

Spain's top 10 cider houses

In Britain, we try to tax a great rural tradition, but in the Basque region cider houses still rule and people venture out into the hills to eat, drink and be merry

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Barrels of fun ... cider houses are one of the hidden dining gems of the Basque country.
All photographs: Andrew Hickman

There was a public outcry in Britain when Labour tried to raise the duty on cider by 10% in the last budget culminating in a Facebook campaign, [Leave Our Cider Alone](#), and a decision to shelve the tax before the dissolution of parliament.

But in the Basque country, the only cry that goes up in cider season from January to April is "ccchhotch" ("txotx" in the local language), which means to break out the cider. At which point, people duck through small doorways in farmhouses and emerge in cavernous rooms filled with enormous chestnut barrels, their glasses tilted towards a fine flow of wheat-coloured cider.

Historically, the sagardotegias (cider houses) nestled in the hills around San Sebastián only sold one thing - Basque ciders are flatter than their European counterparts and less alcoholic, typically between five and six per cent. Then in the 1970s, gastronomic clubs on day trips to buy cider brought their own food and cooked it.

Nowadays, cider houses are one of the hidden dining gems of the Basque country, serving a variation on a menu of chorizo cooked in cider, salt-cod omelette, fresh cod fried with peppers, char-grilled T-bone steaks, walnuts and Idiazábal sheep's cheese – all for around €30 with unlimited cider. Here are 10 of the best cider houses around San Sebastián.

"Every cider house has its own personality," explains Zelaia's owner José Antonio Gainerain. Zelaia would best be described as gregarious and family-orientated to the core. Diners are served up classic cider house fare cooked by José Antonio's wife Nati and delivered by his daughter Oihana. A student of agricultural technology, Oihana is determined to modernise cider making without losing the traditional ritual. As such, there isn't a chair in sight and cider is released from the barrels by drawing out a thin txotx (peg) rather than by turning a tap. The brew is as convincing as the food, well-balanced and gently acidic.

- Open Jan - Apr. Martindeji Auzoa 29, 20120 Hernani; +34 943 555851; zelaia.es.

2. Lizeaga



The Lizeaga twins

Hidden in a 16th-century farmhouse, Lizeaga is one of the region's oldest and most atmospheric cider houses. Escape the outside view of a newly built motorway bridge by entering a dimly lit, low-ceilinged dining room where baguettes signal bookings on long wooden tables. The Lizeaga twins are the fourth-generation of cider makers and have built a clever tunnel linking the old farmhouse to the newer cellar building. Move on from the barrels to taste the house speciality, tortilla de bacalao, which comes out steaming and soft in the middle.

- Open all year. Gartziategi Baserria, 20115 Astigarraga; +34 943 468290.

3. Gurutzeta



Cider pouring

Climb the steep steps in Gurutzeta on a Wednesday evening and you'll hear the singing of an Otxote (Basque male choir). Singing for their dinner, Otxote Eguzkilo includes doctors, teachers and engineers who replenish their cider glasses before returning to eat. A regular at Gurutzeta, culinary guide Jon Warren of San Sebastián Food explains the reason why people angle their glasses when cider is poured. "Breaking the stream of cider on the edge of the glass allows the cider to oxidise, releasing the natural flavours and aromas."

- Open Jan - Apr. Oialume Bidea, 63, 20115 Astigarraga; +34 943 552242; gurutzeta.com.

4. Zapiain



The loading bay for lorries behind Zapiain is testament to its commercial orientation. Only five per cent of its cider is drunk during the txotx season, the rest is sold to supermarkets and a small amount is exported to America. Egoitz Zapiain, one of the heirs to the business, plots the label's expansion during the day and works as the

txotxero, opening the barrels in the evening. "I like to start people off with the easier drinking ciders before moving on to the slightly more acidic ciders later on," he says. Renowned for consistently high-quality cuisine, early booking is essential.

- Open Jan - Apr. Kale Nagusia 96, 20115 Astigarraga; +34 943 330033.

5. Petretegi



Cider catching at Petretegi

Regularly fully booked (which is saying something if your restaurant seats over 700), family-owned Petretegi is one of the few to offer self-serve cider all year round, thanks in part to their staggering 15,000-litre chestnut barrels. It has an electric atmosphere when busy and the price includes wine as well as cider. The homemade sherberty apple sorbet is worth the extra €2.

- Open all year. Petreitegi Bidea, 20115 Astigarraga; +34 943 457188; petritegi.com.

6. Mina



Bacalao con pimientos

Mina is perched above the small town of Astigarraga with impressive views of the surrounding countryside. It's a difficult landscape for modern farming machinery, which is one reason why apples are brought in from Asturias, Galicia and Normandy to meet the demand of cider makers. Mina is best at bacalao en salsa verde, cod cooked in a parsley-laden sauce, served with potatoes.

- Open Jan - Apr. Txoritokieta Bidea 50; 20115 Astigarraga; +34 943 555220.

7. Altzueta

Just down the road, in Hernani, the cider house Altzueta is the birthplace of Florentino Goiloetxea who, during the second world war, helped hundreds of air crew cross the border from Nazi-occupied Ipparalde (French Basque country). His nephew Juan serves up no-nonsense cider house staples to diners who stand beside the barrels.

- Open Jan - Apr. Barrio Osinaga 7, 20128 Hernani; +34 943 551502; altzuetasagardotegia.com.

8. Larre-gain



Queso y membrillo at Larre-gain

Follow the river out of Hernani and resist any instincts to turn back as you bare left up a steep incline. Owners José and Ixabel have an eye for details, the unusual aperitivo of anchovies plays off brilliantly against the sweetness of the cider. Order ahead if you'd like cod in salsa verde and leave some space for generous servings of cheese, quince jelly and almond biscuits.

- Open Jan - Apr. Ereñozu Auzoa 58, 20120 Hernani; +34 943 55 58 46.

9. Alorrenea



Steaks on the grill at Alorrenea

One of the few cider houses to open for lunch on weekdays, what Alorrenea lacks in charm, it makes up for in unpretentious hospitality. Owner Javier Mariz wields a hefty cleaver in front of an open barbeque. The plate-sized T-bone steaks have crimson centres.

- Open all year. Petritegi Bidea 4, 20115 Astigarraga; +34 943 336999; alorrenea.com.

10. Calonge

A boxy modern building on the Igueldo hill overlooking San Sebastián, purists don't see Calonge as a "true" sagardotegia. But with stunning views of the Bay of Biscay and a maze-like cellar out back, it's worth a visit. The menu goes beyond the traditional cider house offering and chairs are a welcome relief to weary legs.

- Open all year. Gurutzeta baserria, Orkolaga paseoa 8, 20008 San Sebastián; +34 943 213251.