



FOOD

In Basque Country, Everyone's in the Cider House

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SAN SEBASTIAN, Spain

A YOUNG worker at Barkaiztegi, a cider house in the hills of San Sebastian, yelled out as he scraped tallow from a hole in a giant cider cask to make way for a tiny steel spigot. People in midmeal around the long communal tables were roused to action. They grabbed their glasses and lined up near the newly tapped barrel to catch a finger or two's worth of cider from the txotx, which is what the Basques call the thin stream of hard cider that gushes from the barrel.

The end of January is when the Basque country's cider houses open dining rooms in the building where they make their cider, and until April 1 guests come to eat and to taste the new vintage straight from the cask before it is bottled.

José Maria Irizar, the 10th-generation cider maker at Barkaiztegi, said the tradition of the txotx (pronounced tchotch) goes back to centuries when families visited the local cider houses in the long nights of February and March and drank the just-fermented cider. The hosts would make the most of midwinter provisions, mainly dried sausage and salt cod, and tap into his casks.

The menu today is similar: chorizo cooked in cider, omelets with stewed salt cod, sautéed deeply caramelized onions and green peppers studded with more salt cod. Chuletas - thick bone-in steaks - are then served rarer than rare with piquillo peppers.

Bread, which is torn from loaves piled in the middle of the table, used to play a more central role in the meal, functioning as place holder and plate. In leaner times without plates or even seats, you covered your food to ensure it would still be there when you returned with your refreshed glass.

During the course of a night 10 barrels or more may be tapped. And though the general procedure is to grab a splash of cider from the streaming txotx and then head back to the table, the occasional barrel warrants a second helping. There is much discussion about the subtle differences from one to the next, and guests sample as much as they please before the barrels are sealed.

Mr. Irizar makes his cider with about as little intervention as possible. In the beginning of October apples (half of them grown on the property, half bought) are hand sorted, washed and crushed. The resulting cider is transferred to giant wooden casks or modern stainless steel fermentation tanks, where ambient yeasts in the cider house and the yeasts that rode in with the apples begin the fermentation process.

By the end of January the cider has gone through malolactic fermentation, changing the biting malic acid of the apples into softer-tasting lactic acid, and has reached 6 percent alcohol by volume. It is now ready to drink. Because the cider is bottled or drunk straight from the cask it ferments in - Barkaiztegi's are not blended - each is slightly different.

The night I tasted the ciders one was forward and direct with a simple apple fruitiness, another was marked by distinctly honeyed notes, and a third batch had faintly sherrylike oxidized overtones. All shared a green-gold color and an appealingly yeasty aroma. Like all ciders from the Basque country (and many great ciders from around the world) they are not completely limpid because they are neither refined nor filtered before they are consumed.

Mr. Irizar produces about 20,000 bottles annually, all of them consumed within the year. He keeps another couple of thousand liters aside for this season of the txotx at the cider house. None of his cider or any Basque cider for that matter is exported to the United States. Very little is even exported outside the region. But if it were, this uniquely Basque ritual, with its odd rhythm - rush to get a glass of cider, eat, repeat - and its own provincial terms and rules, would be hard to follow.

The night I was at the cider house there was one table of Basque men unaccompanied by women - these used to be strictly male affairs - and they spoke only Euskera, the Basque word for Basque. A short man at the head of the table was a bertsolari, whose profession is to sing improvised songs in taverns.

He caught wind of visitors from New York in the room, and when we were gathered around a particularly good barrel, snatching up glasses of cider, he broke into a song. A friend translated as he sang:

*Whether from New York or San Sebastian,
The United States or Spain,
Everyone is friends, everyone is equal
Together here in the cider house.*

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