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## A Good Time for Cider

By LISA ABEND Monday, Jul. 16, 2007

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*Txotx!* with a cry, Gabriel Lizeaga pulls a tiny stick — the txotx itself — from the face of an immense wooden barrel. A thin

stream of straw-colored liquid carves an arc several feet long through the air and into a waiting glass. One by one, Lizeaga's clients remove themselves from their lively conversations and platters of fried cod, and make their way over to fill their glasses. "In the past, you would come just to try the new cider," says one reveler. "Now it's a big party."

And everyone's invited. From January until early May, txotx season — named after that all-important little stick — takes over this part of Spain's Basque region. Cider houses in the Gipuzkoa countryside around San Sebastián open their doors to a convivial ritual that is at once deeply Basque and thoroughly welcoming. The best place to experience it is Astigarraga, three miles (5 km) south of the city. During the txotx, this small town is cider central, with 17 cider houses ranging from the intimate Lizeaga to the large, beam-ceilinged Petritegi.

The ritual originated when cidemakers began offering restaurants and culinary societies the chance to place orders for that year's vintage before it was bottled. Potential clients would bring their own food to help offset the lightly alcoholic effects of the cider. But for the past few decades, the cider houses have done the catering. For around \$40 a head, patrons can enjoy all the cider they can drink and a set menu of salt-cod omelette, salt cod with peppers or immense grilled steaks, followed by local Idiazabal cheese served with quince and walnuts — all eaten standing up from shared platters.

"You stand so that you can go over to the barrels more easily," says Arantxa Eguzkiza, president of the Gipuzkoa Natural Cider Association, as she joins in the fun at Petritegi. "And because it's more communal." Indeed, most every aspect of the txotx is about community — from the way patrons scrunch around tables to make room for latecomers, to the tight lines they form at the barrel to make sure not a drop is missed of the pale, naturally effervescent liquid as it travels from tap to glass. When Petritegi's owner opens a new barrel, a crowd quickly gathers around it. Watching a group of Brazilian tourists laugh with some older local men as they wait to get their drinks, Eguzkiza smiles approvingly: "At the txotx, everyone is friends for the night."

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