

Spain's gourmet city

Jo Bates takes us on a foodie tour of beautiful San Sebastian in the Basque region of Spain

Despite anthropologists trying to work out just why the Basque people are so food-centric, no one has been able to figure it out. It just is.

As Elena Arzak, Spain and Basque Country's leading female chef, says: "There's a special feel for the food and we can't explain why."

Basque Country is an area that boasts more Michelin stars (16 in total) per square metre than anywhere else in the world. The culinary clubs that have been running for around 100 years are also unique. While New Zealand men play sport to get away from it all, Basque men get out of the

house by getting into the kitchen at their txoko (pronounced 'choke-oh'), or culinary club. This is where they get together with their mates to shop for and prepare traditional Basque dishes. When you see a mast leaning out from a building with a flag flying, this is home to a txoko.

While not everyone goes to high-end restaurants or txokos (in this traditionally matriarchal society, women are invited to eat at the txokos but not to cook), everyone goes for pintxos ('peen-chos'). In San Sebastian, the region's culinary capital, the bite-size bar food has become an art form. Originally the pintxo was a small

slice of bread topped with a portion of food, usually secured by a toothpick or skewer (a 'pintxo', hence the name). Now they are a delicious mouthful or two of thoughtfully prepared and balanced food.

It could be a slice of toasted baguette topped with a sliver of chargrilled pepper, anchovy, aioli, egg and caviar, or a portion of melt-in-the-mouth octopus drizzled with paprika-tinted oil. It could be sautéed local mushrooms topped with cured ham, or cod with caramelised onion. Or a delicate creation of crab mousse between shaved zucchini, or foie gras many different ways. And there are the

These pages: A pedestrian promenade runs alongside the bay. Cured meats feature in many pintxos.



Photographs by Getty Images, San Sebastian Tourism and Jo Bates

more substantial wedges of tortilla between baguette and chunky slices of blood sausage. Most bars have their own signature pintxo, and as well as what's on the bar there are more options available from the menu.

Ir de pintxos – or going for pintxos – is essentially bar hopping to enjoy a slice of the local gastronomy. And it's a very affordable pastime – just one pintxo accompanied by a glass of wine costs as little as €3 (about \$4.70). For the Spanish, pintxos are an appetiser before lunch or dinner, always enjoyed with wine or a small beer, and they are taken at bars where it's usually standing room only. During the busy



This page. From top: La Concha bay. Preparing pintxos. Flavoursome crab dishes. Opposite page: Sophisticated San Sebastian was originally a fishing village.



hours, the bar staff work at a furious pace – it's astounding to watch as they slosh wine into glasses the size of jam jars, fire orders to the kitchen and keep up banter with customers. You never pay as you order – who can stop at one pintxo? – and the final bill works on an honesty system, with customers reminding bar staff what they've had. It's a fun and casual affair, right down to the toothpicks and paper napkins that are tossed onto the floor to be swept away later.

If you are daunted by the language (Basque is challenging but come with a few Spanish words if you can), then take a tour of the pintxo bars to get your bearings and confidence. Tours last for around two hours and you'll go to several bars and also get some interesting insights into the city. Visit the very helpful people at **San Sebastian Tourism Office** at 8 Alameda del Boulevard (sansebastianturismo.com) for details, or make a booking at sansebastianreservas.com. If you want to take it to the next level and learn how to make a few pintxos, ask at the tourist office about the workshops held at the nearby Ni Neu restaurant.

San Sebastian is a sophisticated city of around 180,000 people. It started out as a fishing village and this is reflected in the pintxos, where seafood dominates. The city spreads out from its perfectly formed bay, La Concha. If you climb up Monte Urgull you'll not only have spectacular views over the Bay of Biscay, but you'll see why San

Sebastian's bay was named La Concha (shell) – it looks just like a sea shell. The Spanish royal family found the climate and La Concha so lovely, they had their summer residence built to enjoy prime views of the bay.

With its Parisian-style avenues lining the banks of the River Urumea, Baroque churches and charming 19th-century architecture, it can be incongruous to see surfers jogging through the streets to the beach.

