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PURSUIITS

## In Spanish Basque Country, Sampling Cider and an Ancient Ritual

“Here, cider is not just an alcoholic beverage. It’s a way of life.”



Lunch is paired with cider tastings at Petritegi, a sagardotegi, or traditional Basque cider house, in Astigarraga, Spain. Daniel Rodrigues for The New York Times

**By Jason Wilson** March 16, 2018

No one really tells you what to do when you first arrive at a sagardotegi, or traditional Basque cider house, especially if you don’t speak Basque. You’re simply given a glass, led to one of the long wooden tables in a vast room, and immediately served a plate of chorizo, followed by a cod omelet. It’s left up

to you to figure out how to get a drink.

My brother, Tyler, and I learned this on our first night in Astigarraga, 15 minutes southeast of San Sebastián, which happens to be the cider capital of Spanish Basque Country. In this town of just under 6,000 people, there are an astonishing 19 cider houses. We were spending several days here in late January, at the start of the traditional cider season that runs through April. With Spanish-style ciders becoming more popular among American cider makers and cider enthusiasts, I wanted to see what they tasted like at the source.

At Garziategi (<http://gartziategi.com/en/>), a sagardotegi in a big stone barn on the outskirts of town, we learned that when a guy with a bucket yells “txotx!” (pronounced “CHOACH”) that means he’s about to open the tap on one of dozens of huge 13,000-liter barrels, shooting out a thin stream of cider. You’re supposed to stand up from your meal, get in line, and hold your glass at just the right angle to catch a few fingers of cider from that hissing stream. You drink the small amount in your glass and then follow the cidemaker to the next barrel.

Thinking it was a free for all, my first faux pas was coming at the stream from the wrong side and essentially butting in line. Then, I couldn’t quite figure out how to hold my glass so that the cider hit at the right angle, to “break” the liquid and create foam. Thankfully, the crowd at the Basque cider house was very forgiving. A kind white-haired man in a sweater, whose group was eating next to us, showed me the ropes, hopping up and waving me along with him at the next shout of “txotx!”



Zapiain, a modern cider house in the town center.  
Daniel Rodrigues for The New York Times

We eventually learned on our cider house tour that advice was forthcoming if you sought it out. At a modern cider house in the town center, called [Zapiain](http://zapiain.eus/en/) (<http://zapiain.eus/en/>), a hand-painted mural of “don’ts” was on the wall: Don’t cut in line; don’t fill your glass all the way up; don’t sit on the barrels. Tyler grasped the technique much quicker than I did.

“Here, take it here, at an angle,” said Igór, our tour guide at [Petritegi](https://www.petritegi.com/en) (<https://www.petritegi.com/en>), another sagardotegi just down the road from Garziategi (the suffix “tegi” means “place of”). I did as Igór said, allowing the stream to hit the very rim of my glass, spraying a little bit on the floor, just as the locals do. (I got the hang of it on my fourth glass.) Some older sagardotegi actually have worn grooves in the cement floors from years of streaming cider. The point, Igór told us, was to make sure the cider has good txinparta, or foam; if the cider is healthy, that foam should dissipate quickly. The cider in the glass disappears quickly too. The flavors are funky, crisp and acidic, and usually bone dry — nothing like the cloying, over-carbonated ciders you too often find on tap in the United States.

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In late January, Astigarraga was still relatively mellow. But as txotx season rolls on, more than 15,000 cider enthusiasts can crowd into the town's cider houses each weekend. Txotx season follows the apple harvest of September and October, then fermentation of the cider in early winter. In fact, in late January, some of the barrels might not be fully finished fermenting. "The cider in the barrel is still evolving," Igór said. "If you come back in two months and taste the same barrel, it will have evolved." In Basque Country, most cider is made by spontaneous fermentation and no added commercial yeast, similar to natural winemaking. Once the season ends in April, whatever is left in the barrel is bottled.



A huge cider barrel in the middle of the roundabout that marks the town entrance in Astigarraga. Daniel Rodrigues for The New York Times

The annual ritual harkens back to an era when cidemakers would invite

clients, perhaps innkeepers, restaurateurs or the famed gastronomic societies of San Sebastián, to taste and choose which casks they wanted to purchase. “Here, cider is not just an alcoholic beverage,” Igór said. “It’s a way of life.” Petritegi, for instance, dates to 1526.

Over the years, a meal became part of the ritual. Every cider house serves the same basic menu for 30 euros: chorizo; cod omelet; roasted cod with green peppers; thick, medium-rare chuleta steak; Basque cheese (such as Idiazabal) served with walnuts and quince paste. And all the cider you can drink. The cider house ritual is just one of many Basque Country cultural touchstones that make this autonomous coastal region a very different place than the rest of the Spain.

“Twenty years ago, there wasn’t chairs,” Igór said. “The food was just served in the middle of the table.” While Petritegi did indeed offer chairs — and a beautiful hake in garlic and oil as an alternative to the cod — we were served roughly the same menu in all seven cider houses we visited, and we stood and ate in three of them.

In Astigarraga, a sleepy but pleasant town, we took a lovely, steep and tiring hike up to an old church that had been a stop on the ancient [Camino de Santiago \(http://santiago-compostela.net/\)](http://santiago-compostela.net/) pilgrimage (<http://santiago-compostela.net/>). As we wandered past orchards overlooking the bay of San Sebastián, our guide, Ainize, told us stories of the Basque golden age. In the 16th century, Basque ships were built around the cider barrels, and each sailor drank up to three liters of cider per day to fend off scurvy. The result, according to lore, was that the Basque fishermen and whale hunters were the healthiest and most renowned on the sea, fishing far from their home waters. Their range was so famous that, only two years ago, the remote West Fjords of Iceland repealed a 400-year-old law that ordered the murder of any Basque visitor on sight.



