—BASQUE COUNTY

SAVORING SAN SEBASTIÁN

At the vanguard of new Basque cuisine, this seaside town has been luring foodies for decades. A tour of some of its Michelin-starred restaurants and cheery *pintxos* bars reveals why San Sebastián's culinary appeal is as strong as ever

BY ANGELA SHAH



GOOD CATCH Charcoal-cooked mollusks in a "fisherman's net" of rice flour at Akelarre, in the hills above San Sebastián.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSE LUIS LOPEZ DE ZUBIRIA

There might be fine silver cutlery on the tables at Mugaritz, but when they bring out chef Andoni Luis Aduriz's "beer and olives"—a canny trompe l'oeil of tapa beans disguised to look just like black olives and accompanied by a frothy broth of toasted chickpeas—we're expected to eat it with our fingers, tavern-style. The soup course is likewise hands-on: waiters present us with individual pestles and mortars, which we use to grind a medley of spices before drowning the mixture in a flask of fish broth. It all makes for a delicious, entertaining extravaganza that lasts through 16 courses, ranging from "edible stones" (baby potatoes coated in edible clay to resemble the gray pebbles found on San Sebastián's beaches, and nested in a "soil" of coarse salt and pepper) to "Shhhhh ... Cat Got Your Tongue!"—an assemblage of delicate strands of slow-cooked beef tongue tweezered into the shape of a tiny bird's nest. It's the most theatrical meal I've ever had.

The stage for this is the Basque Country of north-central Spain, where I've arrived with a trio of friends from Dubai and Dallas. More precisely, we're in the tiny mountain village of Errenteria, about 20 minutes outside the seaside resort town of San Sebastián (or Donostia, in Basque). We've come here on something of a food pilgrimage: with fewer than 200,000 residents, San Sebastián and its surrounds are home to an impressive 15 Michelin-starred restaurants, among them some of the leading lights of *nueva cocina vasca*, or new Basque cuisine. Starting with the avant-garde cooking of Mugaritz, whose chef apprenticed under the Catalan maestro Ferran Adrià, we've planned to sample as many of these as we can fit into a week. Or should I say afford: with Mugaritz's multicourse degustation priced at about US$250 a person, our budgets (and waistlines) will stretch to just four of San Sebastián's haute *ristorantes*.



ETXEBARRI'S CHEF-OWNER VICTOR ARGUINZONIZ USES HOMEMADE CHARCOAL AND LOCAL OAK FROM THE ATXONDO VALLEY TO GRILL OR SMOKE EACH OF THE DISHES ON THE RESTAURANT'S MENU. THIS GIVES HIS FOOD AN ELEMENTAL QUALITY

The next day, after a morning spent admiring the Belle Époque mansions built during San Sebastián's heyday as a summer resort for Spanish aristocrats, we head into the hills to find an *asador* (barbecue restaurant) called Etxebarri. Awarded its first Michelin star in 2009, it's situated in the tiny village of Axpe, about halfway along the road to Bilbao. Thanks to the combination of a near-useless GPS, mountainous terrain, and indecipherable Basque-only signage, what should be a 45-minute drive stretches to twice that time. But we eventually find it, and settle in for another epic meal.

Chef-owner Victor Arguinzoniz uses homemade charcoal and local oak from the Atxondo Valley to grill or smoke each dish on Etxebarri's menu. This gives his food an elemental quality, whether it be a rectangular pat of goat butter served atop toasted bread with mushroom shavings and ash salt, or grilled





BASQUE IN GLORY Clockwise from above: amid the cobbled lanes of San Sebastián's old quarter; father-and-daughter team Juan Mari and Elana Arzak, in the kitchen of the family's restaurant; roasted veal with thyme, ash, and radishes, at Mugaritz.

percebes (goose barnacles) whose briny taste evokes the sea. Also from the grill comes a bright-yellow egg yolk with purple-hued creamed potatoes, and toothsome chorizo on polenta cakes. And to finish, yet another revelation: smoked ice cream.

The next marathon lunch on our list unfolds at Akelarre, in the hills overlooking the Bay of Biscay. Chef Pedro Subijana has helmed the aptly named restaurant (it means "witches' sabbath") since 1975, and our dishes certainly seem packed with culinary sorcery. There's an amuse-bouche presented as a tray of spa products, with a piece of porous toast standing in for a loofa, creamy-rich Idiazabal cheese served in a moisturizer jar, and a pump-bottle full of tomato broth. Another dish consists of clams, mussels, and oysters "caught" in a lattice of fried rice flour that resembles a fisherman's net, complete with tiny dried shrimp and edible flowers. It looks as though Subijana has just plucked it from the sea below us.

