

FOOD + DRINK

You'll fall in love with Basque Country's wild cider traditions

Photo: Sagardoa Route/Facebook

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GERMANY HAS ITS BEER halls, France has its vineyards, and the Basque region of northern Spain has its cider houses. Every year from January to the end of April, the Basque region revolves around cider, or *sagardoa* in the native language. The beverage has been part of local culture for centuries, and it's far from your average cider. Here's where and how to enjoy it.

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Find a cider house.

Cider houses, or *sagardotegi*, pack with locals and a few in-the-know travelers eager for a taste of the year's cider. Conversations at cider houses are periodically punctuated with yells of "txotx" (pronounced "choach") as the tap of a 3,000-plus-gallon barrel is opened and people line up to catch their own drink from the spout. It's a tradition unlike any other and something that should be on everyone's travel to-do list.

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Photo: Sagardoa Route/Facebook

Partake in a thousand year old tradition.

The San Sebastián Tourism Board states that “Proof exists to the effect that the Basques have been familiar with both apples and cider since time immemorial.” Other region-specific sources note that the first record of apple production in the Basque region was in 1014. Regardless of whose history you choose to believe, the Basque cider tradition is many centuries in the making.

In the early years, gatherings at cider houses were for people who would later buy the cider in bulk. Buyers would visit the cider houses to taste from the various barrels, called *kupelas*, and pick which cider they wanted. Each barrel is slightly different depending on the apples thrown in but all are naturally fermented, very lightly carbonated, and tart. Basque cider is also funky tasting with an earthy, straw-like flavor. The taste description is, to put it lightly, off-

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Enjoy it with a hearty meal.

As long as there have been Basque cider houses, there has been Basque cider-house food. Drinking on an empty stomach doesn't lead to the best purchasing decisions, after all, and that's what cider buyers were there to do. Basque cider is low in alcohol (usually around five percent), but surely there are stories out there of some hapless soul who went to buy the year's cider for his tavern on an empty stomach, hit the cider stream one too many times, and left with the wrong order.

Food isn't just a precaution at the *sagardotegis*, though; it's a treat. The Basque region has more Michelin-star restaurants per capita than anywhere in the

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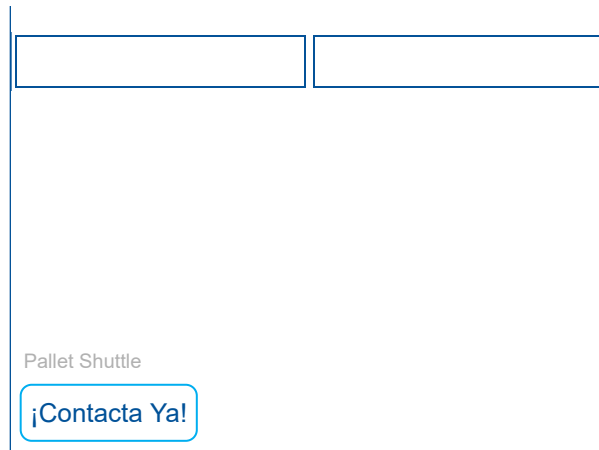
Photo: Sagardoa Route/Facebook

“When I tried ciders in the past, it was just the cider along without the food,” Yi, who spent 25 years as a wine buyer before opening Brooklyn Cider House, says.

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The taste and traditions of Basque cider are unlike anything else once you get the hang of catching it and acclimate to its unique flavors.

“Once you understand this cider, there’s no going back,” Yi says. “The cider is almost like an abstract painting. You can’t go head on with this cider and understand it immediately.”



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The food and convivial atmosphere are great, but cider houses are about cider. That means that when you go, you should know how to get said cider into your glass the correct way.

First things first: stand in line. It may look like an unorganized mass, but there's a pecking order. When it's your turn, approach the stream of cider from the side so as not to get it on yourself. Place your glass underneath the glass of the person in front of you and follow through. You want the cider to hit the side and splash in – it's OK for some to fall to the floor. The cider's natural carbonation means that it has very few bubbles, if any at all. Catching it as it spurts from the barrel aerates it and gives it some life.

It's important to limit how much cider you catch. It tastes best when freshly poured in small doses. (Don't worry, there are plenty of opportunities to get up and try more.)



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town, as well as places accessible by taxi and public transport. Some of the popular *sagardotegis* are Zapiain, Petritegi, and Zelaia. Reservations are suggested but not required. In order to plan out your cider trip best, though, check out the Sagardoa Route, which provides info on 59 cider houses, trips and guided tours, and other cider-related events and Basque cultural experiences.



Photo: Brooklyn Cider House/Facebook

If you can't make it out to Spain, Brooklyn Cider House's 12,000-square-foot cidery and restaurant in the Bushwick neighborhood of Brooklyn offers a taste of *sagardotegis* using apples grown in New York state. 🍷



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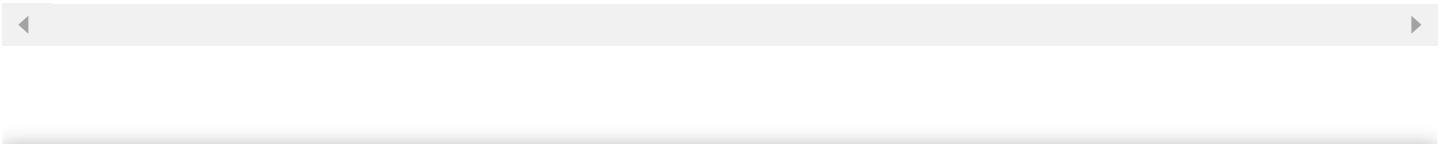
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