As well being a premium surf destination, the city also has its own world-renowned film festival that has been running for 60 years.

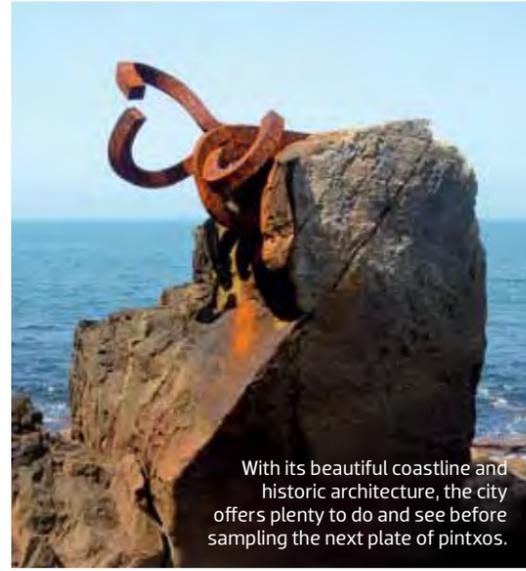
Cultured, historically rich, naturally beautiful, and with cutting-edge and traditional cuisine, there's plenty to keep you happy in San Sebastian.

WHERE TO START

Pintxo territory is in the heart of the old town, where the narrow streets are lined with bars, bakeries and restaurants. Start your adventures at **Fermin Calbetón**, the most famous street, at **Bar Goiz Argi** (4 Fermin Calbetón), where Andres – probably the friendliest barman in town – serves with plenty of smiles and banter. Like most pintxo bars, Goiz Argi has its specialty – prawns skewered with bacon and topped with a lightly acidic salsa. Delicious. Try, too, the wonderfully rich and flavourful crab (txangurro) dish.

On **31 de Agosto** street, you'll find **Bar la Viña** at no 3, which has excellent





With its beautiful coastline and historic architecture, the city offers plenty to do and see before sampling the next plate of pintxos.



pintxos and cazuelitas (rich, hearty serves of traditional hot dishes, such as chorizo and beans) that have to be followed with their cheesecake – no biscuit base, just a smooth, creamy centre that gives way to a light cheesecake and browned exterior. You can opt for a half serve, as the usual, at €5, is very generous.

Just along the street at no 9, **Bar Martinez** has an elegant selection of mostly cold pintxos. **Fuego Negro**, at no 31, is the place to try pintxos that have been given a contemporary twist.

If you prefer less obvious cuts of meat, such as beef cheeks, or slow-cooked pork and rich duck, make your way to **La Cuchara de San Telmo**. You'll find it off 31 de Agosto at 28 Trasera. If you love crab, go to **Bar Ganbara** (21 San Jerónimo) or for anchovies, head to **Txepetxa** (5 Pescadería). And that is just a taste...

