

Drinking a Little From Huge Barrels, But Drinking It Often

By [John Ward Anderson](#)

Washington Post Foreign Service

Tuesday, February 20, 2007; Page A07

ASTIGARRAGA, Spain It's a beautiful winter afternoon in Spain's Basque Country. Up a steep dirt driveway, an apple grove on one side and traditional wooden barns on the other, buses and cars are parked everywhere, but not a soul is in sight.

A low rumble and a faintly acidic smell come from some timber-beamed buildings up ahead. No mistaking: There are a lot of people inside, and judging from the whooping and hollering and unrestrained song, they are having a seriously good time.

Inside the Petritegi cider house, a group of newcomers arriving at about 3 p.m. is immediately embraced by a stranger and invited to join his group -- a band of 15 guys celebrating an upcoming marriage with several hours of indulgence at a traditional Basque gathering place.

An afternoon or evening at a cider house, which is similar in spirit to a Bavarian beer hall, is a seasonal ritual that begins in January with the opening of the first kegs of cider made from the fall's apple harvest. For the next three or four months, Spaniards flock to these family-run, communal establishments in the rugged foothills just outside the coastal town of San Sebastian.

The cider houses are steeped in tradition, chief among them being all the hard cider you can drink, accompanied by massive amounts of food and camaraderie.

"In [France](#), they make a huge fuss over food and it's very sophisticated, but the Basque think cooking is a way of understanding life, and they don't talk about it, they simply celebrate it and take it for granted," explains Borja Mateo, 29, a lawyer and brother of the husband-to-be.

He yells to be heard over the background commotion of several hundred diners crammed

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Urko Torre, right, serves hard cider during a Basque ritual that includes massive amounts of food and camaraderie. (By John Ward Anderson — The Washington Post)

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around long, wooden picnic tables that seat as many as 50 people.

Around the building stand more than a dozen huge chestnut barrels, about 10 feet high and 15 feet long, each holding as much as 4,400 gallons of cider. People crowd around the barrels, demonstrating the essential cider house etiquette: Customers fill their own glasses, but only a little at a time, because the cider loses its taste if it is not consumed soon after pouring.

So while the glasses are large, and in theory could hold about three cups of cider, no glass has more than about an inch or two of the cloudy, yellowish liquid at the bottom. The alcohol content is about 6 percent, slightly more than a typical beer.

Another rule, explains Urko Torre, 27, who has worked at the Petritegi three years: When pouring, "You have to tilt the glass and break the cider on the side to oxygenate it" and give it some fizz.

During the day, a competition evolves, with admirers watching people demonstrate the proper and most extreme pouring techniques. Some assume a catcher's crouch six or eight feet away, their glasses almost touching the floor, as the barrel tap is opened and a powerful, thin stream of cider arches into the room, to be captured artfully (or not) in the glass. Others employ a bowler's style: arm straight, glass by the ankle, then swinging it upwards along the stream in one smooth motion with an exaggerated follow-through.

The traditional cider house feast is delivered to every table, beginning with spicy chorizo-style sausage made with apples, then cod omelets, followed by cod fillets sprinkled with nuggets of garlic fried in pools of olive oil or buried under mountains of sautéed green peppers. About two hours into the meal come platters of huge juicy steaks, and finally plates of cheese and quince jelly with bowls of walnuts.

The meal is a study in constant motion. Diners must get up, all the time, to refill their glasses, because a key cider house rule is to drink a little, but drink it often.

Although the focus is on food and drink, the essence of the cider house experience is fellowship. Large groups come for celebrations, families have reunions, friends meet to catch up, and they all mingle together in a boisterous explosion of fraternity.

There are no plates. Everyone eats off the communal platters, sharing tables and food -- and sometimes knives, forks, napkins and glasses as well. Tables often erupt in spontaneous song and hoopla.

During cider season, Petritegi usually is sold out for lunch and dinner -- about 500 people for each sitting, according to Ainara Otano, daughter of the owner. The character of the cider depends on the blending of the apples and the weather. "There was a lack of rain this year, so the apples were drier. But the cider is good -- fruity and round," she said.

At about 6 p.m., thin streams of black smoke are drifting up from the chimneys outside. The singing and shouting continue as families and friends gather in the parking areas for a final picture. And the meaning of the traditional Basque song that fills the air achieves new clarity:

Barrel, Barrel,

Hotel of cider.

Barrel, Barrel,

Let's fill our stomach.

Barrel, Barrel,

Look after yourself!