

668 views | Oct 10, 2019, 08:40am

Go To Spain's Basque Country For Legendary Restaurant Arzak



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Travel



Arzak restaurant in San Sebastián, Spain. PHOTO BY DIOPORAMA, COURTESY OF RESTAURANTE ARZAK



Elena Arzak is a member of some very exclusive “clubs”: the group of chefs who helm three-star Michelin restaurants (which she does with her father, the culinary legend, Juan Mari Arzak) and the rarified cadre of women (there are just 13) whose restaurants have received this ultimate accolade. Not surprisingly, she was honored with the Veuve Clicquot World’s Best Female Chef Award in 2012. Ferran Adrià, the food-world luminary behind the revolutionary Catalan restaurant, El Bulli, told [The New York Times](#) that “Elena is one of the most important chefs in history.”



Elena Arzak and Juan Mari Arzak. PHOTO BY COCONUT, COURTESY OF RESTAURANTE ARZAK

Today In: [Lifestyle](#)



Culinary genius runs in the family. Juan Mari Arzak, a seminal figure in the development of New Basque cuisine, earned the family restaurant its third Michelin star in 1989, a ranking that’s been maintained for three decades, making [Arzak](#) one of a handful of dining spots to have reached such a milestone. That longevity is a remarkable feat under any circumstance, but consider Arzak lies in a region that glitters with Michelin-starred eateries.

The restaurant is known for dishes that are not only extraordinarily original, but also exquisitely plated, which has made Arzak an enduring culinary hot spot, drawing visitors from around the world to savor the seasonal seven-course tasting menu served at lunch and dinner. And despite all the buzz Arzak has received for its inventiveness, the menu keeps its ties to the cooking of Basque country, a region spanning France and Spain with a rich culinary heritage, and one that’s long nurtured female chefs.

“We describe our work as a confluence,” says Elena, the fourth generation involved with the restaurant, which opened in 1897. “We use methods and turn to values from the past and adapt them to today,” she says, citing the significant changes in taste in the last ten years, with guests wanting to eat healthier, have more vegetable options, but wanting both a surprise element and a certain simplicity to their food, even if the techniques that

went into its preparation are not simple at all. “To be modern, you need to cook with the times,” she says.



Elena in the laboratory. PHOTO BY JOSE LOPEZ, COURTESY OF RESTAURANTE ARZAK



Huevos Arzak, made with tomato and corn candy. COURTESY OF RESTAURANTE ARZAK

A great part of Arzak’s success has been its never-ending ability to come up with amazing dishes, and the pursuit of the new and unique is something both Elena and her father focus on daily. At a specially designated laboratory above the restaurant, she and Juan Mari and their team perform their culinary wizardry, devising the ethereal creations that keep Arzak in the pantheon of restaurant greats. On average the Arzaks will greenlight 16 new items from the lab each year. “It doesn’t have to be a dish,” says Elena. “It can be an amuse-bouche, an appetizer or ice cream.” Recent favorites developed in the lab include local mackerel with shio koji, served with sea grapes and a dried-tomato, nut and onion

sauce; and an egg dish with tomato and corn candy.



Mackerel with shio koji. COURTESY OF RESTAURANTE ARZAK

Elena says the tasting menus (consisting of five small appetizers for a first course, five half-courses, two small desserts and a chocolate treat) will always be grounded in the seasons, the market and the surrounding territory. “In the menu we express not only our personal identity and our modernity, but also the Basque experience,” she says, adding that when you dine at Arzak you know you are in San Sebastián—through the produce and cooking methods, as well as with the special touches that are more than culinary flourishes. “I like to cook with messages,” she says, explaining why she developed new chocolates in the shape of the type of frogs common to the area. “The frogs are an animal symbol of the city, they faced extinction, but were saved.”

Even with the restaurant’s 30 years of three Michelin stars and all the accolades, Elena says sustaining that kind of success has its unique challenges and to keep performing at such a level you can’t ever relax. “I can’t be boring or monotonous,” she says. “People come here with high expectations, and you can’t have them be disappointed.”



La hoguera, a dessert made with smoked chocolate ice cream and layers of chocolate. COURTESY OF RESTAURANTE ARZAK



The Arzaks at the restaurant. PHOTO BY COCONUT, COURTESY OF RESTAURANTE ARZAK

Father and daughter share duties and keep long hours at Arzak. When asked how many, she says, “I don’t count. If you count, you are lost.” Despite the obvious time commitments required of running one of the world’s top restaurants, Elena says she doesn’t consider herself a workaholic, noting that she’s very pleased to be able to do what she does. Living near the restaurant makes managing time between work and home easier. As to what she cooks for her family (her husband is an architect and they have two children), she says the menu is much simpler than at the restaurant; she’ll whip up something like grilled squid with onion marmalade, or a leek and potato soup with seaweed. A Christmas holiday meal might include Galicia oysters, crab, braised duck, artichokes, a fruit compote and a sweet like turrón.

Elena, who trained in London, Switzerland and France (at La Maison Troisgros and Alain Ducasse’s Le Louis XV, both Michelin three stars) says she likes to revisit places where she worked when she travels, and stops by restaurants of other renowned chefs. Some favorites include Carré des Feuillants (with chef Alain Dutournier) in Paris. “I trained there and I like the cooking,” she says. Another Paris stop is Alléno Paris au Pavillon Ledoyen (with chef Yannick Alléno; it has three Michelin stars). When she’s in Italy she heads to Massimo Bottura’s Osteria Francescana in Modena (named the best restaurant

on the planet in 2018 by [The World's 50 Best Restaurants](#)) and Viva (Viviana Varese) in Milan.

This weekend, Elena makes a quick trip to New York City for [NYCWFF](#), the annual food and wine festival benefiting Food Bank of New York City and No Kid Hungry®. [Dinner with Elena Arzak](#) takes place on Saturday, October 12, at the Four Seasons Hotel New York. Not surprisingly, it sold out quickly, which means you'll just have to book that planet ticket to Spain sometime soon to sample the Arzaks' renowned cuisine.



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I have worked for magazines in Italy and the US, and have been editor-in-chief of Forbes Special Interest Publications, Gotham Magazine and Four Seasons Magazine, a tra... [Read More](#)