

Spain|España, Reviews

“Txotx”

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An unforgettable night in the Basque
Country



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“Txotx,” referring to each time the wooden peg on a new cider barrel (kupela) is opened for tasting.

In February this year one of my best buds Rosie and I headed to a small town called Zarautz in the Spanish Basque Country where Hamish, one of my closest friends from my uni days in London was (and still is) teaching English. He's always been a bit alternative our Hamish, and it was clear that he was feeling quite at home in the Basque Country. He really pulls off the Basque look, and I was so pleased to see my good friend loving life in this quirky town. He didn't mess about either, and as soon as we arrived he told us there was a surprise install for the following night.

Hamish could not have done a better job. This wonderful human being arranged for us all to attend a Cider drinking, eating (and later singing and dancing) event at a traditional Basque farmhouse. This evening, in the nearby town of Astigarraga near to San

Sebastián, is known by the locals as ‘Sagardotegi,’ and we visited Sidrería Irezta, one of about 40 cider houses in the region. It’s an experience that is inherent to this specific part of the Gipuzkoa province of the Basque Country where we were staying.

Now, I’m not much of a cider drinker (I can barely get through a bottle of Magners), but boy was I excited. This is not just an occasion to drink yourself silly with the most incredible cider I believe will ever bless my tastebuds, but also a truly unique and authentic experience for anyone interested in food. FeedTim is all about eating what’s local with the locals, so it seems Hamish was already forging a path for me before my blog even existed.

What’s Sagardotegi all about?

It’s a tradition that dates back to the 11th century. Nowadays it’s a celebration of the apple harvest. Every year these special apples are harvested between September and November. They are crushed in to a pulp which is pressed to extract the must. This is left to ferment in these giant oak casks, ready for the cider season from mid-January.

This social drinking (and naturally) eating tradition is so alive today. In what you might describe as a very rustic Basque boozer, you pay around €25 for a 5 course meal and all the cider you can drink. The evening itself is not easy to organise. I was told that Basques themselves might only get the chance to experience this once a year and that only groups of 15 people or more can get involved, since there is such high demand at each cider house during the peak season (mid-January to late-April/early-May). We had the pleasure of being in the company of proud Basques, and many of Hamish’s students.

Yes, ok, tell me about the cider (la sidra)

This cider is like nothing I had ever tried. It's really not sweet at all. The cider that is famous in the Basque Country, and particularly in the other Northern region of Asturias, is made from crab apples that are low in sugar and acidic. It's still and is much drier than the cider you might know from the West Country in England. It goes down very easy.

It's not just the thrill of tasting cider in a century-old farmhouse in a place whose name I was soon unable to pronounce. It's the

worshipped tradition of catching the cider in your glass from quite a height. Worshipped, because these traditions are what the Basques identify with and use to distinguish their history from the rest of Spain. There's a man whose role it is during the whole evening to continually open and close the peg of each barrel while a queue soon forms everytime "Txotx" is called out. Our cider barrel opening person would get very angry if nobody came quickly enough to collect some cider in their glass, and it went to waste on the farmhouse floor.

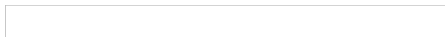
Tim, get on with the feeding bit

Yes indeed. This bit is really simple because your ticket to this unique occasion gives you a set menu that is pretty much always the same. I like this because what's on offer is only the best of local delicacies and produce. This is what we ate and what you should expect to eat over the evening:

1st – locally made Chorizo and Morcilla (blood sausage) with bread.

Txotx: time to head down to the barrels and fill up. (Don't make the peg man angry)

2nd – TORTILLA DE BACALAO (cod fish omelette). Tortilla is so innate in Spanish gastronomy, but this version belongs to the Basque country. I loved that is what cooked runny. It's so simple, but made with plenty of attention.



3rd – BACALAO AL PIL PIL (cod fish in a Chilli & Garlic sauce). Simple but elegant, and cooked to perfection. Food is still king here: nothing is rushed.

4th – TXULETON (enormous Flintstone-style aged Ox Steak cooked rare). You see these colossal things as soon as you walk through the front door (#LettheGamesBegin).



5th (when you're trying to find a gap...

anywhere) – Walnuts with local DO Idiazabel cheese and membrillo (quince jelly).

At this point you're just eating for the sake of eating. Cracking the walnuts just adds to the mess of spilled cider and grub spread across the table. Sign of a good evening.

A truly convivial experience

The Sagardotegi experience was quite like no other. Firstly you are standing the whole time, from collecting your cider in the cellar to eating at the table. Groups are large, yet it gets pretty cosy as the tables are quite small. Considering I only knew 2 members of the group before we began, I felt like I was celebrating life with friends from way back by the end of the night.

What I really loved was after the final course. I managed to roll back to the oak casks for one final refill and suddenly hymns with lyrics of cider production broke out around the entire farmhouse. It was almost emotional after the experience I had just witnessed. I of course hadn't a clue of the lyrics, but was unable to free myself from the gaping arm of a passionate Basque man. It was funny.

We couldn't end such a spectacular evening without visiting the local grimy nightclub for a few hours, where artisanal cider turned to G & T's, and I was wasted.



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