At Petritegi, as at other cider houses, how you fill your glass is an essential skill.  
Daniel Rodrigues for The New York Times

“The 16th century was the golden age of cider, but cidermaking is much older than that,” Ainize said. “The original meaning of txotx, in our language, is ‘to speak’. Now it’s an invitation to drink cider.”

As we descended back into the town square, Ainize pointed out the local pelota court, where a traditional handball game is played. Many believe this sport originated with the ancient Greeks. We also saw huge stones with handles that are used for lifting and carrying in yet another Basque sport. The day before, we’d drank cider with a woman named Olatz who told us, “I carry a stone of 550 kilos with eight women.” She added, with a laugh: “We have our own sports here.”

At Petritegi, Igór took us through the orchards where we learned about Basque varieties of apples like Goikoetxe, Moko, Txalaka, Gezamina and Urtebi — a far cry from Granny Smith and Golden Delicious. A Basque cider can be made from more than 100 varieties — some bitter, some acidic, some sweet — and 40 to 50 might be blended in single cider. We were told that one kilo of apples will make one bottle. We were also told by a number of people that apples are sometimes trucked in from Normandy or Galicia to keep up

with demand.

In the town center, Sidería Bereziartua (<http://www.bereziartuasagardoa.com/en/>) operates a tasting room, and so we booked a tasting. “Cider is deep in our culture,” said Mikel, our pourer. “We don’t even know when we started making it.” Ciders using the official denomination of origin, Euskal Sagardoa, created in 2016, must be made entirely from Basque apples. When he poured Bereziartua’s Euskal Sagardoa, Mikel said, “If you want to take one bottle, drink this one.” Then he poured a cider with a Gorenak label, one that can use foreign apples in the blend — but must adhere to strict standards and be approved by official tasters. “If you want to drink three bottles, you take this one,” he said. Buying bottles at the cider houses in Basque Country is relatively inexpensive. I never saw one priced above 10 euros (about \$12), and most were under 5 euros.



Garziategi is a sagardotegi in a big stone barn on the outskirts of town.  
Daniel Rodrigues for The New York Times

On our last evening, we went to Lizeaga (<http://lizeaga.eus/>), a sagardotegi in a 16th-century farmhouse that’s next to Garziategi. Earlier, our stone-

carrying friend Olatz had described the house as “the real txotx.” Our reservation at one of the long table was marked with a long baguette. There were no chairs. After the opening plate of chorizo, we strolled into the barrel room. Gabriel, the cider maker, was opening the ancient taps with what looked like pliers. (“This is the real txotx,” our stone-carrying friend Olatz had told us about Lizeaga.) Gabriel went from cask to cask, and we followed along, dashing back into the dining room in between for the omelet, the cod, the steak.

After the eighth or ninth (or 10th?) txotx, and after some debating of technique with my brother, I thought I had finally gotten the catch down like a true Basque. But on the next txotx, when I put my glass under the stream, Gabriel gently corrected my form: “No, no,” he said, “have the cider hit here.” Well, no matter. Soon enough he tapped another barrel, and there was another chance to learn.



Sampling cider at Zapiain. Daniel Rodrigues for The New York Times

## IF YOU GO

The cider museum **Sagardoaren Lurralde** (Kale Nagusia, 48, Astigarraga; [sagardoarenlurralde.eus/en](http://sagardoarenlurralde.eus/en)), is a great resource, with tastings and hiking tours. Visitors can also book advanced reservations for any of 21 local cider houses on the [museum website \(https://sagardoarenlurralde.eus/en\)](https://sagardoarenlurralde.eus/en).

## WHERE TO DRINK AND EAT

Cider houses in Basque Country get crowded during the cider season, which runs from late January through April, so reservations for dinner or lunch are recommended.

Some recommended cider houses in Astigarraga to visit during txotx season:

**Zapiain**, Kale Nagusia 96; [zapiain.eus/en/](http://zapiain.eus/en/) (<http://zapiain.eus/en/>)

**Garziategi**, Martutene Pasealekua 139; [gartziategi.com/en/](http://gartziategi.com/en/) (<http://gartziategi.com/en/>)

**Lizeaga**, (<http://lizeaga.eus/en/lizeaga/>) Paseo de Martutene, 139: [lizeaga.eus/en/lizeaga/](http://lizeaga.eus/en/lizeaga/)

**Petritegi**, Petritegi Bidea; [petritegi.com/en](http://www.petritegi.com/en) (<http://www.petritegi.com/en>). Offers tastings and tours, as well as lunch and dinner.

In Hernani, a 20-minute walk from Astigarraga:

**Zelaia**, Martindegi Auzoa; [www.zelaia.es/en](http://www.zelaia.es/en) (<http://www.zelaia.es/en>)

## WHERE TO STAY

Pensión Txingurri Donostia Ibilbidea, Astigarraga; [pensiontxingurri.com/es/pension-txingurri-astigarraga](http://pensiontxingurri.com/es/pension-txingurri-astigarraga) (<http://www.pensiontxingurri.com/es/pension-txingurri-astigarraga>)

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