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You'll have more fun at a sagardotegi than you will at any bar.

Many European regions have seen their indigenous drinking culture coopted by the United States – some more successfully than others. For instance, plenty of bars have tried dubbing themselves “German beer halls” simply by serving brews in one-liter steins. Meanwhile, thanks to the Irish diaspora, I found pubs on the Emerald Isle to be a bit of a letdown because the look and feel has been so successfully recreated across the pond. However, during a recent trip to Spain, I indulged in a drinking practice unlike any I had ever encountered in the States: the cider houses of Basque Country known as “sagardotegis” (Basque for cider house). If you love cider – or just love drinking, eating and revelry in general – put a stop at a proper Basque cider house on your bucket list.

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Needless to say, at a sagardotegi, cider is king – and the fermented beverage flows freely... literally. Unlike a tap house where patrons line up behind a bar awaiting their next pour, here, cider is served out of giant fermenting barrels nearly as high as the ceiling, often times right in the cidery's cellar. And forget any sort of orderly pouring system: Once the spigot has been opened, sidra shoots out in a long, half-rainbow-shaped stream towards the ground. Patrons interested in a tippie simply hold out their glasses and collect a few fingers worth. And hopefully another thirsty drinker has lined his glass up right behind yours – otherwise when you move, the free flowing cider will hit the floor, running past your feet and down the drain. Though a bit of waste is just part of the “txotx” (pronounced “tchotch”) – a

flexibly used local word that in a single syllable sums up the entire experience.

Such a loose drinking ritual deserves to be paired with an equally flexible meal, and most sagardotegi serve up a very similar spin on the same traditional meal. During a stop for lunch at the Petrítegi cidery, we were served two fish courses – a salt cod omelet followed by fried salt cod with peppers. Next was the hefty main – a 700 gram bone-in ribeye steak served intensely raw.



© Petrítegi Cider House

Finally (besides the final glasses of cider), dessert comprised of cheese, quince jelly, walnuts and almond cookies. During a dinner stop at Zapiain a couple days later, the dishes were nearly identical, and the experiences had other similarities as well: Baguettes arrived freely, as helpful for sopping up cider in your belly as for accompanying your meal, and courses were served at the most leisurely pace, providing plenty of opportunities to wander to and from the cellar as you saw fit. In fact, Zapiain eschewed chairs all together in favor of standing-height tables, meaning you were already on your feet for the next cider call. And since the sagardotegi rotates from barrel to barrel when serving sidra, each featuring its own subtle but unique difference, it's good to be at the ready.

Even setting the experience aside, Basque sidra is wonderful in its own right. Unlike the sweet, fizzy and fruity cider most common in the States, these Spanish ciders are bone dry, practically still and sometimes almost devoid of any obvious apple flavors. Instead, they're complex, emphasizing process by giving off a funky farmhouse vibe with notes of yeast and barrel. The result is extremely tart, typically revealing more flavors of lemon or grapefruit than apple, balanced out with a bitter finish. Though Basque ciders have yet to make a real impact in the US, some are available if you know where to look: Both Petrítegi and Zapiain, for instance, import to the States. Petrítegi even collaborated with Vermont's Shacksbury Cider, bottling a Basque Craft Cider that is worthy of the source.

But of course, seeing the txotx in person is the real adventure. The Basque Country is home to literally dozens of these traditional cider houses, some which have been around for hundreds of years. Though cider season typically runs from January to April, a few – such as Petrítegi – are now open all year, making a stop at a sagardotegi easier than ever before. Sure, heading all the way to Spain just to drink cider might sound excessive, but with beautiful destinations like San Sebastian and Rioja right nearby, even if you don't travel to Basque Country specifically for the sidra, if you want a unique drinking experience, it's not to be missed.

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