

Inspiring Arzak

Elena Arzak, the Basque chef with three Michelin stars, voted Best Female Chef in the World, found inspiration in her visit to Dublin, writes Marie-Claire Digby



Within minutes of meeting Elena Arzak, she has given me a list of her favourite restaurants and tapas bars in San Sebastian (a few of which are listed below), and an invitation to call on her when I am in the city, where she and her father Juan Mari hold three Michelin stars for groundbreaking “new Basque” cuisine at their restaurant, Arzak.

When she tells me that her first visit to Ireland has led her to believe that “the Irish and the Basque people are very similar”, I have to agree with her; she is friendly, charming and generous.

Arzak was named Best Female Chef in the World in the San Pellegrino restaurant awards last year and her family’s restaurant, which bears the family surname, is ranked eighth in the World’s 50 Best Restaurants ratings.

The 44-year-old chef was in Ireland recently to join the panel of judges for the final of the Euro-toques Ireland Young Chef of the Year. She also visited Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud, Restaurant 41 at Residence and Chapter One to take the pulse of the Irish culinary scene.

“I knew the food in Ireland was good – friends of mine, chefs – have been here and liked it very much. They told me: ‘you will see’ and I was very impressed. I saw Irish identity; for me that is really very important and I would have been sad if I hadn’t seen that. It was based in tradition, with Irish style, but contemporary, and without forgetting about flavour,” she says.

“I’ve been looking forward to coming here for many years; Irish cooking is very fa-

mous in Spain now and we like it a lot. People who are interested in food should come to Ireland.”

Arzak took notes as she explored Dublin’s top tables, jotting down ideas and information. Ross Lewis, co-owner of Chapter One, said she came into the kitchen after dinner with a long list of questions about the meal she had just enjoyed with her architect husband, Manu Lamosa.

So there was little that was going to escape her eagle eye when the five young Irish chefs presented their dishes to her and fellow judges Wade Murphy, Lorcan Cribbin, Marc Amand and chairman of the panel Neil McFadden, in the final round of the Euro-toques judging in the kitchens at Google HQ in Dublin.

Arzak was impressed with the standard in the competition, generously saying that she “took away some ideas from all the plates” presented by the finalists. Elements that caught her attention included “emulsions of honey and different nuts”, “a different way of cooking artichokes, even the skin”, “interesting tastes – hay infusion”, and “mixtures like carrot and saffron”. She says she was surprised by the amount of root vegetables she encountered – “we use them less” – and “cooking with whiskey, that for me is quite new”.

She is the fourth generation of her family to work in Arzak and says she runs her kitchen with her 71-year-old father Juan Mari. They describe their cooking as: “Basque, research-based, evolving, cutting edge.”

“I am very lucky to work with my father because since the beginning he has be-

■ Elena Arzak, front right, with Brian O’Flaherty, Paula Leavy, Kevin Burke, Mark Moriarty and Grainne O’Keefe.

PHOTOGRAPH: ALAN BETSON

AND THE WINNER IS . . .

Mark Moriarty, chef de partie at The Greenhouse in Dublin and a final year BA culinary arts student at DIT, is the Euro-toques Young Chef of the Year 2013. Moriarty cooked roast pheasant, Brussels sprouts, sprout farci, bacon cream, game crisps, and a vegetarian dish of celeriac baked in rye and fermented hay, cured and smoked celeriac, hazelnut, celeriac and toasted hay tea in the technical skills test. Runners up were **Kevin Burke** (Restaurant Patrick Guilbaud), **Paula Leavy** (Locks Brasserie), **Brian O’Flaherty** (Restaurant FortyOne) and **Grainne O’Keefe** (Pichet)

lieved in my cuisine. We have arguments, but in a good way. We always find a solution; he listens to everybody. For example, I might say I want less ingredients on the plate, and he will say okay, tell me why.”

In the mid-1970s, Arzak senior was one of 12 founding fathers of what is now known as the New Basque cuisine movement”. He had taken over the kitchen from his mother Francisca who had stepped up to the stove when her husband Juan Ramón had died prematurely, when Juan Mari was nine years old. So Elena, who first started helping out in the kitchen when she was 11, is not the first woman to hold a prominent position in the family business.

“In my case, I never had a problem with being a woman [chef]. I grew up in an atmosphere where it was normal. The staff, both front of house and in the kitchen, is 80 per cent female,” she tells me. “When my daughter Nora was born, there were five more children born [to female staff at the restaurant], and everything continued without a problem.”

“Cooking is a way of sharing happiness,” Arzak says, and her point was illustrated by the bonhomie in the Google dining room as the finalists presented a five-course menu to guests, based on the theme “Carnival of Memories”, in which their food memories came alive on beautifully presented plates.

Elena Arzak’s San Sebastian recommendations: La Cuchara de San Telmo, C. 31 de Agosto, 28 Trasera (modern pintxos); Bar Ganbara, C. San Jerónimo 21 (spider crab); Bar Bergara, C. General Arteche 8 (codfish)