

SPIRITS

A visit to Basque ciderland plus two Premium reviews

ADAM WELLS • APRIL 11, 2020



“Txotx!”

The stocky, deep-lined, grey-thatched man at the next table pops the word out like a bullet from a silenced revolver. Like a curse, an oath, a little votive offering. Like a verbal full stop. He spits it quietly, accompanied by a light

to hear him, or pay him no notice if they do. They're busily masticating chorizo, salt cod omelette, T-bone. But I hear him and, novice though I am, I know the score. He's the bloke looking after the round. It's a summons, a call to arms.

We weave through the bustling, warm, clackety tumult of the dining room and all at once the ceiling billows, caverns, vaults church-like upwards. The smells shift from heat and fat and meat and oil to coolness and dampness and juice and acid. Two ranked lines of barrels – no, too small a word – vessels; great arks of chestnut flank the nave, thinned out pockets of people mill around the sticky, booze-glistened stone floor and a longer line stretches towards one of the vast casks where a slender, glittering beam of cider bursts forth from its face, pattering and splashing into wide, impossibly thin proffered glasses.

Welcome to the Basque country. Welcome, specifically, to Hernani. We're a twenty-minute bus ride from San Sebastián and we're here in the last gasps of winter for txotx. There are dozens of cideries – *Sagardotegias* – across the town and its neighbour Astigarraga, and from the end of January to the start of April, almost every one of them will be serving a txotx dinner almost every evening to – depending on the cidery's size – up to hundreds of people. By the time the season closes, providing it isn't cut short by a pandemic, as it was this year, something in the region of 800,000 people will have attended. And every single one of them is drinking cider.

Txotx means "toothpick". There's a tiny hole drilled into the face of each barrel, bunged by a splinter of wood. Pop the splinter and that slender shaft of cider drills out, fired by the pressure behind it. Catch it in your glass, from a distance, and you'll have a light, temporary carbonation. It doesn't last long, so you catch just an inch or so at a time and gulp it down on the spot, small sips be-damned.

The "txotx" season began as just a way for cideries to show the new season's cider to merchants, private customers and the local gastronomic societies common to San Sebastián. Taste the barrels, pick your favourite. Actually, since you're coming, bring some grub, would you? We've got the meat, so if you do the chorizo, he'll do an omelette and we'll figure out the cheese when we get there. As the years ticked along a txotx menu formed and consolidated: chorizo in cider ... salt cod omelette ... cod loin with peppers ... t-bone steaks ... cheeses with quince jelly. It's what you'll be served wherever you go, and believe me, you won't want anything else. San Seb is one of the world's food capitals, and the food in the txotx houses was as good as we

the barrels as you can stand. It's a thief's bargain.

The geophysicist and I have come to Zelaia. I did some digging before our visit, as you'd expect, and Zelaia was on my shortlist anyway. But Little Pomona's Susanna Forbes told me it was *the* not-to-be-missed cidery, and that sold it. We arrive half an hour before kickoff to be shown around by Maialen, one of the sisters who runs the cidery. Zelaia's on the larger end of the medium-sized houses in the Basque country, making somewhere in the region of 400,000 litres a year. Every drop of it is dry, every drop is full-juice, natural. Apples, apples, more apples and nothing but. The production room is an ordered medley of pristine stainless steel. Two big, pneumatic presses loom large. "Like the wine trade", I comment. Yes, that's where they came from. Zelaia's one of the few cideries that uses them. Gentler on apple pomace, better for purer, cleaner flavours. Another machine is less familiar; it looks like the slotted carcass of an industrial tumble drier. It turns out to be for removing leaves and detritus from the apples before milling. Wine-inspired again.

Cideries out here don't tend to have long lines of products, and Zelaia's no exception – they make only three, in line with the relatively recent PDO changes. Gorenak – cider made with apples harvested both inside and outside the Basque Country. Euskal Sagardoa – only Basque apples qualify. And Euskal Sagardoa Premium. The Gold top. Basque apples only, and independently adjudged to be of significantly superior quality. That paucity of different lines makes blending a fine art indeed – especially when the variation across the giant casks is considered. We try one that Maialen describes as "tannic for us ... nothing compared to England or France". It's full, ripe, peachy. But she's right; those tannins would barely register on the West Country or Cotentin Richter scale.

