



The dish on the world's best female chef

Column Life Lifestyle

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In Photo: Elena Arzak in the kitchen



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THE best female chef in the world is seated right across me; her eyes are all lit up and she is brimming with excitement as she talks about her morning trip to Farmer's Market.

Only 45, Chef Elena Arzak, who has been working side by side with her father, Juan Mari, at the three Michelin-starred Arzak in San Sebastian, Spain, was a recent visitor in Manila sharing her passion about cooking and talking about "Creativity" at the Madrid Fusion Manila, held last weekend.

She peers through her glasses into her little blue notebook (on the cover it reads “Manila”), and enumerates all the interesting fresh produce she discovered in the market that day. She is most impressed with the durian. “I love it very much. The smell is not very nice, but once you have it in your mouth, the texture is creamy. It’s like French cheese.” She also fell in love with mangoes from Zambales, jackfruit, *siniguelas*, *malunggay*, heart of the banana, *ampalaya*, smoked *tinapa* and other dried fish, as well as fresh seafood, like squid and *lapu-lapu*.

She says she had been wanting to go to the Philippines for the longest time, having met numerous Filipinos who have dined in her restaurant, which is located in the Basque region. Among them is restaurateur and Cirkulo head chef J. Gamboa, “who gave me a Filipino cookbook [*Memories of Philippine Kitchens* by Romy Dorotan and Amy Besa] many years ago.”

She is all praise for Filipino chefs, like Margarita Fores, Myrna Segismundo, Bruce Ricketts and Claude Tayag, for doing their part in getting more attention for Philippine cuisine. “They are very good. Very modern and yet, respectful of Filipino foods. What I like in the food is to not lose the identity even if you cook avant garde.”

For her, the Philippines is a good destination for food: “I know there are many beautiful things to see in the Philippines but for me, food is also very important. It’s a place where people can come for the food and be very happy.” Among local dishes she likes is the *lato* (seaweed) and the *kinilaw* (raw fish marinated in vinegar and spices) —“you cannot compare it to ceviche.” She adds: “I like Filipino cuisine because of its contrast [of flavors]. It’s acidic or it’s bitter or it’s sweet. I like that. A lot of flavor.”



Elena with her father, Chef Jose Mari Arzak

Chef Elena is a fourth-generation chef, Arzak having been originally founded as a wine inn and tavern by her great grand-parents in 1897. Serving New Basque Cuisine, a movement founded by her celebrated father in the 1970s, Arzak is also considered the eighth best restaurant in the world.

Aside from winning as Best Female Chef in 2012 from the World’s 50 Best Restaurant Awards, Chef Elena will be in New York this week to receive an Augie Award from the Culinary Institute of America (CIA), along with six other women chefs. (Coincidentally,

the CIA was founded by two women—Frances Roth and Katherine Angell.)

Writes the CIA on its web site: “[Chef Elena’s] style is Basque, like her father’s, but her cooking has evolved with more avant-garde, international perspectives. She uses Mexican mole, ginger for an Asian influence, and an Indian tandoor oven, blending the traditional with the modern to get the impact she wants. More than 40 new dishes are developed each year in her ‘Restaurant Lab’—which is affectionately referred to as her ‘playroom.’”

Despite all honors, she remains humble and very accessible. Although pressed for time in Manila, she agreed to a number of one-on-one interviews from the local media. “She doesn’t like saying no,” intimates her local handler, Gabriela. “I don’t feel myself like a celebrity,” she answers, when I ask about the rise of so many celebrity chefs. “We are like that, my father and me, low profile.” And food reviewers talk about the experience of dining at Arzak as “warm,” like being in the family’s home, where it is the guest’s satisfaction that is paramount.

On the rise of more female chefs, she says: “I think this needs time. It’s a social question. If you go to hotel and cooking school 20 years ago, there were more men than women, but now it’s equal.” The Basque region “is a matriarchal society,” so it wasn’t surprising that women became chefs or owned restaurants. “Today in our staff, we are 80-percent women still. In the kitchen with me, I have seven women chef de partie,” Chef Elena says.

Although her father and her mother, Maite Espina, initially discouraged her from working in the kitchen, at 11 Elena started going to the restaurant daily after school to peel oranges or clean squid. At 18, she went abroad to study at the Scwheizerische Hotelfachschule in Lucern, and worked in some of the finest hotels and European restaurants, including the famed el Bulli. (Juan Mari is considered the mentor of el Bulli Chef Patron Ferran Adria, teaching him how to play with liquid nitrogen.) She returned to Arzak in 1996, starting at the bottom and slowly working her way up to eventually become cohead chef with her father.

“What I learned abroad were different systems—in one restaurant I learned how to treat fish well and in others, meat and desserts, but in the end I learned something important. There are different ways to have a purpose; the purpose is to do it as well as possible, to

offer quality and good food and good service. I learned that each chef is different, but the purpose is the same,” she says.

According to Chef Elena, the first plate she was proud of was a “Ttonttor of Tuna,” a salad of tuna heaped into a mountain (*ttonttor* is Basque for “peak of a mountain”) “with strings of vegetable. I did it with a horrible sauce and my father changed it to a vinaigrette. This was the first dish I made with him. It was important to me that the plate I was doing was acceptable and edible.” She and her father, still active at 72, are a “tandem,” never sending out food to their diners unless they both agree their dish is perfect.

“My father has always been very generous with me. My father is very kind—and very modern. He told me in the beginning, ‘Elena! Make me plates, no? You are not here to [waste] time, no? Otherwise, do something else. [In making] plates, you are also learning, right?’” She says her father “likes working with women” because he grew up surrounded by them.

She talks about the need to be organized and systematic—there are proper measurements to be followed to, say, make gelatin—to bring out creativity. “But sometimes, surprises come because that is the nature of food. Nature gives you surprises. You can do try to do something but it gives you another result.” But above all, what’s important is that “you always have to taste, because the salt you’re using is different, because the bones that you have for the soup are different, etc. I like that in our profession; it’s still human, but you have to know the basics.”

Chef Elena admits that she has very little time for a social life “but I don’t mind, I’m happy like that.” But to her, interacting with their diners is also like having a social life —“the restaurant is not only a job, many things happen.” She also likes traveling “because it opens the mind,” and eating out with friends and family. Her favorite go-to places outside of Arzak are the *pintxos* (*tapas*) bars. Also, “I like many restaurants of my colleagues, of course. But I like to always discover new ones.”

Have any of her children—Nora, 10, and Matteo, 8—shown interest in cooking? Chef Elena says that having been able to choose her profession freely, so will she allow her children to make their own decisions about their respective careers. She says her sister Marta, for instance, is an art historian at the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. “We were not forced to do it [work in the restaurant]. I want my children to choose for themselves.

But what I'm teaching them is to cook, because for me it's important. It's my opinion that all schools should teach history of cooking, nutrition information, how to cook to have a knowledge for your family, for your friends and for yourself."

At the end of our brief interview, we kiss each other on the cheek and exchange "thank yous." She then says, "I'm so glad to be here in Filipinas. I hope to come back!"

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