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Photo: Iretza Sagardotegia

## **The Basque Country's Golden Rule of Cider**

| by [Dejou Marano](#) | [Bred Locally](#), [CountryBred](#), [Savor & Sip](#)

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In the [Basque Country of northern Spain](#) the act of eating and drinking transcends mere consumption and soars to the heights of something much grander – it becomes an art. To say that eating is as important to the Basque as breathing would certainly not be hyperbole. In the local lifestyle, the experience of breaking bread and sharing a meal is a vital social component of everyday life. Mealtimes are not a solitary activity or a mundane occurrence, but rather the opportunity to celebrate community through shared flavors.



Photo: Olaizola Sagardotegi

In [Basque country](#) eating well and eating fresh is a right not a privilege, and in a land where almost every person regardless of occupation or income is a discerning gastronome, it is no wonder that Basque towns like [San Sebastian](#) have become culinary epicenters for both nouvelle Basque and Spanish cuisine and are illuminated by a glittering constellation of Michelin stars. But the inventive and avant-garde spirit of today's modern Basque cuisine has only been made possible by an understanding and reverence for what came before. The region's culinary heritage and beguiling food traditions, which have been upheld for centuries, have laid the groundwork for young chefs and forward thinking cooks to deconstruct typical Basque flavors and reinterpret them into dynamic new dishes. Some sacred food traditions however, are just too near and dear to the Basque palate to ever be reconstructed. One such tradition is the iconic **Basque sagerdotegi**, or cider house.

Much in the same tradition as the Basque pintxo, the sagerdotegi is best enjoyed amongst the company of good friends in a communal setting where unlimited food, drink and conversation flow. The Basque interpretation of an old fashioned steakhouse, sagerdotegia bring people together to venerate the region's glorious cider while enjoying grilled steaks prepared over hot coals and other regional delicacies including local artisanal cheeses, *membrillo* (quince paste) and nuts.

The tradition is said to have come about when patrons, wishing to sample cider directly from a producer during the wintertime, would bring along food to be cooked at the cider house in order to better enjoy the flavor of the beverage. The sagerdotegi has since evolved into a cornerstone of Basque culinary culture complete with its own dining protocol. The season of the cider house begins in January and ends in April, when cider producers invite diners into their production facilities to sample their latest offerings while enjoying a boisterous meal.



Photo: Bereziartua Sagardotegia

When dining at a cider house, one usually pays a set fee for the meal, which includes a glass to drink unlimited cider from, a first course typically consisting of a cod omelet, a second course of either green peppers with cod or a selection of cured meats like chorizo, a main course of grilled steak and a final course of Idiazabal cheese, nuts and *membrillo*, along with an unlimited supply of fresh bread at the table. Diners eat at long wooden tables located within the cider house, where nearby a large barbeque sizzles away, filling the atmosphere with the smoky aroma of grilled meats. Throughout the meal, a *txotx* (a verbal signal) is called several times, whereupon diners descend into the basement to fill their cups directly from the cider barrel taps. The cider is dispensed in a long and steady, thin stream directly from the tap so as to impart air into the liquid, which helps to bring out the cider's fleeting zesty fizz. Small quantities of the cider are drunk at one time to preserve the integrity of the beverage and bring out the individual and characteristic flavors of each tasting. After guests have sampled enough cider for the moment, they then return to their tables to eat, converse and await the next *txotx*. The cycle continues, golden cider rules and patrons leave at the end of the night feeling happy and full, and eager to repeat the experience as soon as possible.

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#### About the author

Dejou Marano is Co-Founder of CountryBred and Founding Editor of The Bred Blog. Splitting her time between Los Angeles and Europe, Dejou seeks to bring the imagination and wonder of Europe to all travelers through her never-ending pursuit of undiscovered cultural gems and experiences, which she shares through her travel writing.

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