Basque cider – indeed Spanish cider in general – isn't about the tannin. There might be a trace, and they do grow a handful of bittersweet apples, but this is sharp country. Spanish cider's all about the kind of acidity that can hiss and skewer through oil and fat; a cutting edge set alight by starbursts of citrus and tropical fruits. There's a caveat with that though: those big barrels let a lot of oxygen in ... and there's a lot of acetic acid around. So much so that Spanish ciders often struggle in international competitions judged by international palates. Proper pouring, from a distance, slightly reduces the perception of the acetic, but once bottles are in the hands of consumers, that's difficult to police. Maialen's of the opinion that acetic levels need to be controlled more in any case – by fermenting and cellaring hers in

some other cideries would be well advised to follow.

We pop a few more barrels before Maialen excuses herself – she’s on chef duty, with a hundred-odd customers to cook for. And then it’s off to the dining room with us too, standing up, elbows on tables, for course after course of rich, indulgent, mesmerising brilliance, punctured by the frequent mutters of “txotx” from the next table, and lashings of pristine, dew-fresh cider under the cellarmaster’s eye. It’s fast, it’s dynamic, it’s riotous. It is food and drink – it’s dinner – but it is also performance; theatre and festival. You stuff down a course, wipe it up with the bottomless bread, then join a line to catch the cider with the inside edge of your glass, then dash back to the table to find a new course has arrived. It’s not just about the cider, or the ritual, or the food, but the interweaving of all three. Without any one element the whole thing would be diminished; none is more or less important than any other. Finally, stomachs creaking, spirits aglow, we head out into the lukewarm, breathy darkness of a late Basque evening and catch the last bus home.

Two days later we’re standing in another Sagardotegia. A bigger one, Zapiain, the biggest of the lot. It’s mid afternoon, we’re the only people here, and the huge, empty cidery seems to echo with the absent ghosts and roar of txotx because of it. Zapiain’s twice the size of Zelaia, but again everything is natural; everything is made from whole juice. There may be vast stainless steel tanks, but the presses are still pneumatic, still gentle; sensitive to the apple, still all about the quality. And in another hall those huge, hulking rows of massive chestnut casks are still stoppered by slender, traditional toothpicks.

Cider has been made here by the Zapiain family for nearly four hundred and fifty years – quite possibly a chunk longer. But what sets out their range from other producers is the diversity of their liquid portfolio. I’m put in mind of Burrow Hill – like them, Zapiain have a still, an alembic in the cognac style, and they’ve been distilling since the eighties. They don’t have quite the same age range of brandies as Burrow Hill; your options are simply with or without oak, but there’s a pommeau and an ice cider as well and tasty they all are too. At the local cider museum our guide says that Zapiain leads the region when it comes to innovation, and I don’t dispute it. But that doesn’t mean they’ve turned their back on the classics; their Gorenak, Euskal Sagardoa and Euskal Sagardoa Premium are popularly acknowledged as some of the best drinking around, all leaning down the more tropical end of the Basque spectrum, reflecting the house style.

to consider this place the world's cider epicentre. Nowhere else on earth has anything like the txotx season; every bar in San Sebastián sells cider by the bottle. This is a place with distinct, unique celebrations and styles and festivals; the cideries produce almost entirely dry, natural cider and present it in beautiful, fluted 750ml bottles, for all the world like Alsace white or German Riesling. Look around anywhere that sells alcohol and you'll see a real local cider; a bottle being shared by students, a weathered old Basque nailing two fingers at a time, a couple making their way through a Euskal Sagardoa at a restaurant.

And yet. In every store, cider sits cheaply on the bottom shelf as tourists and locals alike pass it over for wine and beer. Outside Astigarraga much of the cider is hidden from view; you have to know it's there and ask for it, and they'll seldom have a selection. Talk to anyone outside the industry and they'll sniff at cider as a second citizen, a bit of fun, a festival drink. Not something for your Sunday best, not a bottle to produce to impress your guests. The industry itself is still recovering from ruinous years under Franco; a hundred years ago the average Basque drank fifty litres of cider per year – now it's just about eight. Production is down by twenty million litres, orchard acreage is a third of what it once was. Industry has enveloped Astigarraga and Hernani; in living memory this was all fields and farms, now it's concrete-carpeted car dealerships, workshops and bus lanes. Barely anything made here leaves the region; when I spoke to friends and relatives about San Sebastián, not one of them brought up the cider. Most were surprised to hear that it existed.