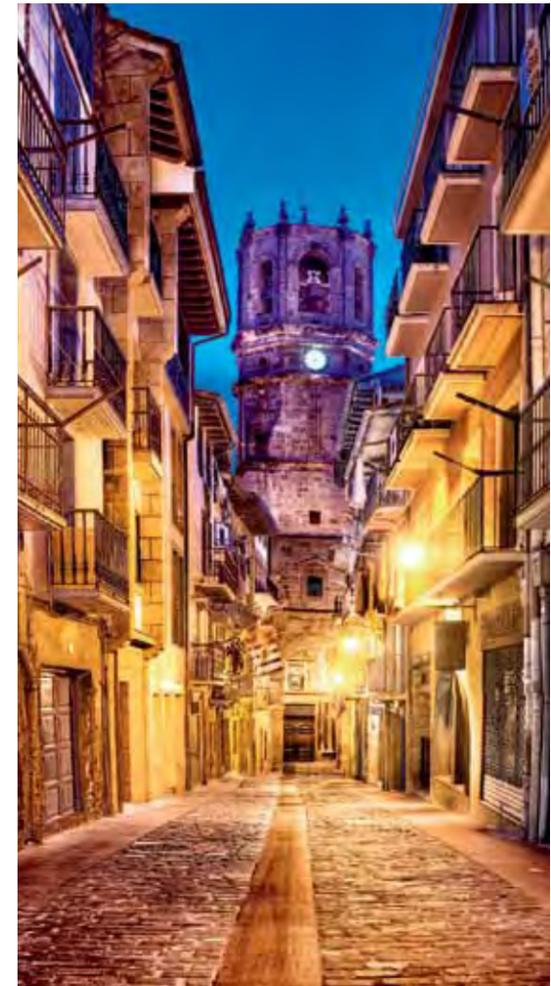
WHAT TO DRINK

Txakoli: In 1989 the txakoli wine of nearby Getaria was recognised with its own Destination of Origin as Getariako Txakolina. This crisp and dry, slightly effervescent white wine is elaborately poured from as high as the server's arm can reach. It is enjoyed young and perfectly offsets

a dish of anchovies (but not the salty kind we are used to) and tuna in oil. The family-owned **Bodega Txomin Etzaniz** (txominetzaniz.com) is a premium producer and can date its winemaking roots to around 1649. They preserve their own anchovies and tuna, which are served with their wine tastings. Contact the winery to make a booking, €8 per person.

Cider: There are around 42 cider bars in and around San Sebastian and while it is traditionally seasonal – from December to March – many bars are open year round. Like txakoli, cider here is poured from a great height. The rustic nature of the bars takes its cue from the old days when cider was enjoyed at the farmhouses where it was made. The food served with the cider follows suit, with traditional fare and farmer-sized portions of cod omelette, more cod and T-bone steak, finished with a serving of cheese, membrillo and walnuts.

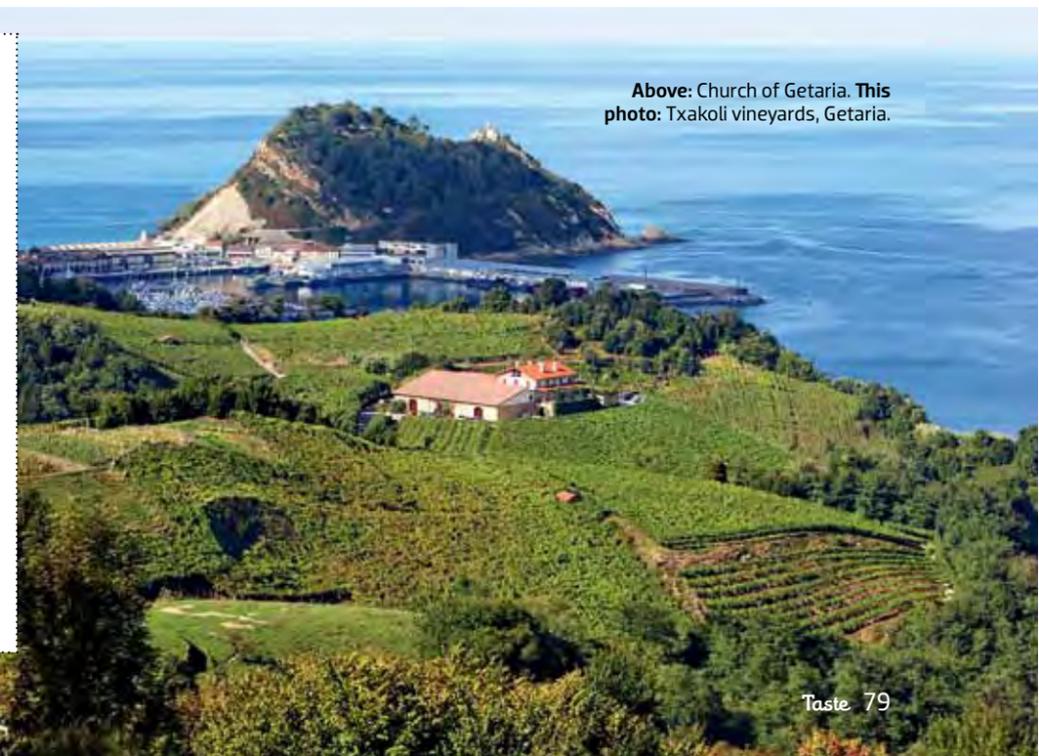
Wine: San Sebastian is close to the famous Rioja region, which produces some of the best, predominantly tempranillo-based, wine in the country. The tempranillo and blends are reliably good, but there's a wealth of native Spanish grapes to get to know, including albariño, grenache and



Above: Church of Getaria. This photo: Txakoli vineyards, Getaria.

