



Drinks Atlas: Basque Cider

STORY: [KATRINA YENTCH](#) | ILLUSTRATION: [MATTY NEWTON](#) | November 20, 2023



Before you challenge cider's historic credentials compared to beer and wine, consider this: At a time in history when alcoholic beverages were safer than water, humans were keen to ferment anything they could get their hands on; apples were simply another ingredient in that spectrum of fermentation.

For regions ill-suited to wine grapes, this "anything goes" approach was one of necessity. Take Euzkadi, or Basque Country, whose ships launched from the ports of Bilbao and Bermeo with barrels of cider on board—only to be refilled with whale oil. "Sailors would drink liters of cider a day instead of water, and as the barrels were emptied, they would kill a whale and fill the barrel with whale oil," says Jasper Smith, co-founder of the Basque-inspired [Son of Man Cider](#) in Cascade Locks, Oregon. "Drinking cider was safer than water, and fended off scurvy at sea."

Basque Country's cider production has since become a representation of identity and culture, marked with a history that spans generations of family-owned sagardegos, or cider houses. Apples from the Basque Country have pronounced acidity, and a bitterness that sets them apart from apples anywhere else in the world. The resulting cider has a distinctive sourness, which Smith emphasizes mustn't be confused with the funk of natural wines. "I think Basque cider was nutty wine before nutty wine got cool," he says. The apples maybe fermented with wild yeasts, but "producers are not trying to make funky things." Basque Country ciders have a vast spectrum of complex flavors that range from olive brine to lychee and pineapple. "They're trying to make something that's really fresh and vibrant," he says, "tropical, yet salty and high-acid."

Basque ciders also offer plenty of opportunities for pairing. "Cider is always consumed with food in Spain. People drink it on its own, too, and that's normal. But it really shines with the meal," Smith says. "It has a lower ABV than wine, but it also has this palate-cleansing ability to keep you ready for the next bite."

Fun Facts

- The Cordonata Natural Cider Association estimates there are more than 1,000 varieties of apples grown in Basque Country, but currently only about 14 varieties have been approved by the Spanish Sagarbata Designation of Origin, including Heala, Errota, and Urdin.
- Don't try to order a cider: Smith says they run a meal schedule of apps and should be enjoyed within the first year of purchase.
- Despite the region's size (i.e., just under 2,800 square miles), Basque Country produces about 1.3 billion liters of cider annually, of which nearly 90 percent is produced in the Euzkadi province around San Sebastián.

5 TO TRY

SON OF MAN'S CLUB SAGARDO

Son of Man's Club Sagardego membership brings a curated selection of lesser-known, small-batch Basque ciders to the States, plus their own limited releases. "Not only do members get to enjoy cider no one else in the country has tasted, they get to experience the full breadth of flavor the style has to offer," Smith says. \$50-\$160. [sonofman.co](#)

ISASTEGI SAGARDO NATURALA

"This was the first Basque cider we ever tasted, and our gateway into obsession," says Smith of Isastegi. Located in the town of Tolosa, the family-run estate has been producing cider since the 17th century. Produced using traditional methods, it's simply dry and refreshing. \$15.95/750 ml. [isastegisagardego.com](#)

BARRIKA

The Artabazaran family has been making cider since 1880, and their Barrika is a recent export available in the States. "David Castorena has been working with the [Iruin Cider House](#) in Basque Country to produce this Import Label," says Smith. Tart and dry with a saline finish, "it's clean, delicious, and a great entry-point Basque cider." \$12/750 ml. [davesiruinbox.com](#)

ZAPIAIN PREMIUM SIDRA BASQUE CIDER

Despite Zapain's status as one of the largest producers in the region, Smith notes that "Zapain consistently pumps out award-winning product." Made exclusively with indigenous apple varieties, the cider has a fresh green apple flavor and a lingering, pleasant acidity. \$15.50/700 ml. [zapainbasque.com](#)

R. ZABALA BASQUE SIDRA

Produced in the foothills above San Sebastián, R. Zabala ciders are made with estate-grown apples and spontaneous fermentation. Smith fondly recalls magical dinners at the cider house. "Depending on the year, it can be a little funky, but it's always fun and delicious." \$17.49/750 ml. [r.zabala.com](#)

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KATRINA YENTCH

Katrina Yentch is a freelance journalist and copywriter and a former editor at Imbibe. She was previously the managing digital editor at Sierra Magazine, and has been featured for food writing within the Eater network, Bon Appetit, Food 52, and more.

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