The picture is improving. Numbers might be down on 1913, but they're worlds ahead of 1967, when as little as a litre per person was drunk every year. Led by Zapiain, Basque cider seems to be looking outward more, to be less insular than it once was. To be something that people talk about, are curious about, make pilgrimages to drink. The PDO was put in place just a few short years back with a focus on provenance, quality and transparency. On smartening up, tucking its shirt in and talking like wine.

And here's a funny thing. The culture of txotx; of a special festival and a set menu with all of its ingrained rites and bespoke rituals, really isn't any older than my parents. Reading about it at home I had always assumed that it was some handed-down, centuries-old tradition. In fact it began around the same time as the Beatles. From nothing to a million visitors in just over half a century. All of them eating together, in a cidery, drinking cider. Tradition, for all its nostalgic allure, was just your grandfather's bright idea. Basque cider needs to channel the energy, the

space. I suspect they just might.

When they do, I suspect the two ciders we're looking at today will be in the vanguard. They're the premium edition Euskal Sagardoas from Zapiain and Zelaia. Independently adjudged to be the cream of the crop. The top 1%. 750 mls of either will set you back around €3. Let's be honest, you can't even get mugged for that. The geophysicist and I managed to get a few proper Basque cider glasses back from San Sebastián, and I'm even confident enough in my Basque pouring now that I'm allowed to do it over the table. So, never mind the independent Basque adjudicators ... let's see what Malt thinks of this pair.



Zelaia Euskal Sagardoa Premium 2018

Colour: Freshly squeezed lemon juice

middle. Wonderfully clean and bright and crisp – vivid green apples, sherbet and lime juice. Guava and fresh passion fruit. If smells were sounds this would be the peal of silver bells.

In the mouth: That acidity is delicious. Just the littlest nip, Sauvignon Blanc level, to keep things zippy and refreshingly tingly. Actually the flavours trend in a Sauvignon direction too. Soft lemons, gooseberries, Granny Smiths, cut grass. It's sorbet-fresh; clears your palate wonderfully. Clean and elegant and refined and teeming with pretty, thrilling life. Oh – and not a whisper of acetic!



Zapiain Euskal Sagardoa Premium 2019

Colour: See Zelaia.

the apples have turned from green to red and the tropical tones of pineapple and passion fruit bear more weight. Still that bright, vivacious sherbet keeping things lively though.

In the mouth: There's a wonderful, round, softness to that acidity. No one drinking this would call it "acidic" or even "sharp", by any means – there's just a splendid cleanliness, enough to be brisk and refreshing. More pineapple, tangerine and deeper tropical tones ride alongside Cox apples and higher florals. Superb balance, with more weight than the average Basque. I could drink this forever.

Conclusions

Given the current state of the world I think it's safe to say we won't see these on shelves in the UK any time soon. But if you do come across them, wherever you come across them, buy them on sight. If I could regularly get these for three quid a pop they'd be my summer staples without any shadow of a doubt. As often happens, I'm loathe to pick my favourite – at these prices I really don't have to. But I'll give you a hint – it starts with a "Z". Treat them as the makers wanted them to be treated – poured properly, chilled, with food, as a celebration.

Because, to my mind, that's what Basque cider is. A part of its environment; a thread in the tapestry rather than the tapestry altogether. Drink it on its own and you've almost missed the point. This isn't whisky, isn't a solitary sipper, isn't designed to be the whole, sole focus, no matter how good it is. Cider in the Basque ideal is the meeting of the orchard with pasture and sea; a rooted link to the tilled earth and the cast net. It's the bringing of a whole, natural place into our hearths and homes. It's the land poured into your glass.

Sincerest thanks to Maialen and Haritz for taking the time to show us around Zelaia and Zapiain respectively. The Zapiain was a gift, but such things don't influence our writeups on Malt.

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CIDER

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Adam Wells

In addition to my weekly-ish articles on Malt, I've written about whisky (with or without an "e") for Distilled Magazine and the British Bourbon Society. Day to day I work in wine, and have passed the WSET Diploma, proving I have a colossal amount of time on my hands. By all means follow me on [Twitter.com/WhiskyPilgrim](https://twitter.com/WhiskyPilgrim) as long as you don't mind vacuous drivel about Kit-Kat chunkies and geophysicists.

