarchal society. At the restaurant, women make up 80 percent of the team — seven are chefs de partie in charge of the kitchen's stations.

Just before midnight, the kitchen has been restored to gleaming, and Arzak is sipping a flute of cava. Thick-armed women, potbellied men, skinny interns, all stand with drumsticks raised and ready. This is not a common sight on the Arzak line, but this night in January is special: it's the start of the Tamborrada festival, San Sebastián's biggest party, when marching drummers dressed as Napoleonic soldiers and Basque bakers will parade down the streets, beating drums as if they're the city's own heart.

In a moment, the Arzak kitchen will erupt with music and thumping, and Elena Arzak will stand alongside her cooks, grinning, as her father conducts. Her husband and their two children, who had a peaceful dinner in the upstairs dining room, will beat their drums as well.

When Arzak studied abroad as a young cook, she found it most difficult to be away during La Tamborrada. "But my family would call me and hold the phone out to the crowd," she says, making her hand a receiver. "So I could hear the drums at home."

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