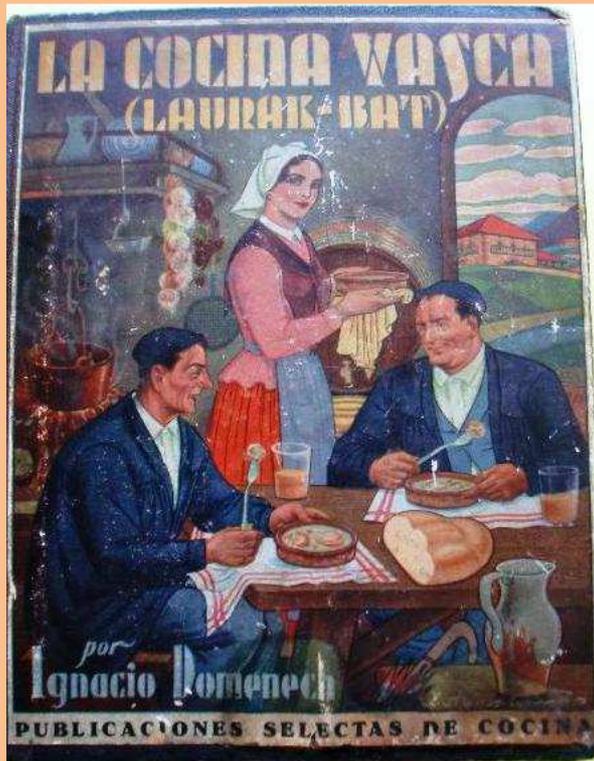


The Basque Country Gastronomy





The Basque cuisine (Laurak-Bat) is a compilation of culinary traditions and recipes that are typical of this region. It is very extensive and varied, and includes many different ingredients, from the Bay of Biscay (seafood) and the inland (vegetables, cereals, meat, etc.). The popularly known pintxos (a type of snacks) are served in bars and restaurants, and it is Basque tradition that is equivalent to the Spanish tapas.

The Basque Country is the region of the Iberian Peninsula that has more Michelin stars and outstanding culinary schools, such as that of Luis Irizar, the Gastronomy School of Leioa, or Aiala Gastronomy School, supported by Karlos Arguiñano.

The ingredients of Basque cuisine are plentiful and varied thanks to the richness and variety of the Cantabrian Sea fish and abundance of grass fields in its mountains, which are favored by heavy rains, a fact that provides a good quality livestock. The interior mild climate favors the cultivation of an abundant amount of vegetables and livestock. All this contributes to the many variations of each Basque preparation.

Vegetables and fruits



From the wide variety of products the following ones are to be highlighted: Tolosa beans, the Mendavia asparagus, cherries Itxassou, peppers of Espelette, and Guernica; while the latter are recognized by the Eusko Label brand; and the Ibarra chillies, which are also recognized by the same brand. Some dishes like the porrusalda or marmitako show how the Basque cooking can blend in a very harmonious way both ingredients: vegetables and fish. The porrusalda is an excellent example of how leek, potatoes and cod can give rise to a dish that very few indeed

would reject. Marmitaco is a tuna stew, although the fish (cut into 1-inch cubes) is added some five minutes before the conclusion of the preparation, as the fish would get a hard and dry consistency. Both are with any doubt an excellent pair of recipes.

Meats *There's also a wide variety of meat dishes, from which beef-based recipes are to be taken into account. Also sausage preparations, such as Bayonne ham (cured ham), Viana Blood puddings and the tripotx (lamb blood puddings from Biriatu).*

Fish

Dishes containing fish are varied. Cod is certainly one of the most prominent ones, and these recipes are prepared in certainly many, many ways. Also hake and squid are very traditional recipes of the Basque recipe book. It should be noted the Koskera-style hake, which is a recipe known as "Merluza en Salsa Verde" (hake in green sauce, or Basque-style hake).

Desserts



Milk- and fruit-based desserts, from the dense forests of the area, such as nuts, from which the Intxaursaltsa, the Goxua, the Basque cake, and the Pantxineta Pintxos, are the most standing ones.

A snack (pintxo in Basque) is traditionally a small slice of bread on which is placed a small portion of food. Its name comes from the toothpick that is

traditionally used to held the piece of food to the bread, although the use of such toothpick is not a mandatory feature. It is also known as "banderilla or tapa", but unlike the latter, which is often included in some bars when ordering a drink, the pintxo must expressly be ordered separately. Cold snacks are those that are usually arranged on trays on the counter of the bar and taken by the client on his own, or served by the bartender at the request of the client. Hot snacks should be ordered to the bartender, who asks the kitchen staff to have them prepared or heated at the time.

