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Finding Anthony Bourdain's 'perfect meal': This is as close as it gets



Ben Groundwater



A huge bone-in rib-eye "txuleta" that's seared until barely rare on a wood-fired grill. Photo: Ben Groundwater

It doesn't get any better than this. The atmosphere is relaxed, probably a degree or two below rowdy. The crowd bubbles and murmurs as it ebbs and flows from the dining area into the barrel room, where people queue to hold out their glasses and catch the brilliant green arcs of cider that come cascading from the wooden tanks.

You have to hold your glass just so to catch it properly. You have to tilt the glass at an angle, make sure the stream of cider is exploding on the lip and then be caught at the bottom.

You don't take too much. You allow your glass to fill maybe an eighth full and then you move it upwards in as dramatic a fashion as possible, letting the person behind you know it's their turn,

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cider house set just outside the Basque town of Astigarraga, a place where patrons eat the old way, standing up at long, wooden tables. It makes for a convivial atmosphere when everyone is upright, it's so easy to mingle, to cross between tables to greet old friends, to shift around to talk to whomever you want to talk to.



When you're thirsty, you gather your squad and head back down to the barrel room, grab an eighth of a glass of funky, sour Basque cider poured as fresh as it gets, and then get back to the eating. Photo: Ben Groundwater

The menu is the same menu served at every Basque cider house, though here it's done exceptionally well: local chorizo and morcilla sausages, grilled and hacked into chunks; a large omelette, dense with salt-cod filling; bacalao fillets topped with caramelised onions and peppers; and a steak, a huge bone-in rib-eye "txuleta" that's seared until barely rare on a wood-fired grill.



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Everything is served family-style, on large plates that everyone eats from. No side plates – you just dive in with your knife and fork on the same platter. When you're thirsty, you gather your squad and head back down to the barrel room, grab an eighth of a glass of funky, sour Basque cider poured as fresh as it gets, and then get back to the eating.

It doesn't get any better than this. Anthony Bourdain, the late chef, TV host and traveller, was always on the hunt for the perfect meal, even though he knew it didn't exist. Perfection is a nebulous concept, he admitted, an unachievable goal. So many stars have to align. But the joy is in the search.

And this, for me, is as close as I've ever come. Maybe the closest I will ever come. The perfect meal.



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For the perfect meal you need good food, and this is good food. It's simple food cooked with skill, a menu ripe with passion and tradition. The people of the Basque Country have been eating this exact thing at cider houses for centuries. The key ingredients speak of their love for the land and the sea.

For the perfect meal you need good company, and I'm sharing this night with my partner, Jess, and two friends we've met while living in San Sebastian, expats like us, people we click with perfectly, people with whom to share the adventure and the weirdness and the wonder.

For the perfect meal you also need a touch of magic, something transcendent sprinkled on the occasion like salt on a steak, something you can't possibly plan or ever hope to repeat. And tonight is magic.

It's the culmination of an incredible year living in a foreign land; it's a chance to realise how much we now know, how much we understand, how much deeper we've managed to go than most other tourists – and how much you need that knowledge to experience a cider house properly. It's the beauty and the thrill of travel, the intense friendships you make, the wild places it takes you, the sheer wonder it exposes you to.

I've eaten better food in my life than Zapiain. I've probably been to more interesting places, too. But as far as a "meal"? As far as our search for perfection?

It doesn't get any better than this.

Zapiain is in Astigarraga, near San Sebastian. It's currently closed, though there are plans to reopen by March. See zapiain.eus

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Ben Groundwater Feb 17 2021

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Matthew Newton

Pais Vasco has delivered some of my most treasured food memories, too. Happy you got such a kick out of it.

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Fiona McDonald

"always on the hunt for the perfect meal" - I am too - just wish animals were not involved

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