The Arzak Dining Experience

By Lauren Cahn | Lauren Cahn Journal

Spain's century-old restaurant with a cutting edge cuisine

Juan Mari with daughter Elena.

When it comes to visiting Spain, San Sebastián isn't a city on many people's hit list. Of course, there's Barcelona, and then Madrid, and then Seville, and then Ibiza, and then Bilbao. But did you know that San Sebastián — a small, coastal city in the north of Spain with a modest population of 186,126 — is one of the culinary capitals of the world?

San Sebastián, also known as Donostia, has more **Michelin stars** per square meter than any other city in the world except for Kyoto, Japan. That edges out Tokyo, Paris, and New York City.

Of course, if you're going to indulge in one of the three three-star Michelin restaurants, you'll want to start with the one with the most history: **Arzak**. With roots stretching back to the mid-nineteenth century, Arzak has continuously maintained the wizardry that happens in the kitchen. The elegant tasting menu is much more than just a meal. It's an experience of exquisite, cutting-edge **Basque** cuisine. Click through and follow along as we share our experience of the tasting menu at Arzak.

Family Business

Arzak was started as a humble wine cellar and tavern in 1897 by Juan Mari's grandparents. It has been passed down through two generations to Juan Mari, who now collaborates with Elena, one of his two daughters. Working in tandem, they've raised the standards to the point where Arzak is a three-Michelin star restaurant, is rated No. 1 in San Sebastián on TripAdvisor and No. 21 in the **World's 50 Best Restaurants** list. It's worth noting that Elena is just one of two females in the top 50 of that list who are head chefs.

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Wine Cellar

Arzak's cellar houses an incredible 100,000 bottles. The sommeliers actually use a special flashlight when search for the bottles, one that emits as little heat as possible, so as not to throw off the temperature in the cellar.

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The Lab

Arzak has four chefs working around the clock to create new dishes. Their job is to innovate and invent for the tasting menu. Then the creations are vetted by Elena and the rest of the team before they're added to the rotation.

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Spice Wall

The collection of spices is almost as impressive as the collection of wines. Arzak chefs use just more than 1,000 difference spices in their cooking.

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Centerpieces

As we take a seat, we first notice the centerpieces. On the table, two types of salt are served: a sea salt and a house-made sea salt infused with seaweed.

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Amuse-Bouche

The first bites are moringa and prawn gyoza. Traditional Japanese gyoza are made with steamed dough (not unlike a dumpling) but Arzak's take sees a crispy outside to add a crunch.

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Next Bite

Next up is a banana and squid bite. A banana chip is covered with spicy squid-banana topping. It's just a bite, but the taste buds crave more.

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Last Hors d'Oeuvre

The last bite to wake up the senses is marinated sardines and strawberry. As you may have noticed, there is a slight seafood-and-fruit theme going on. And it worked well together with the seafood offering up the salty while the fruit delivered the sweet part of the equation.

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Fish of the Day

The courses begin with the fish of the day, a sea bream. It's marinated in a Txakarain, a Basque liqueur. Normally served as a digestif, Txakarain is made of wild plums (sloe berry). The fish is topped with chia seeds for an added crunch.

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Prawn With Krill

Hidden under a shell are marinated prawns served on lemon grass and mint. The base is a beetroot purée with crunchy krill.

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Red Space Egg

It's interesting to see Michelin-starred chefs get creative with eggs. Elena served us a "red" egg, which is carmine due to a thin veil of red pepper. The colored sauces are parsley and spinach (green), smoked red pepper and annatto (red) and turmeric (yellow). It's one of her favorite dishes on the menu.

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Monkfish Cleopatra

Next is a dish fit for Cleopatra, the last active Pharaoh in Egypt just before the Roman Empire was established. The monkfish is a dish suitable for a pharaoh to present to her. It's grilled and then topped with a squid ink rice flour pyramid, while the plate is adorned with hieroglyphic forms of pumpkin and chickpea.

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Lamb With Cypress Aroma

This lamb becomes cage-free once the cover of cypress is lifted. It's done to infuse a cypress aroma, which adds an extra layer to the scent of the dish. The lamb itself is a lion, which is roasted and served over a nut and Armagnac spread.

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Palate Cleanser

Before dessert, we're served a refreshing granita topped with acai and fruit. Hidden inside is a delicate yuzu ice cream.

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The Big Truffle

The arrival of dessert is a blessing and a curse. On one hand, it's the sweet endings. On the other hand, it's the endings, which means we're approaching the conclusion. The first of two is the big truffle. It's a large cocoa and sugar truffle that gets coated by a chocolate sauce that the server pours on top. Inside is a chocolate and cacao filling. It's an explosion of chocolate (but the layers and textures are distinct).

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Square Moon

The last dish just feels like a lot of fun. It's served in a tuner chocolate cube with a fluid core of mint, marcid, and kiwi. It's a contrast to the first dessert, which was chocolate all day. This was a display of how chocolate can partner with citrus fruits.

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