After such exalted eating at midday, we opt for simpler fare in the evening by visiting some of San Sebastián's *pintxos* (Basque tapas) bars. While the restaurants we've seen so far have the hushed ambience of culinary temples, the bars are crowded, noisy, and jovial. Their proprietors work behind the counter, passing down plates of pickled red peppers or salted cod and pouring generous glasses of Txakoli, a dry sparkling wine. There are no tasting menus here, and pintxos plates set diners back maybe US$5 at most.

On a brisk evening we walk the gas lamp–lit promenade of Paseo de la Concha across town to the cobblestone streets of the Parte Vieja, San Sebastián's historic, largely Baroque quarter. Our *txikiteo*—the Basque term for a pub crawl—begins at Bar Borda Berri, with plates of succulent duck breast with plum sauce and stewed beef cheek. After that, we stroll down an alley to Bar La Cepa for an unforgettable selection of Iberian ham and plates of sauteed mushrooms topped with a farm-fresh egg yolk. And at Bar Gorriti, we devour several servings of *boquerones*—fresh anchovy fillets marinated in vinegar with peppers, olives, and onion.

ROOM WITH A VIEW The dining room at Akelarre, a three-star restaurant overlooking the Bay of Biscay.



A HUMIDITY-CONTROLLED ROOM AT ARZAK IS FILLED FLOOR-TO-CEILING WITH SMALL PLASTIC CONTAINERS OF EVERY HERB AND SPICE IMAGINABLE, MANY OF WHICH WERE BROUGHT BACK BY STAFF AND DEVOTEES OF THE RESTAURANT FROM THEIR TRAVELS

On our final night in San Sebastián, we discover that we've unwittingly saved the best for last. The highlight of our culinary pilgrimage, Arzak, occupies a red-brick building on what used to be the road to the French border, just 20 kilometers away. Founded by current owner Juan Mari Arzak's grandparents as a "wine inn and tavern," it was the first restaurant in Spain to win a Michelin star, in 1989. Today it has three.

The Arzak family no longer calls the building home, but chef Juan Mari's daughter, Elena, has joined him in the kitchen. Together they manage to evoke both the comfort of a family-run restaurant and the precision you'd expect from such a culinary pedigree.

Elena Arzak offers to take us on a tour of the restaurant. We visit the wine cellar, her office (stacked high with cookbooks, including her own handwritten recipe book, complete with pencil sketches of dishes), and the "laboratory," where, she says, "all the inventing takes place." The humidity-controlled room is filled floor-to-ceiling with small plastic containers of every herb and spice imaginable, many of which were brought back by staff and devotees of the restaurant from their travels. A freeze-drying machine, used to create so many of the new flavors and combinations that are emblematic of avant-garde Spanish cooking, occupies a corner.

Elena then sits us at her chef's table, in full view of the bustling kitchen, to sample a menu she has just put together. Medium-rare lamb roulade and melt-in-your-mouth slices of carpaccio provide a nice anchor to bites of cheese-stuffed sardines with strawberries and balsamic-and-rockfish mousse, the latter wrapped in delicate fried noodles in the shape of a beehive. We particularly enjoy our dessert, whimsically dubbed the "Arzak Hardware Store." It consists of tiny pieces of marzipan made to look like steel bolts and orange Lego pieces, alongside chocolates masquerading as rust-colored screws.

Our 9 p.m. dinner stretches past 1 a.m. As the staff scrub the kitchen and prepare to leave for the night, Elena stops by our table, urging us to linger. "I am still going to be around," she says. "So enjoy; there is no need to rush. This is your home." ⊙



THE DETAILS
SAN SEBASTIÁN
—GETTING THERE From Barcelona or Madrid, connect to San Sebastián on **Iberia Airlines** (*iberia.com*).
—WHERE TO STAY
Villa Soro
61 Avenida de Ategorrieta, San Sebastian; 34-943/297-970; villasoro.com; doubles from US$173.
—WHERE TO EAT
Akelarre
56 Paseo Padre Orcolaga; 34-943/311-209
Arzak
273 Avda. Alcalde Jose Elosegui; 34-943/278-465.
Bar Borda Berri
12 Fermín Calbetón; 34-943/425-638.
Bar La Cepa
7 Calle 31 de Agosto; 34-943/426-394.
Etxebarri
1 Plaza San Juan, Axpe; 34-946/583-042.
Mugaritz
20 Caserio Otzazulueta, Errenteria; 34-943/522-455.