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Chef Elena Arzak and Her Family Legacy

April 3, 2017 | By Geeta Bansal

The chef shared the story of her family's restaurant in Spain

The Spanish chef literally grew up in the kitchen of her restaurant.

On a Saturday afternoon in the Arzak restaurant in San Sebastián, Spain, the sounds of laughter and conviviality filled the dining room, and I was struck by what differentiates it from other temples of haute cuisine. The restaurant was filled with the joyous sounds of local families and guests of all ages, in striking contrast to most other three-Michelin-starred establishments. Usually the only audible sounds at such luxe restaurants are the hushed whispers of diners and servers, the clink of glasses and silver at the table, or the gentle tones of subdued music playing in the background. When I asked chef Elena Arzak about it, she said, "This is how we ourselves are as a family, and that is picked up by guests, many of whom have been coming here through a few generations."

Arzak shares the head chef responsibilities at the eponymous restaurant with her father, Juan Mari Arzak. Following three generations of cooks in her family, the petite powerhouse is expanding the boundaries of the cuisine of her beloved Basque region by incorporating influences, flavors, and spices from other cultures. On my last visit, she was charged up about her Cleopatra monkfish plate with Egyptian hieroglyphics made of pumpkin and chickpea puree. There is often a tongue-in-cheek humor to her whimsical plates that reflects her own lively personality. Her love for cuisine goes back to her childhood, when during summer breaks she was allowed in the restaurant kitchen for two hours every day. Those afternoons led to a lifelong passion for the kitchen's creative processes. The entire family — including her grandmother, aunt, and father — are all chefs, and her mother took care of the front of the house of the restaurant, where Elena spent most of her childhood. Given her passion for gastronomy, it was inevitable that she would follow in their footsteps.

The restaurant is still located in the family home, where her father was born and grew up and where Elena lived as a child with her family. The family has since moved out to make room for the expansive wine cellar, the R&D kitchens, and offices, but she has very fond memories of those years. "There are two things that I remember the most," Arzak said. "The first is when I was a very young child, maybe five or six, I smelled the aromas of food the moment I entered the restaurant, but every Sunday that I would come in the smells were different. I especially remember the smell of squid and that of the first mushrooms that arrived in the kitchen. One thing I remember distinctly [is] that even when the smells were intense, they were very clean, and I have never forgotten them."

"Another vivid memory is of playing in this very dining room, waiting for my mother or my father to get me when the guests arrived since I was only allowed to play while there were no guests. I would hide under the tables with my dolls and pretend that under the tablecloth-draped tables was my own little house. I remember once I left one of my dolls under the table and the next day I was told that one of the guests found it."

On my last visit, I walked into the kitchen to find Anthony Bourdain's crew filming the Spain episode with Juan Mari. With cameras underfoot, the kitchen team, led by Elena, worked frantically to send out food into the dining room. I escaped up the back stairs into the calm of the recently remodeled research kitchen and spice room. A comprehensive collection of spices and ingredients from every corner of the world lines the shelves of the "Banco de Sabores," and they figure prominently in dishes on the ever-changing menu. A few months ago, Arzak and I explored the spice market of the Grand Bazaar in Istanbul, where she was in her element with her adventurous spirit and passion for exotic spices.

After tasting a dessert on the menu with distinct tastes of cloves and coconut, I was tempted to ask Arzak if her interest in spices had deepened over the years and if she found herself playing with bolder favors. She said, "Yes, it's true I do and find I take more risks now. I was just as much of a risk-taker in my twenties and then became more restrained for a while, and now I am back to it. You cannot have one style as a chef forever, and your style changes though the base stays the same. I want to have different experiences with food. I notice over the years there are a lot of places that I haven't visited yet and now I want to travel and explore more."

Her culinary education took her to Switzerland after finishing high school, and for six years she traveled and worked with many great chefs such as Michel Roux Jr. (of London's Le Gavroche), Michel Troisgros, Pierre Gagnaire, Claude Peyrot, Alain Ducasse, and Ferran Adrià. Her language studies were no doubt an asset, since she speaks Spanish, German, French, English, and of course Euskara, the language of the Basque Country. Her life revolves around her family: her husband, Manu Lamos, an architect; daughter, Nora; son, Matteo; her parents; and her sister, Martha, who after studying art history became the director of education at Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum.

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The Arzak restaurant has held three Michelin stars since 1989 and was voted No. 21 in 2016 by the World's 50 Best Academy. Not just food-lovers but also chefs from around the globe make it their first stop in San Sebastián to enjoy the food as well as to visit with Juan Mari and pay their respects. At 74, he is still at the restaurant with Elena every day, overseeing the kitchen and feeding friends and family at the table in the kitchen.



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