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# Gastrotourism in San Sebastián, Spain

By Paul Richardson



At Bar Zeruko

“Can you smell that? This is really how a leek should smell,” says Lourdes Erquicia, encouraging us to get up close and personal with the seasonal produce on a farmer’s stall outside San Sebastián’s La Bretxa market.

Erquicia points out a bag of the tiniest possible peas – a cult item in the Basque country, where they are known as “tears” and sell for as much as €600 per kilo (“we compare them to caviar,” she says) – before leading us into the market for a crash course in fine Basque ingredients, from *chistorra* sausage to hake cheeks and green chillies in vinegar.

It is an example of gastrotourism in one of the European cities where such a concept makes greatest sense. Our small group hails mainly from Australia. The tour we have signed up for is organised by San Sebastián Food, an outfit run by an Englishman, 34-year-old Jon Warren, and staffed mainly by Basques. What we all have in common is an interest in the culinary life of a city where food and drink, rather than museums and sights, represent an increasingly powerful tourist draw.

Erquicia leads us off to a show kitchen attached to a restaurant where we spend the rest of the morning learning the art of the *pintxo* – the Basque refinement of the Spanish *tapa*, which San Sebastián has taken to the heights of global gastronomic fame. (*Pintxo* means thorn or spike, a reference to the cocktail sticks or skewers often used to hold them together). Under the guidance of Gregory Schaefer, a sparky young American chef and passionate enthusiast for the local cuisine, we whip up a *pintxo* feast of octopus with potatoes and *pimentón*, pork sirloin with caramelised onions, wild mushrooms scrambled with parsley and garlic, and *gildas*. The latter is a Basque classic of pickled peppers, anchovy and olives all packed on to a cocktail stick.



San Sebastián Food's passport to pintxos

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That evening I hit the Parte Vieja (old town), where innumerable *pintxo* bars await. I am travelling alone but hold a “Pintxo Passport” from San Sebastián Food. Initially at least, the hermetic nature of Basque culture and language can make the *pintxo* experience slightly forbidding, but the mocked-up passport provides a fast-track route into a fascinating world.

Six bars in the Parte Vieja are included, and the route can be tackled in one go, or in more than one session. The food and drink is covered in the €75 per head cost of the passport – holders just hand over a wooden token at each bar they visit.

The passport also contains details of the snacks and wines to seek out in each venue, plus sections on *pintxo* etiquette and history, a glossary of culinary terms, and even a list of Basque expressions, should you be brave or foolish enough to try them.

I stride into the old town’s cross-hatch of rain-darkened streets feeling not just a raging appetite but also a surge of confidence. Walking into a real Basque bar and ordering a drink can still occasionally remind me of the pub scene in *An American Werewolf in London*. Armed with the passport, however, I feel emboldened. At Goiz-Argi on the calle Fermin Calbetón, my first port of call, the passport tells me the bartenders “are always smiling and looking for someone to go out and share a few drinks with”. I’m not sure I want to go that far but they do seem friendly, smiling as they pour me a big glass of *txakoli*. This Basque white wine, once regarded as a thin and acid plonk, has recently improved and become wildly fashionable.

“*Uno de gambas!*” the cry goes up, and out of the kitchen comes Goiz-Argi’s famous skewer of prawns, sizzled on the *plancha* and coated in a deliciously oily vinaigrette, plus a plate of tiny green *padrón* peppers. I wolf these down along with the wine. Meanwhile, the barman stamps my passport and drops my wooden token in a special box. I wonder about ordering more but the passport advises that locals usually take only one or two *pintxos* in each bar. And I have five more to visit. *Pintxo* culture is about being on foot and on the move.

At Borda Berri, a shy English speaker is rustled out of the kitchen to deal with me. Here, I notice, there is no bartop spread of mayonnaise-rich delights: this is a *pintxo* temple whose serious take on the form has led them to do away with such frivolities. A sign on the wall says sternly “*Aki se Guisa*” (here we cook). Like its sister establishment La Cuchara de San Telmo – a modern classic but sadly not included in the passport route – Borda Berri specialises in cooked *pintxos* of a savouriness that is nearly addictive – witness the griddled octopus with quince and the unctuous beef *carrilleras* (cheeks), slow-braised in red wine.



Five more glasses of wine and eight *pintxos* later, I reflect on the evening’s highs and lows. There was a scrumptious spider crab tartlet at Ganbara, and the *gilda* that preceded it was a notable improvement on my own efforts. The tender slab of sirloin with sea salt and green pepper at Gandarías was memorable. My only quibble about the evening lies in the uneven nature of the route, which takes me from top-flight gastro glories such as Txepetxa and Ganbara to a raucous strip-lit joint called La Mejillonera – fun in its way but a cheap and cheerful hang-out where students go to snaffle *patatas bravas*, mussels in spicy sauce, and deep-fried *calamares* washed down with cider.

*Pintxo* tourism may be the core business but San Sebastián Food has expanded into ham-cutting masterclasses, sherry tastings, baking workshops, Michelin-starred dining tours, as well as the secret world of the Basque gastronomic societies. When I first met Warren, in late 2011, he was working out of one room on the calle Aldamar, between La Bretxa market and the sea. On Monday, though, as the city celebrates the festival of its patron saint, the company will officially launch a rather more luxurious base, within the Maria Cristina, arguably the grandest of Spain’s grand hotels. An area in the basement that was formerly a spa has become the centre of operations (complete with a demonstration kitchen, wine-tasting room, pantry, bar and lounge), while a retail outlet by the main entrance has been turned into a high-end deli.

On its shelves (beside a €1,000 hamper) I see *turrónes* from Gorrotategi, *flor de sal* from the Añana valley, and the babyiest of baby broad beans from Jaime Burgaña in Getaria, famed supplier of micro-veg to the holders of 24 Michelin stars. It says something about the city that what must be its most covetable retail location is selling not jewellery but vegetables.

In a corner of the shop hangs an office suit and tie – a symbol of the life its owner left behind. Originally from Kent, Warren spent four years as a stockbroker in the City of London. In 2008 he quit his job and headed for Spain. Why San Sebastián? “I had been here before, with a mate, on the way down to Portugal during my gap year. I remember thinking, ‘I could live here some day,’” he tells me.

At the same time, a reduction in activity by Eta, the militant Basque separatist organisation, had begun to bring international tourism back to the city, while the global media were just cottoning on to its world-beating culinary culture. An early stint as a bellboy at the hotel Villa Soro, giving bewildered guests informal advice on the city’s best *pintxo* bars, told Warren there was a gap in the market.

You might think the locals resentful, or at least suspicious, of this Englishman purporting to teach the world about their food. In fact, the opposite seems to be true, and it helps that Warren is a real outsider – a non-Basque Spaniard might have had a much tougher time. In this complex and still battle-scarred society, the importance of good food is the one thing everyone can agree on.

Paul Richardson was a guest of San Sebastián Food, [sansebastianfood.com](http://sansebastianfood.com)

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