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Cider makes life rosy



The Grand Plage at Biarritz

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A meal with a glass of the local speciality? Try the Basque region for traditional hosi
Frederic Manby

Cider farm restaurants are a regional peculiarity in the Basque country. Sebastian Za Oyarbide is one of several traditional cider producers who put on food in the town of , the Basque region.

“No. Not Spain, It’s Basque” insisted Pantxoa Daguerre, who has his apples crushed autumn by Sebastian Zabalegui. We’d come over the border from the Daguerre hous in French Pays Basque. With us were the majority of the Ainhoa choir in which Pantx conducted by his wife Marilys – like him the possessor of a stunning voice. These au farm restaurants are only open in the start of the year – serving cider straight from the into your glass. It comes out in an arc and is caught in the glass. Then, from April, th

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Last year, the Daguerras produced 10,000 bottles of their dry, tart drink. It's quite different from the softer ciders of north-west France, with similarities to some of the dry ciders from the UK. It has its own drinking ritual, requiring it to be poured from the bottle or spur barrel from a great height into the glass – enough for a few good swigs. The pouring creates a fine aeration. You have a refill as required.

There is a cultural identity here which is absent from many other parts of western Europe. In this region, it is almost a secret – not like the commercial all-year cider restaurants in tourist areas. Locals are sniffy about these cider houses but I went to one last autumn and it was full of decent food (though usually not the “proper” menu) and a conviviality with fellow ciders. The food is different, the cider may be in a fake barrel but you will get an impression of the real thing. Oyarbide is the real thing. It is up a lane at the back of the village. A wood fired grill is in the farmyard. A small door lets into the cider cellar or barn – three adjoining rooms stacked with huge old barrels holding several thousand litres each.

Long tables and benches complete the picture.

It is a ritual menu: cod omelette, then salt cod with green peppers, then chuleta – a steak cooked over wood outside. It is cut up and shared round, no plates, just forks and knives and bread. It feels very special. The food is interrupted by trips to one of the cider barrels, by Sebastian Zabalegui with the cry of “txotx” – literally, the name of the spike used to tap the bung. It is a pure, semi organic blend of a dozen or more apple varieties – the balance is in the hands of timers like Sebastian.

Lest you think this is one big cider booze-up, the cider is drunk in small quantities, sipped and the air for several feet until it hits the glass.

One drinker after another visits this wonderful amber jet and drinks it while it is still bubbling. Young cider from the previous autumn without the leg-buckling savagery of Devon so common here for a few euros a bottle in local shops and is best drunk young, if not immediately. The cider is free of chemicals or additives, a natural fermented juice. I woke, fresh as the legends, the next day with no trace of a thick head.

It is one of the best nights I have had. And they sing. Marilys Daguerre produces a tune that resonates into a note and the choir chimes into song. The other customers see and hear this unusual impromptu singing. Indeed, as the clock slips past midnight and the tapping begins barrel after barrel, many of them have joined in – knowing off by heart the songs of love and life which contribute to being Basque. These are not your antagonistic Euzko separatists, just peaceful people – a doctor, a graphic designer, a lab technician, a retired folk who sing with choirs like this.

The singing is uplifting. The repertoire is wide and heartfelt, a league on from the corny embarrassment of On Ilkla Moor B'ah't 'At ..

There's a vital and warming joy in the way these just-met strangers celebrate their on-farm cider meal is part of this.

Then they all stop singing, riveted first by the crystal clear voice of Marilys Daguerre, a superb tenor of Pantxo. Afterwards a couple of girls insist on having their picture taken as a tribute to his voice. He is delighted. As we leave, one of the family collects our 29 eur

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north-west Spain. It is glorious land. Full stop. Biarritz on the coast leaves nothing to be desired. On the border there is Pamplona and on the coast Bilbao with the museum which has transformed fortunes. Go further west towards Oviedo for superb limestone scenery.

Getting there

Ryanair flies Manchester to Biarritz. You can take a Eurotunnel train or drive from the south with P&O. Brittany Ferries has the most convenient crossings from Plymouth to Santander from Portsmouth to both Santander and Bilbao and a car allows you to load up with refreshments and drink. Note Bilbao port is 14 miles and 25 minutes or more to the west at Zierbena.

Hotels: Santurtzi on the coast is handy for Bilbao and your boat. The NH Palacio de Cristal de Cristobal de Murrieta is a large comfortable hotel with costly private parking but reasonable rates. Go into the town for tapas or the classy Kai-Alde on Capitán Mendizábal.

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