



Foodie

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How To Eat (And Drink) Your Way Around The Basque Country

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Boasting an abundance of everything from rustic country fare and delectable “pintxos” to multi-Michelin-starred marvels, northern Spain’s Basque Country is the stuff of foodie dreams. Here’s how to eat and sip your way through the very best of the best.

Immerse Yourself in the Heart of the Basque Country



Ben in Vitoria

As the capital city and proverbial heart of the Basque Country, Vitoria-Gasteiz is the perfect place to set up base and get acquainted with this gastromomic wonderland.

Kick off your foodie voyage with a delicious morning at Vitoria's main market, a hubbub of action where over 180 traders offer fresh fish and seafood from the Bay of Biscay, colourful fruit and veg and a whole lot of local Idiazabal cheese (more on that in a bit). The best part of the market however is the recent addition of the rooftop gastrobar, where you can nibble on tapas and ease your way into a few local wines.



Vitoria street market

Once you've worked up an appetite it's time to get lost in the Vitoria's Old Town, or "The Almond" as the locals call it, where streets like Calle Cuchillería rumble with revellers hopping from pintxo bar to pintxo bar.



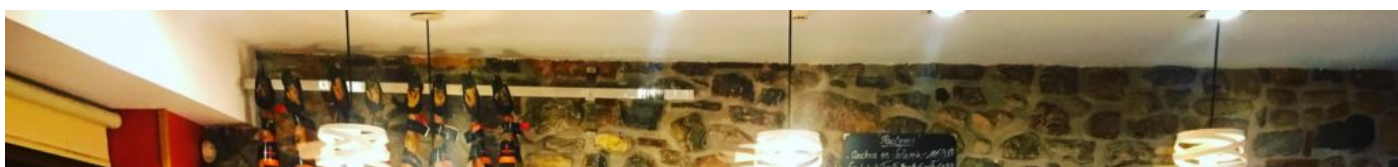


For something less boisterous, travel back in time for a taste of old world Spain at the ancient Restaurante Portalón. Dating back to the 15th century, this historic inn and coachhouse is perfectly preserved with original stone work and rickety wooden beams.

Pintxo Bar Hopping in San Sebastián



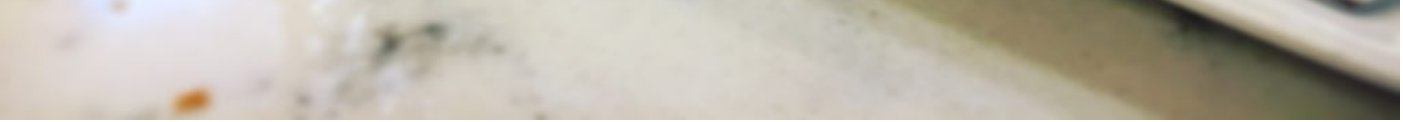
Even the gourmets, the Basques have their own take on Spain's famous tapas dishes. In this part of Spain, where Michelin-stars are commonplace, chefs aren't afraid to experiment with new ingredients and every morsel is a creative culinary conquest. "It's like cooking in miniature," my guide Ester explained as I inhaled a bitesized beauty of anchovies, red peppers and juicy olives. Something to keep in mind – traditionally pintxos were served on skewers or atop a little slice of bread, but as chefs grow ever more creative this isn't always the case.





You don't have to go far in San Sebastián to find a good pintxo bar, but many of the best are to be found in the narrow streets of the Old Town, or "Parte Vieja" as it's known locally. Leading off the square of Plaza de la Constitución you'll find crowds of bar hoppers loving life on streets like Calle Fermín Calbetón, Calle Mayor and the legendary Calle 31 de Agosto.





Don't miss Ataria Gastroteka for classic pintxos like “angulas” (baby eels), “gildas” (spicy pickles with olives and anchovies) and great music. Gandarias Jatetxea is the place for delicacies like crab and sea enenemoes, whilst Casa Urola and A Fuego Negro are all about pushing the boundaries of traditional Basque tapas. There's only one place to go for dessert and that's La Viña for their famous “burnt cheesecake”.

Enjoy Michelin-Star Dining in Bilbao



Foie at Restaurant Etxanobe in Bilbao

The Basque Country has the highest concentration of Michelin-starred restaurants per capita in the world — a whopping 40 in total. The great news for gastronomists is that this abundance of high quality establishments means a Michelin-starred meal here typically costs less than in other parts of the world. And where better to indulge in a contemporary fine dining experience than in the handsome riverside city of Bilbao. For sweeping views, limitless imagination and a suitably interesting wine pairing menu, book a table at Restaurant Etxanobe, which is located on the top floor of the contemporary Palacio Euskalduna.



Dessert at Restaurant Etxanobe in Bilbao

Here, local legends Fernando Canales and Mikel Población enhance classic Basque dishes with fusion flavours and avant-garde presentation. They're lovely chaps too and will more than likely come to your table to say hello and talk about their latest dishes. Pop in after visiting the neighbouring Guggenheim Art Museum for the ultimate day out in Bilbao.

