

Brooklyn Cider House Is the Basque Cider House America Needs

FOOD & WINE



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(Even if it's not yet what it wants.)

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Though cider often gets lumped in with beer, thanks to the beverage's similar alcohol levels and penchant for being yellow and fizzy, good cider is actually far more like wine.

This idea isn't a matter of taste: It comes down to production. Both wine and cider are a fermented fruit juice: wine, grapes; cider, apples. With wine, however, consumers have come to appreciate things like varieties and appellation. Sadly,

despite becoming a bit more common, you're far less likely to see indications like *Northern Spy apples* and *Finger Lakes, New York*, on a bottle of cider.

Part of what makes this lack of appreciation of cider's origins so frustrating is that, much like visiting a winery, visiting an artisan cidery – seeing the trees and terroir – can be a wonderfully authentic experience. One region where this is especially true is in Astigarraga, an epicenter for Basque-style “sidra.” In this part of Spain, cider has its own culture: Cider houses known as “sagardotegis” all serve very similar house-produced sidras with extremely similar food in very similar atmospheres – and yet, despite all these similarities, almost all of them are enjoyable in their own special way. (It's a bit like how red sauce Italian joint can be both identical yet individual.)

Even more incredible is that, outside of this one small region, sagardotegi culture is found almost nowhere else in the world.

Sure, some of the area's deliciously tart, acidic and funky cider brands are imported into the United States – Petritegi and Zapian are two relatively easy to find and delicious standards – but as for places that serve an authentic Basque cider house meal with, more importantly, the “txotx,” a way of serving cider directly from the barrel, you're unlikely to find it anywhere in America... except for Brooklyn, New York, of course.

Brooklyn Cider House – which opened late last year in the neighborhood of Bushwick after years of planning – does an amazing job of bringing the Basque cider house experience to the U.S. in a complete package. After you push through the large American-style bar and seating area at the entrance, you thankfully arrive at an accurate interpretation of a sagardotegi. On your way to the authentically sparse dining area (this isn't just minimalist Brooklyn chic), you see six massive wooden barrels on your right, and if the doors happened to be pulled back, on your left, you'll see an equally impressive room full of large silver fermenting tanks. Often times, Basque cideries will serve cider from both barrel and tank, and Brooklyn Cider House is conveniently set up to do the same. The actual dining area is all-natural wooden tables, just like Spain, and includes enough large communal tables to hammer home the group appeal of a traditional Basque cider house.

The menu, almost painfully streamlined by American standards, is actually a dead ringer for what you'll find in Astigarraga, albeit with some fitting American twists. Brooklyn Cider House essentially only offers its standard "Basque Sagardotegi Prix-Fixe" menu: Grilled Vegetables & Chorizo, Tortilla de Bacalao, Cowboy-style Ribeye Steak, and a final course of Manchego, Membrillo & Walnuts – as well as cider – for a reasonable \$49. If you find that option constraining, know this: Brooklyn Cider House actually goes out on a limb (by Basque standards) and offers a vegetarian version of this prix-fixe as well that substitutes in things like a cauliflower steak instead of the ribeye.

Though Susan Yi, one of the three founders of the cidery, said they debated between the merits of authenticity versus a more typical American menu, they eventually decided to stick with all the things that intrigued them about Basque cider houses to begin with.

"A traditional restaurant offering may have broader appeal, but we wanted our concept to have a razor sharp focus," she told me. "The simplicity of the menu and ingredients help to showcase the versatility of our raw ciders. This simplicity is consistent with our cider brand, which is about highlighting the quality of the raw ingredients, the pureness in flavor, and simple processes."

Of course, when you only serve one thing, it behooves you to serve it well, and luckily Brooklyn Cider House has no problem in that department. Admittedly, though the cider-braised chorizo doesn't quite reach the apple juice-oozing decadence of the best Basque-style sausages, it was still enjoyable. From there, however, things were impeccable. The Spanish-style omelet was soft and filled with salty, fishy goodness. The steak was perfectly charred and, despite only using salt, seasoned wonderfully. Even the manchego and walnuts were well sourced.

My biggest quibble – and this may seem like a major one – was with the cider experience. But actually, this is the area where, for now, I am most willing to let them slide. The prix-fixe includes "cider catching from the barrels in between courses," a process that in Basque country is known as the "txotx." Someone from the cidery opens a spout in the side of a barrel, a stream of cider goes flinging towards the floor, and guests are encouraged to catch as much as they like in

their cider glass lest the flying cider goes to waste down a drain. In Basque Country, the txotx is more or less a free-for-all: Go grab your cider whenever you please. Brooklyn Cider House tries to control this process a bit more – in part, they say, because of more stringent U.S. liquor laws – with servers leading you to and from the barrels and a Cider House employee talking you through the actual txotx process. For seasoned “txotx-ers,” this can be a bit frustrating, but Yi explained that very few people who come in are sagardotegi veterans, so, in turn, all the hand-holding actually makes people feel more comfortable with the experience.

As for the cider itself, unfortunately, none of the three iterations I tried from the barrel offered the acetic, funky delights of the Basque cider on the other side of the Atlantic. This isn’t to say the ciders were bad; all of them were drinkable, and importantly, weren’t just your standard Strongbow-style stuff. But they just weren’t quite revelatory.

But again, Yi openly admitted that Brooklyn Cider House, as a cider brand, was still learning. They only started out four years ago. Meanwhile, the aforementioned Petritegi cider house traces its history back to the 16th century.

“I don’t doubt that we will come out with a batch of cider that more closely resembles some of my favorite Basque ciders, but I don’t think that that is our goal,” Yi explained. “We’re more interested in discovering the flavors of our fruit and the nuances our native yeasts and microbes impart and working hard to bring out the best of what raw materials we have. I don’t doubt that, with more experience, with more active yeasts and bacteria in our cidery, and with our farm in full production (in a few years), our ciders will improve. We’re new to this game and eager to continue learning and gaining influences and inspiration in all walks of our lives. For now, I’m really excited and proud of what we’ve created so far, which is a really interesting raw, natural ciders, heavily influenced by the Spanish cider tradition.”

So oddly enough, along those same lines, Brooklyn Cider House’s shortcomings are just as much part of the reason I suggest you go as are its successes. Attempting to put a true Basque-style cider house in the urban landscape of Bushwick, Brooklyn, was a wild risk that took an insane amount of vision,

dedication and heart. The founders behind it had to have known it might not work with an American audience, and after visiting, I'm still not sure if it will or not. But what worries me is that they'll choose to give up on what works – things like the delicious traditional menu – before the things that don't quite work, like the still maturing cider program, bring everything together. A couple years down the road, I can imagine Brooklyn Cider House being a Spanish bastion in the middle of New York City; and that might come down to whether they get the support they need.

So, my suggestion: Go to Brooklyn Cider House as soon as possible to take in this authentic experience because it's being done right, and also if you want to lend your support to their vision for the future, which could be even better.