The pintxo is a typical dish of the Basque gastronomy that is often taken as an appetizer, and accompanied by a glass of red wine, called txikito (tiny glass); or a glass of beer (called zurito). It is very common in the taverns of the Basque Country, Cantabria, Navarra, La Rioja and some parts of the province of Burgos and Miranda de Ebro. On



account of the popularity that this way of eating is gaining, more and more people choose to have their lunch or dinner eating pintxos, and going from bar to bar to have a wider variety.

***Basque cuisine** is regarded as one of the most prestigious gastronomies worldwide. Those who visit the Basque Country claim that, whether you eat at restaurant, grill house or cider bar, the experience is sublime and unforgettable. The traditional Basque cuisine is based on the quality of their products, the simplicity in the preparation of the dishes; also seafood recipes are the star attraction, although one must bear in mind, too, the lean and tasty meats and the abundant amount of agricultural ingredients, such as beans, veggies, fruit, or dairy products, such as cheeses and junket preparations. These and other products complete the tasty recipes of the traditional and extensive Basque cuisine.*



***The new Basque cuisine** emerged in the 70s thanks to a group of young cooks who, after a first contact with the French cuisine, were eager to investigate, innovate and expand the traditional recipe book of Euskadi. Many of those cooks are now the real stars of the Basque cuisine.*

Experimentation and research have introduced new ingredients, new ways of preparation, new flavors and new combinations that gave rise to an exquisite and creative cuisine. When speaking of the Basque cuisine, it is worth bearing in mind the so-called Gastronomic Societies, which can be found all over Euskadi. These male strongholds are a unique phenomenon that still keeps the devotion for their love for a good gastronomy in today's boring society. Without them, it would be difficult to explain the popular roots of the Basque gastronomy. In such culinary societies men cook for their male friends and family members, and make food and mealtime the base of their social relations. Another curiosity of Basque cuisine are the "pintxos", small portions, served in most bars and restaurants, which are

another chance to try some of this cuisine delicacies. The Basque Country has a wide range of restaurants, steakhouses, seafood restaurants, cider, bars, etc., for all tastes and budgets.

Bilbao gastronomic societies

Bilbao represents,, without any doubt, good gastronomy, and good food; Bilbao's Gastronomic Societies can be regarded as the guarantors of culinary traditions of the Euskadi in both within the kitchen itself and outside it. Values, such as camaraderie, and the sharing of moments with male friends and family members around a table are a good excuse to have a good meal.



***Euskadi** has over 1,500 gastronomic societies, and they represent an institution for the people of the Basque Country. In those places food is the perfect excuse for friends to get together in fellowship and discuss the divine and the human values of life. In the Basque Country, Gastronomic Societies are indeed very close to the way of life and thinking of the Basques: For them, a good food can be better enjoyed when it is shared with your friends; hence, the "txikiteo" (wine drinking) and "poteo" to eat pintxos with a group of friends (cuadrillas) is quite an experience, especially if we are referring to Bilbao. The Basque Country, in general, and Bilbao, in particular, are one of the most important temples of gastronomy in the Iberian Peninsula, and not only in their kitchens but also outside them.*

***And this culinary temple**, which the Basque Country is in itself, has many small chapels that can be found in the old quarters of the city (el Casco Viejo de Bilbao); and they are represented by the numerous venues that are open for the lovers of the good food and, of course, for those who want to share that food with their friends. In such venues people talk about*

gastronomy, politics and, above all, soccer, or better said, the Athletic Club de Bilbao.

Good food, good drinks, an amiable converse, signing and enjoying life are the activities that take place in these Bilbao's gastronomic societies; some of these activities date back from centuries, since the first gastronomic societies were founded in the early nineteenth century -the first gastronomic societies were established in San Sebastian, or also known as Donostia, a city that has the largest number of such societies. This habit of gathering together has already become a tradition, and it was imported from the UK, and specifically from the so-called "assembly centers" of that country, although the habit of meeting to drink, eat and chat with friends was in itself a practice carried out in the traditional Basque cider bars, so such bars were the starting point between this habit imported from Britain and the gastronomic societies that emerged some time later.



Initially, Gastronomic Societies followed the traditional culinary practices of the "txokos" (a name that still remains to this day and which refers to those premises in which gastronomic societies are located), which were the basements of some houses in which a kitchen with a large table was the ideal place for holding meetings, chatting,

playing cards, and, of course, having a delicious meal; although, the participants were always men.