Discover the Basque Country's Famous Idiazabal Cheese



Idiazabal cheese

The north of Spain boasts countless varieties of cheese and easily rivals France in terms of quality. But the cheese that's most famous across the rest of the country is Idiazabal. That's “Ideeh-ah-tha-bal” — try saying that after a glass or two of Rioja! This hard sheep's milk cheese is mild but complex, with a subtle nuttiness and slightly smoky finish.





To see and learn more about how this local delicacy is made, visit the Adarrazpi cheese farm in the Adarra Mountains just outside of San Sebastián. Shepard Mikel will introduce you to the special “Latxa” sheep that produce the milk and, with the help of Argi the sheepdog, you can even help round-up the flock. The tour continues in the cheese factory where Mikel’s wife Inma explains and demonstrates how their delicious cheese is made. The best bit is the tasting session, which is accompanied by a bottle of traditional Basque cider and panoramic views of the verdant countryside. Book your cheese farm tour with Thabuca Tours or Basque Cool Tours.

Join the Locals for Cider and a Hearty Meat Feast



Talking of the Basque Country’s famous cider...

Apple trees grow in abundance across the north of Spain and have been put to good use at “sagardotegis” (cider houses) since the 11th century.

“The owners of the cider houses would invite their neighbours over for lunch and to try out their cider,” my guide told me, “and now it’s an important tradition for the Basques.”





Today locals head to their favourite sagardotegis by the busload. And with unlimited cider on offer it's easy to see why! Basque cider is natural and much sharper and cloudier than English cider. Another key difference is the way in which it is served. Giant barrels rest in cool chambers where staff shout “Txotx!” to let you know they are about to open the tap. You get in line with your glass ready to fill it about half full and drink it in one while it is still bubbling and “alive”. It's worth spending a moment to observe how the locals do it before trying it yourself, but don't be shy or you'll miss out.



And because most sagardotegis are owned by farmers, eating is also an important element of the experience. The cavernous dining halls are filled with long wooden benches where whole families, couples, grandparents and large groups of friends sit shoulder-to-shoulder. Traditionally, the menu is fixed.



A starter of “tortilla de bacalao” (cod omelet with green peppers), main dish of “txuleton” (a jurassic-sized ox-steak) and a dessert of walnuts with Idiazabal cheese and “membrillo” (a sweet quince jelly) at Petrategi sagardotegi.

At around just €25/30 per person for the entire feast (including unlimited cider), eating at a sagardotegi offers outstanding value for money. There are countless cider houses throughout the Basque Country, but I can highly recommend the Petrategi sagardotegi, located in the countryside about 7 km outside of San Sebastian.

Sip Your Way Through the Rioja Alavesa Wine Region



El Fabulista winery

Ask anyone what their favourite Spanish wine is and more than likely they'll mention Rioja. What most people don't realise however is that a large chunk of the Rioja wine region is located in the Basque Country.





Named Rioja Alavesa, it is the smallest of the La Rioja sub-regions and protected by the Sierra de Cantabria and Sierra de Toloño mountain ranges. This means it receives the lowest amount of rainfall in the region, forcing the vines' roots to dig deep and grow strong. This results in quality grapes — mainly Tempranillo but also Garnacha, Mazuelo and Graciano — that produce wines that are respected for their excellent ageing potential.



La Rioja is revered for producing some of the world's finest red wines, but the region also produces excellent white wines too. Almost every winery and wine bar will have a few varieties in the chiller, so be sure to do as the locals do and start with a glass or two of white before moving onto the reds.





White wine lovers will also love the Basque Country's slightly sparkling white wine called "txakoli" (cha-ko-lee). Light and refreshing with a slight green hue, it is typically enjoyed as an aperitif along with a few pintxos. The Basques drink gallons of it and you'll find it in all bars and restaurants along with Rioja wines.



Visit the tiny family run El Fabulista winery in Rioja Alavesa's Medieval capital city of Laguardia — more of a walled fortress than a city. The cellars date back to the 15th century and very little has changed since. The tours are fun and informative and include a guided wine tasting of the bodega's four excellent wines. For an insight into Rioja's larger and more contemporary wine producers, visit the space-aged Baigorri Bodega, Ysios Bodega, and the avant-garde Marqués de Riscal Bodega which was designed by Frank Gehry, who also designed Bilbao's iconic Guggenheim Museum.

Want to learn more about Basque wine?

The Villa-Lucía Wine Centre is a fascinating museum with interactive activities and intricate models that show the complete process of making wine. There's also a pioneering 4D cinema that allows you to “fly” over Rioja Alavesa and experience this spectacular landscape like a bird.

The adjoining restaurant is also an excellent option for lunch or dinner. Don't miss the Basque speciality of “chuletillas de cordero” – lamb chops grilled over wood cut directly from the vines. Incredible.

Make it Happen



Ben explored the Basque Country with Thabuca Tours, a local company run by passionate foodies and wine connoisseurs. Stay at the ultra convenient Abba Jazz Hotel to be within strolling distance of the best of Vitoria. For a wine-tasting getaway, book in at the Villa de Laguardia Hotel in Laguardia close to the vineyards of Rioja

Alavesa. Stay at the stunning seafront Hotel de Londres y de Inglaterra to explore the best of San Sebastián on foot.

Book now



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Ben Holbrook

Ben Holbrook is a Barcelona-based travel writer. Read more about his adventures on his blog [Driftwood Journals](#).



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