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Marco APRIL 11, 2020 AT 7:29 PM

Basque cider is only drinkable when you run out of water. It might even be a better option to risk your life for a few days than to drink one.

REPLY



Adam W APRIL 12, 2020 AT 8:04 AM

Hi Marco

Thanks for reading (if you read it?)

Did a Basque cidemaker forget your birthday though? You may wish to open the windows and take some deep breaths ...

Yours, with concern,

Adam W.

REPLY



Marco APRIL 12, 2020 AT 7:21 PM

No I didn't read It I will, but Basque cider, come on ...

REPLY



Marco APRIL 12, 2020 AT 7:32 PM

...I know the stuff, I love the place, the people and their products and culture but their cider is an awful drink,... that I buy and drink from time to time, when I am there (yes, right to be concerned !) because I celebrate diversity and genuine stuff and hate uniformisation.

Great article btw.

Cheers

REPLY

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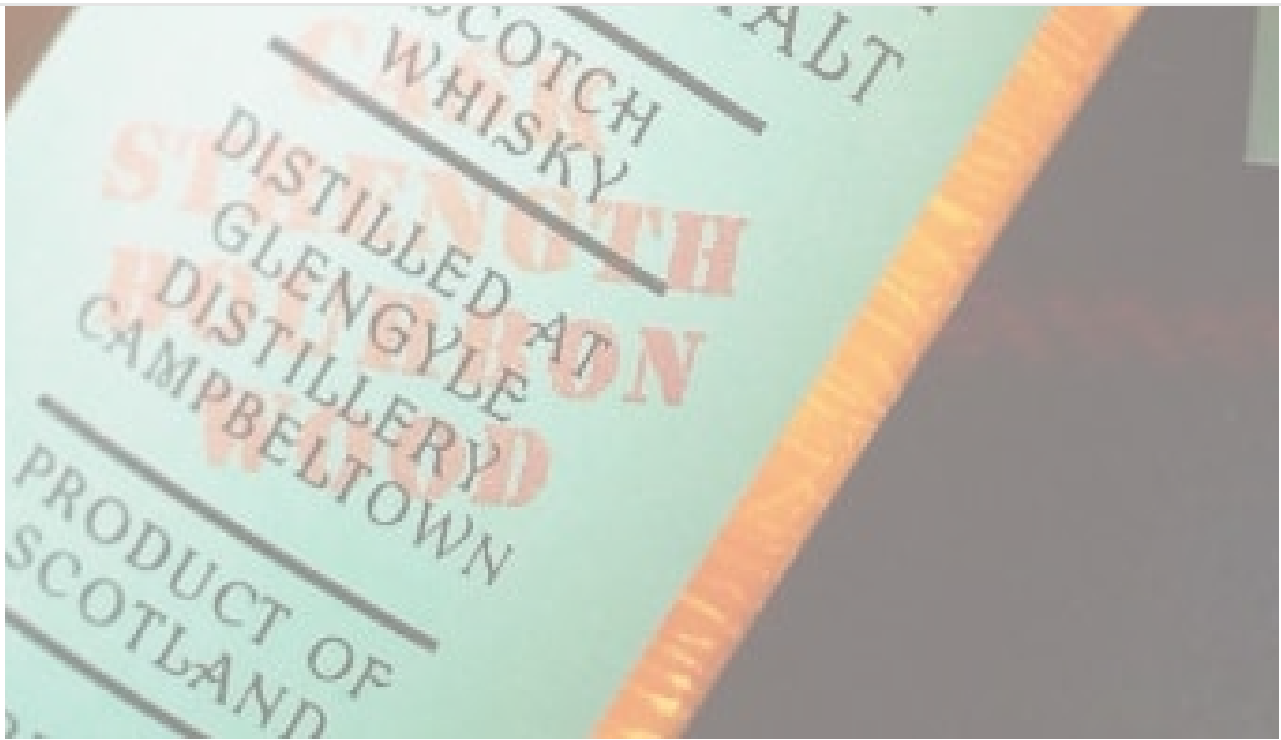
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