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A Cider House Tour Through Spain's Basque Country

On a drinking adventure in the hills near San Sebastián, Spain, our writer learns to *txotx* like a local.



Left to right: BYOG: A guest lines up with an empty glasses to catch her drink at Petritegi; baked cod and potatoes, one of several dishes in a traditional cider-house meal.

I've just sat down when a man named Jon appears with an empty glass, and says that I should follow him. "It's not a formal restaurant," he announces. We march across the dining room into a stone vault that's filled with chestnut-wood barrels, gleaming in the wintry half-light. Each one is almost as tall as an apple tree.

A nearby knot of prodigiously mustachioed revellers sway lightly on their feet, like ancient mariners. They, too, are holding empty glasses. As Jon twists a spigot, he shouts a single word: *Txotx!* It sounds like "choke," but harder-edged. A rush of liquid streams out from the barrel and travels a good metre into the room before arcing perilously toward the floor. At the last possible moment, one of those swaying men slips his glass under the stream and lets it fill, before slugging back the liquid.

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Left to right: Dinner barrels along at Petritegi; fried cod with peppers.

Now glass after glass dips into the arc, with barely a drop spilled. I watch until my thirst can't stand another second's wait. The cider froths as it gathers, and I yank back my cup. "Now drink it quickly. One taste," Jon tells me. If you let it sit, its texture turns thick and heavy. It's cloudy and cold, crisp and dry, but with sly fall-apple depth and sweetness; underneath it all is a mild, yeasty funkiness.

After three more glasses, Jon ushers me back to the dining room, where an enormous salt-cod omelette – the first act of a traditional, multicourse cider-house feast – has arrived for me. As I step up to the table, I catch myself swaying, and I swear it's just from jet lag. Even before a single bite, I am all the way in love with this place.





Left to right: Cider aerates as it shoots from barrel to glass; illustrations and photos capture Petritegi's 400-year history; walnuts, idiazabal cheese and quince jelly finish the feast.

Petritegi, as it's called, is set in a 16th-century cider house, with hand-hewn beams overhead and sawdust on the floor. It's a twisty nighttime taxi trip into the hill country just 15 minutes north of San Sebastián, Spain. But it's also about as far removed as you can get from the culinary capital's heavily touristed pintxos bars and Michelin-inflated dining temples.

The Basques come by their cider habit honestly: It's been the drink of choice for a thousand years. In the 1600s, Basque whaling galleons that crossed the Atlantic to hunt off the shores of modern-day Newfoundland and Labrador ran on a steady ration of apple cider – by some accounts, each sailor was given seven litres daily.



Left to right: The Astarbe family farmhouse, set in a 16th-century orchard; traditional green cider bottles; taking a break at Gartziategi.

The txotx tradition – the all-you-can-drink-and-eat extravaganza you find today – has its origins in the 1960s. Beer and wine were displacing cider and the sagardotegi, as the houses are called, teetered toward extinction. So they opened their cellars, introducing the winter-harvest party, from January through April, when the previous fall's batches are at their finest.

Today, by-the-book ciders still dominate at the area's 100 or so houses and, according to some critics, can suffer from a stultifying sameness. Typically, the juice ferments in the barrel with nothing added, like sugar or carbonation (as you'd find in many commercial ciders), and it's served unfiltered so nothing is taken away. The result is that musty, barnyard funkiness I tasted earlier. But a few makers looking to get back to their roots have sworn, after years of buying cheaper apples from France and Poland, to use only Basque fruit. And locals keep talking about another sagardotegi, called Astarbe, that produces an extra-fine sparkling variety using the same methods winemakers use in Champagne – something that had never been done here before.





Left to right: Apple juice ferments in chestnut wood; baked cod and potatoes before the crowds descend; barrel hopping at Astarbe.

As I arrive at the Astarbe property, high on a hill swaddled with apple trees, Hur and Joseba Astarbe, the brothers who run the family operation, are preparing for the cidery's Saturday lunch. They tell me their ancestors cultivated their own varieties of apples as far back as the 1560s. Unlike many of their neighbours, who plant modern, hybrid apple trees, the brothers focus on their family's heirloom varieties such as Mendiola and Astarbe. They do all their harvesting by hand, the old-fashioned way, to minimize bruising, yet they aren't opposed to every change. When Hur inherited the cidery, he undertook a 13-year project to make his champagne-style cider.



Left to right: Special delivery; Joseba Astarbe prepares for lunch.

The resulting bottling, first released in 2013, is clearly derived from apples, but finely layered and complex, equal parts tart, dry, buttered-toast yeasty and beautifully sweet. Not surprisingly, it's landed on many wine lists: San Sebastián's Mugaritz and Arzak, both considered among the world's best restaurants, were early supporters, along with the Modern in New York City. For now, Astarbe only produces about 3,000 bottles of sparkling cider a year. But they make plenty of old-style cider too and, as I wander in and out of the barrel cellar, tasting them one by one, I'm happy to learn that they're nearly as delicious as the sparkling stuff.



Left to right: A vintage newspaper clipping shows off Gartziategi's heritage; tapping out: guests sample cider at the source.

When I sit down in the sunlit dining room, the Astarbe brothers have changed from farm clothes into kitchen whites. Joseba works the charcoal grill, called a *brasero*, around which hundreds of rib-eyes as thick as phone books – some of the tastiest beef I've ever had – have been stacked. The place is packed with multigenerational gatherings at nearly every table; one group of about 30 people has come to celebrate a joint bachelor and bachelorette event. (The bride-to-be wears a red polyester matador cape.)

Joining other people's parties, it turns out, is perfectly acceptable in these parts. On one night, I visit Gartziategi, a large and popular cidery housed in a stone barn. Out in the parking lot, a tour bus has just arrived, and I brace myself for a tourist mob, but within minutes a group of locals take me in, sharing their dinner as I wait for mine, and saving me a spot in the cider lines.





Left to right: Lunch is on at Gartziategi; a vintage barrel dwarfs a staffer.

In addition to the omelettes, cheese and quince jelly, Gartziategi serves heaping plates of fried Padrón peppers. By the time my steak comes – an enormous dry-aged T-bone, called a chuletón – my neighbours can't stop ribbing me: "What's the problem, don't people in Canada know how to eat?" As the night rolls on, I realize the occupants of that tour bus are Basques from just across the border in France, and they've come with song sheets and accordions. By the time my cheese course arrives, 150-odd voices fill the room, all of them singing in an ancient language I've never heard spoken live until the day before. Over their song, I hear someone shout out, "Txotx!"

Basque in the moment

Three places to txotx! in Canada



Photo: Kelly Pisiso

Orchard & the Sea

Try funky natural cider from Basque maker Bereziartua and feast on Spanish tortillas, pigs' ears and jamón every Friday and Saturday when Txotx Imports (a start-up devoted to bringing Basque food and drinks to B.C.) hosts [Orchard & the Sea pop-up dinners](#) at Birds & the Beets restaurant in Vancouver's Gastown.

Edulis

A few times a year, Toronto restaurateurs Michael Caballo and Tobey Nemeth host *siderias*, hours-long lunches replete with cider-braised chorizo, wood-fired steaks and their own Basque-style label made with West Avenue craft cidery, [near Hamilton, Ontario](#).

Clementine

Taste Petritegi's signature sip at this [Edmonton bistro](#) (N°5 on our list of Canada's Best New Restaurants), where bartenders pour like pros: bottle held above head, glass below the belt, cider aerating as it cascades in between.

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