Indeed, until very recently (and still in some cases), the Basque Gastronomic Societies had always banned the presence of women. However, for them this has no sexist explanation whatsoever, but has to do with the Basque matriarchal society where the concept of "ama" (mother in Basque) dominates all aspects of the household, far beyond the kitchen and housework, as it is women who are in command and rule, so it leaves very

little room to the "aita" (father), who necessarily has to fill his leisure time with other activities together with his friends outside the household, and the best place for it is the "txoko", a place where men talk, discuss and share unforgettable moments between courses, play "mus" (a card game) and talk and debate on all kind of subjects.

Today, gastronomic societies have begun to open their doors to women, although it has not represented an obstacle for preserving their traditions. For example, they ban women from being members of these societies; they have access as guests to gastronomic societies, but accompanied by a member. However, in some gastronomic societies women are not allowed in, but if they are, the kitchen is a forbidden place for them. Nevertheless, the trend that is now more accepted is the existence of mixed societies, or at least, societies where women are admitted but under some restrictions.

In any case, such societies represent an institution anchored in history; they show us a very singular side of the way of being and thinking that the locals of Bilbao, San Sebastian, and other cities of Euskadi have, and which is expressed in the company of friends, and is also a good excuse for having a good meal in an atmosphere of camaraderie.

What do you do in a Gastronomic Society?

Cooking, sharing recipes, and experiences of all kind, talking about football, politics, enjoying a good dish of lamb chops, or cod; excel oneself at preparing such dishes, enjoying the company of friends in front of a cup of coffee, a cigar in one hand and a glass of brandy and, of course, spending out time at the table signing "Bilbainadas" (typical Biscay songs steeped in tradition and with a folkloric character; there is even a contest organized by Radio Nervión that gives very good prizes.



The daily life of a Gastronomic Society includes the "semanero" (weekly man), who is one of the members of the society in charge of opening the txoko every day and carry out the purchase of supplies, as for example, wines, beers, soft drinks, cigars, and cigarettes, and who also is in charge of calling the plumber, the electrician, etc.

The post of weekly-man is, as its name indicates, rotary every week and includes all the members of the society. This shift ends with a dinner prepared precisely by the weekly-man; a dinner that is only attended by the txoco members. As to the rest of the week days, members can freely invite in whoever they want (except in those cases when women are not allowed in). Also, members can reserve the facilities of the society for a special lunch, dinner that they might want to hold with their relatives or other persons who are not members of such txoco.



Each member in charge of cooking will see to making the purchase of food products (market products) in order to prepare a quality recipe, because any member of any gastronomic society is as demanding as the rest. Rice with cod fish, pil-pil cod fish, pork tenderloin, oxtail in red

wine, etc., are dishes that reach the highest quality level, since the level of demand required by the members who are sitting at the table, and the urge on the part of the cook to prepare a good recipe make possible the highest level of gastronomy, because as they say "one has to impress the dinner guests".

In fact, the levels of culinary skill demanded by the txoco members is quite evident, and it is demonstrated by the contests that gastronomic societies organize year after year to reward the best recipes and the best member cooks, and special attention must be given to the awards granted by the Basque Academy of Gastronomy", which is one of the most prestigious gastronomic society and which annually organizes the "Euskadi Gastronomy Awards"; such awards are officially delivered by the Basque Government and represent a recognition of the quality of restaurants,

confectionery shops, the work of food journalists, restaurant owners, hall directors, and a long etcetera.

The twentieth-century Basque cuisine

In the early twentieth century the fame of Basque cuisine began to increase, and to be known and such increase took place in the last thirty years of the century and up the new millennium. In 1910, several restaurants in the Old Quarter of Bilbao offered elvers in their daily menu, and fishmongers in some towns in Gipuzkoa gave a handful of kokotxas (barbels, or the fleshy part of the jaw of hakes that is considered a delicacy, and indeed it is) for the purchase of a good sized hake, all of which gives us an idea that "eating well" had begun to go deeper in the Basque people.



*In 1929, the famous **Julio Camba** (a Spanish journalist and writer), said: "The gastronomic capital of Spain should be located on the coast, and especially in a northern coast, because it is in the North where appetite has its realm. Bilbao, represented at that time a thread as to gastronomy and culinary affairs; it was only a few years*

later when the prestigious Dr. Gregorio Marañón, a worldwide known physician and humanist, said in a very emphatic way: "I have to say, and there's no doubt about it, that Basque region is, within national boundaries, in the lead with regard to excellence in gastronomy".

But, to many food critics, the Basque cuisine of the first decades of the twentieth century had its start in "other type of restaurants", that is, in the "txokos" and gastronomic societies, outdoor lunch spots, and, in a singular way, in the kitchens of the common people, where the etxekoandres (housewives) and amatxus (mothers) have always cooked simple and traditional meals, using, above all, local products. Euskadi is,

with a rate of one restaurant per two thousand inhabitants, possibly the autonomy with a higher of restaurant included in gastronomy guides. Also, the rate of "txokos" and gastronomic societies is very high: one per 2,000 inhabitants; all of this meets the desires of a people who know how to eat well, and enjoys cooking and eating.

