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Basque Chef Elena Arzak on Local Cuisine

The head chef of the Michelin three-star restaurant Arzak continues a family tradition of innovative cuisine.

BY MIKE DESIMONE AND JEFF JENSSEN



Photo courtesy Dookustudio



Elena Arzak grew up shopping at farmers' markets with her father, the famous Juan Mari Arzak, who helped found the New Basque Cuisine movement in the 1970s.



Today, they work alongside each other as head chefs at **Arzak**, the family's Michelin three-star restaurant in San Sebastián. She was named Best Female Chef in the World in 2012 by the World's 50 Best Restaurants Academy.



Arzak's earliest wine memories involve tasting the crisp local white, Txakoli, from her grandmother's glass and enjoying a sip of Cava on New Year's Eve.



"I always liked the ritual and paraphernalia around wine service," she says, which is taken to the level of art at her celebrated restaurant.



After training at hotel school in Switzerland, Arzak worked with noted chefs like Albert Roux in London, Alain Ducasse in Paris and Ferran Adrià near Barcelona. She returned to join her father at Arzak, and she's part of the family's fourth generation to work in the 120-year-old temple of gastronomy.



"Each wine region in Spain has a unique story to tell..."

While Arzak likes to serve Txakoli with small snacks at the beginning of a meal, she reminds people that Spain has over 70 designated wine regions. One of her favorites is Rioja Alavesa, for its "medium-bodied reds with excellent freshness that are easy to pair with many different dishes," she says.

She urges wine lovers to explore **Spain's** many pairing options.

"I think people need to scratch the surface more to find the true character of each region," she says. "What we find on the supermarket shelf or in bars and restaurants is just the tip of the iceberg of what Spain has to offer. Each wine region in Spain has a unique story to tell, and you need to go deeper and look for the small wineries with deep roots to learn that story."

Arzak believes that while today's Basque chefs are less tied to conventional technique than their forefathers, they're lucky to be blessed with an abundance of local ingredients.

"Cuisine is shaped by history and environment," she says. "In the Basque Country, we are surrounded by mountains and the sea, which naturally have influenced our food."

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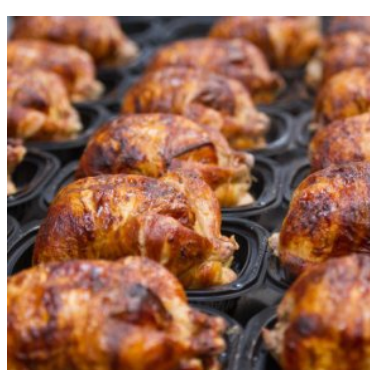
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