

# The New Zealand Herald

## Bar/fly: Cider houses rule

By [Ewan McDonald Ewan](#)

11:00 AM Wednesday May 22, 2013

**In the Basque Country, Ewan McDonald learns the cider houses rule.**



Illustration / Rod Emmerson

### Where are we?

San Sebastian, on the Atlantic Coast in the north of Spain. Or, as the locals prefer to call it, the Basque Country. And they prefer to call the city Donostia, too.

### Why are we here?

Take your pick. Surfing, swimming or sunbathing on three gorgeous beaches at the bottom of the main street. One of Europe's best film festivals. It'll be European Capital of Culture in 2016. The cuisine: three Michelin three-star and one Michelin two-star restaurants - two of them in the world's top 10 - in a city of 180,000. The world's best female chef and the chef's choice as the planet's best cook. That's like going out to eat in Hamilton and ... you know where that's going. However, we forgot to book three months ahead, even though it's nowhere near summer. How about this: the town is said to have more bars per head than any other city in the world. Mind you, they claim that in Kilkenny, too.

### So we go for a drink, then find a restaurant?

No. We go to a bar and try some pinxtos. Then we go to another bar and try some more.

Then we ...

Got the picture. Bar food. Tapas, huh?

No. Tapas come from Seville in the south and are pretty basic. Pinxtos - pronounced "pin-chose" - are the Michelin three-star version.

Haute cuisine in miniature.

### When should we go?

The kitchens usually open around 12.30pm, just before the shops and offices close, until 4pm. Then on the way home after work around 6pm. Then before the movies, or after the movies. Or before bed, around 2am.

### What's the dress code?

You should lose the Real Madrid top.

### Does it matter where we go?

Hell yes. Best to hit Calle 31 de agosto in the Old Town, which has five of the best: Atari, Gandarias, Martinez, A Fuego Negro and La Cuchara de San Telmo. Txuleta in Plaza Trinidad and Ganbara in Calle de San Jeronimo, just around the corner, are pretty hot too. There's a number of websites that not only list the hot spots, they keep up with the ever-changing menus and run votes for each week's top 10.

### Any recommendations?

Some of these are signature dishes, so you can expect to meet them on the counter for years - meltingly tender beef cheeks with rich, red gravy and puree potato at Atari; solomillo, slices of sirloin topped with fried green peppers on crisp bread at Gandarias; ham and artichoke in deep-fried croquettes at Martinez; with a special mention for the platter of pimientos de padron, fried green peppers drenched in salt, at La Cepa. Those are pretty traditional. A Fuego Negro and La Chuchara take the theme into nouvelle cuisine. Seared foie gras with apple compote, a miniature wagyu burger on a ketchup bun with fried banana "txips". Sorry, chips. This is seafood country - or rather, mariscos. Razor clams. Salty barnacles.

### What's the form?

Walk into the bar, check out the array of platters along the counter - that's usually the cold options - then suss out what's on the hot plates. It'll be on a blackboard. Pick a couple, but pace yourself. It could be a long night. The Basques have a word for it.

### Which is?

Txikiteo. You asked.

### And a glass of red wine, of course?

No way. You eat these with a shot of the local cider. And that means shot - it's less than a glass of wine in our bars,

poured overarm from the bottle into the glass from 1.5m above. The barmen insist the high pour is necessary to get the taste out. Funny taste at first - it's flatter, yeastier and less alcoholic than you'd expect. Pure apple, too. None of your feijoa or boysenberry muck.

#### Any other advice?

Learn the words for various foods so you can order what you like and get a variety. Take your time at each place, but get around several places in an evening. Don't try to con the staff about how many little plates you've eaten. They know. Oh, and ...

#### Don't call them tapas?

Right.

*Ewan McDonald travelled to San Sebastian with Insight Vacations and Singapore Airlines.*

### Explore destinations

[Africa](#)

[Antarctica](#)

[Arctic](#)

[Asia](#)

[Australia](#)

[Caribbean](#)

[Central America](#)

[Europe](#)

[Middle East](#)

[New Zealand](#)

[North America](#)

[Pacific](#)

[South America](#)

### Find destinations

Enter a city, region or country

Search

### Travel



#### A Himalayan flight full of fear

[Nepal](#)



#### Travel deals of the week

[Vanuatu](#)



#### Waiheke Island named in top 10 South Pacific islands list

[Waiheke Island](#)



#### Italy: Take your patience with you

[Italy](#)



#### Ask Lonely Planet: Family friendly exploring in the South Island



#### Vivid Sydney - day one

### Travel Photos

[Previous](#)

[Next](#)