Euskadi has a special geographical configuration that includes a wild Atlantic sea, mountains with lush forests and a plateau that favors an excellent agricultural and livestock production. Artisanal fishing habits are particularly popular, as well as fish-based dishes that are served very fresh and only a few hours after their capture, so for many people the Basque cuisine is identified with many fish recipes.



But the latter is not entirely true, because every Basque farmhouse, or baserri, is treated with special care by the farm owner and yields the best quality products: the best free range chickens and hens, the best calves and cows and oxen; the nutritious iodine-rich fodders, which give meat a special flavor; the homebred pork that is fattened to produce the most delicious sausages, steaks, black puddings and hams; and as to the kitchen garden, it offers a bit of everything: tomatoes, pods, onions, garlic, potatoes, peppers from Gernika, etc. Mushrooms from nearby mountains can be found almost the whole year, so the Basques love and understand the micofagia (eating mushrooms) they practice.



The abundance of latxa-type sheep, which have been acclimated to mountains and wet valleys, represent an excellent offer of three handcrafted quality food products: A tasty lamb, the mamia, or junket, which is as old as the Basque people, and cheeses made from sheep's milk; cheeses that are, as a rule, scarce and exquisite. Sparkling and cheerful the txakoli wine from the north, and

the cider, as an alternative to the latter, are typical drinks that can always be found in Gipuzkoa and Biscay bars and restaurants.

On the other hand, the Rioja region offers fine wines that are appreciated all over the world, and which are the perfect complement to a good meal from served at a restaurant, a grill restaurant or outdoor lunch spot, or at the txoko or the gastronomic society, or any place where you can be having any exceptional meal.

Euskadi restaurants offer an excellent selection of top dishes, such as, hake in green sauce, barbels, or Villagodio beef steak, fish cheeks/barbels and hake with clams, hake neck grilled, pil-pil-, Bizkaina- and Club Ranero-style cod, , lobster salad, scallop, baked "sisas" (a type of small mushrooms", chard with almonds, piquillo peppers stuffed with hake meat, perretxikos or crab, Bilbao-style elvers, bonito tuna with ratatouille or piperrada "red peppers braised in oil", sole-fish in txakoli, crab, baked red mullets, oxtail cooked in wine red, woodcock in season, duck a l'orange, pears in red wine, baked apples, compotes, rice pudding, junket, cheese, custard, pudding, varied cakes, and very long etcetera. Other avant-garde restaurants, though, have been infused with cutting edge gastronomy trends, and very suggestive dishes, such as squid, cut into brunoise and on potato toast sprinkled with some anise and black sauce; foie gras with star anise and tropical fruits,; and cold soup of spice jelly with citrus sorbet with juniper and pepper glass.

There are many excellent dishes that give delight to those at a picnic, an outdoor lunch spot, a farmhouse located in the middle of the country, in a small village, or hamlet; dishes that include red beans with their "sacred"

ingredients: chorizo, black pudding, beef ribs and shank, and cabbage); porrusalda, which is a soup-like dish made with potato, leek and cod; seasonal vegetables cooked with fried garlic or wrapped in bacon; salads, which are increasingly more varied and illustrated; fried eggs with chorizo or ham; scrambled eggs of any kind, and ham, or mushroom omelets; trout in season; lamb, and farmhouse chicken roasted; grilled steak; tripe casserole; pig trotters stewed with chorizo, ham and black pudding; beef tongue in sauce; and the traditional Idiazabal-based desserts; the different good cheese types; , rice pudding; junket; homemade custard; and the intxaursalsa, a dessert that is made with nuts and milk.

The New Cuisine



The so called "New Basque Cuisine", daughter of the French, became a reality because as Arzak once said, "It's modern because we incorporate new elements and we also add new current techniques of preparation and concepts, but it is in itself a simple cuisine that respects the traditional one." Thus new dishes were born, such as "krabarroka, or the "sea bass with green pepper"; also the cream or the butter were unexpectedly introduced in the culinary procedures; although some atrocities were also seen, such as sardines with cream; fruit with carrots; elvers with pomegranates. Then the expression: "The new cuisine? Well, it does not exist! There is only a good or a bad cuisine. "Nothing on the plate, but all is on the bill." Or the folly of a proud German "chef" who admitted he sprayed all the dishes with a few minuscule drops of Chanel No. 5. The new cuisine is dead. Long live the modern cuisine! The immediate past is called new cuisine. Tomorrow's future is based on "the cuisine of smells" although it will always be a WELL DONE CUISINE.