





A bartender pours cider in one of San Sebastián's famous pintxo bars. Pintxos—Basque-style tapas—are increasingly popular with tourists, but it's the unique Basque cider that best exemplifies the region's gastronomic history.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MONICA GUMM, LAIF/REDUX

TRAVEL NEWS

Basque Country's cider houses keep an ancient history alive

Apple cider kept Basque sailors afloat during the Age of Exploration. Here's how to experience the effervescent drink in Spain and beyond.

BY ANNE LISE JOLLEY



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With more Michelin stars per capita than any city on Earth, San Sebastián is the gastronomic center of Spain, and possibly the world. And the world has taken notice.

In recent years the city's famous *pintxo* bars (a Basque spin on tapas) have grown increasingly popular with tourists. Local food tours steer groups

during the evening rush. But San Sebastián's culinary heritage includes a potent, older attraction: cider.



Dry, tart, and barely carbonated, this fermented apple cider has a history that dates to pre-Roman times. It's a staple among the Basques, who are a unique ethnic group living within an autonomous community in northern Spain. Basque cider is best enjoyed at a *sagardotegi*—cider house—where a traditional menu pairs with all-you-can-drink cider poured straight from

mammoth barrels. You'll find cider houses in the city as well as dotting the surrounding countryside and in cider-centric villages.

The sagardotegi is central to Basque community and culinary identity. It represents the rustic and self-reliant nature of Basque gastronomy and offers a welcome detour off the pintxo ("pincho") trail. To understand the importance of the cider house, however, you first must travel back in time several hundred years—and then out to sea.



Cider streams from a barrel in Sidrería Barkaiztegi, a Basque cider house where cider has been produced by the same family since 1680.

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Cider-fueled exploration

In the 16th century, around the time that San Sebastián's oldest cider presses were built, Basque sailors dominated the waters and whaling industry of Europe. They set off on voyages to South America and whaling expeditions in the northern Atlantic, hunting whale and cod as far as Newfoundland.

“Basque shipbuilders and navigators were much sought by a diverse group of men from merchants to monarchs, leading them to become invaluable components of the voyages of Columbus, Magellan, and others,” says Christine Bender, who’s researched the Basques for more than 20 years and written three novels based on their adventures at sea. Expert boat builders and navigators, the Basques sailed longer and farther than any

culture of their time

(Go on the hunt with Basque whalers in this detailed illustration.)

At the same time, a disease was ravaging just about every other ship on the Atlantic. While the Basques sailed forth, other European ships lost half their crews on long-haul voyages—not to drowning, but to a mysterious disease that seemed to eat them from the inside out. The culprit was called “the plague of the sea,” which we now know as scurvy. From the 15th to 19th centuries, scurvy killed over two million sailors, more than shipwrecks, storms, combat, and all other diseases combined.

The disease is caused by chronic vitamin C deficiency. After months on open water without fresh produce, sailors would begin to exhibit lethargy, then depression and bruising, then finally bleeding, convulsions, and death. But not the Basques, whose vessels set sail with around 12,000 gallons of cider in their holds. Sailors drank up to three quarts of the fermented beverage per day.

“Cider became the basic drink for the old Basque seamen who practiced coastal fishing in the Middle Ages,” says Pablo Orduna, who teaches history and anthropology at Basque Culinary Center in San Sebastián.

“However, when the vessels improved, they did not replace this supply of apple-based wine with grape wine or beer made with cereals.” The

alcohol content. More importantly, the natural fermentation process preserved the apples' vitamin C content.

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At the time, neither the Basques nor their European counterparts understood how they evaded the drawn-out death scurvy inflicted. “The low rate of scurvy among Basque seamen made many of their colleagues from other parts suspect they had secret pacts with witchcraft or other types of dark arts,” Orduna says.

They may not have understood why, but cider helped establish the Basque maritime legacy. “The importance of this advantage over other sailing enterprises is nearly impossible to exaggerate, since detection of the benefits of citrus fruit, artichokes, and even kelp at staving off this deadly disease was still centuries away,” says Bender.



The Bay of Biscay laps on the shoreline at La Concha, a beach in San Sebastián. Basque sailors were in high demand during the Age of Exploration—partially due to their resistance to scurvy, which came from drinking cider during long months at sea.

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Where sea meets land

The original cider houses were a meeting of land and sea—of the Basque’s pastoral and seafaring identities—right down to a menu of cod omelet and veal steak. Rural and self-reliant Basques gathered in these spaces to share the food they grew and raised. These exchanges helped solidify the Basque culinary identity, one “based on the simplicity and purity of the product,” says Orduna. They fostered social cohesion and “the transfer of culinary know-how, a traditional knowledge of the raw materials and of the preparation methods in the kitchen.”

The modern-day sagardotegi, which saw a resurgence of popularity in the 1980s, continues this tradition of gathering people together over simple and unfussy ingredients native to Basque Country. “Our way to socialize is around the table,” says Ane Basurko Barajuen, a San Sebastián local who hails from a traditional Basque family. “We love to share our food and drinks, and we also like to talk about food and its quality—we all think that we are gastronomic experts and critics.”

(Here’s how the Basques became an autonomous community within Spain.)

Cider season, known locally as *txox* (“choach”) season, runs from January

Through Basque Country's long and wet winters, families and friends huddle together in these tavern-like spaces. Visit a sagardotegi today and you'll be served a menu that is much the same as it's always been: chorizo, peppers, and a cod omelet followed by a slab of sirloin steak. The food is served communally, with everyone eating off the same plate. Walnuts scatter across a checkered tablecloth alongside quince jelly and local Idiazabal cheese.

Of course, there's also cider. Diners receive a wide-mouth glass to refill as often as they like. The call of "Txox!" is diners' cue to head toward a barrel, glass in hand. Employees unstop a small hole in the barrel and let the cider rush out in a thin stream. Diners line up and catch the honey-colored liquid in their glasses one by one.

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"All these details make the cider house a friendly and enjoyable place," says Basurko. "The cider house atmosphere is very informal—you have your table with your group, but the cider barrels are communal and you

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Like the Basque sailors who set off from the coast and traveled as far as Newfoundland, Basque cider has lately made its own transoceanic voyage. Traditional Basque cider is available stateside from producers including [Anxo](#), in Washington D.C., and [Brooklyn Cider House](#), founded by siblings who were converted from wine to cider after a stay in Spanish Basque Country. In Boise, Idaho, the Basque Center's [Oinkari Dancers](#) host authentic sagardotegi dinners.

[\(These Idaho towns celebrate their Basque heritage with an annual running of the sheep.\)](#)

Still, the center of Basque cider land is San Sebastián. During cider season, locals and visitors have their pick of cider houses, from [Barkaiztegi](#) (whose cider has been produced by the same family since 1680) to [Zapiain](#) (the largest Basque cider producer). For those visiting in the off-season, the family-owned [Petrítegi](#) is one of the few establishments open year-round. It's also one of the area's largest and oldest, with a farmhouse press built in 1526.

Orduna says that *sagardotegiak* “are a part of the popular culture, and at the same time a foundation of the knowledge and identity of current top-level Basque gastronomy.” Cider may no longer be necessary to save sailors

adventurous spirit of the Basque people, and the simple, local ingredients that set their food apart in Spain and beyond.

Annelise Jolley is a journalist and essayist who covers food, travel, ecology, and faith. Her work appears in *The Sunday Long Read*, *The Millions*, *EcoTheo Review*, *Hidden Compass*, *Civil Eats*, *Life & Thyme*, and has been noted in *The Best American Travel Writing 2019*.

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