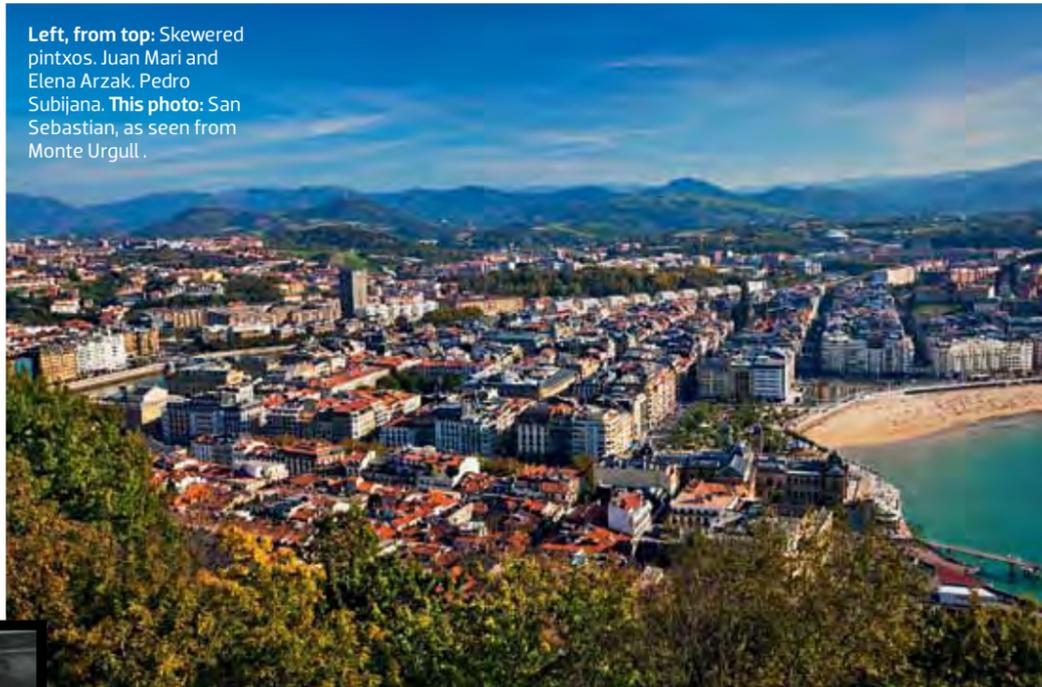
OF INTEREST NEARBY

Getaria: This small medieval fishing village, which is home to around 300 fishermen, offers a slice of Basque culture. About a 30-minute drive from San Sebastian, it's a very scenic seaside route into the town once you are off the motorway. Seafood restaurants abound and the specialty here is fish cooked over coals. Many restaurants have their barbecues located outside the restaurant – very practical, and utterly seductive if you catch the aroma. It's a great place to enjoy txakoli, which is made from the grapes that line the steep hills behind the village.





Left, from top: Skewered pintxos. Juan Mari and Elena Arzak. Pedro Subijana. This photo: San Sebastian, as seen from Monte Urgull.



monastrell. And at the prices asked (a couple of New Zealand dollars a glass), you can afford the research to find what you enjoy.

NEW BASQUE COOKING

Nueva cocina vasca, or New Basque Cooking, evolved in the late 1970s and has put San Sebastian on the culinary map, seeing Spanish chefs become world leaders in their field.

At the fore were chefs Juan Mari Arzak and Pedro Subijana, whose respective restaurants, Arzak and Akelarre, have each been awarded three Michelin stars. After attending a culinary conference in France, the two chefs returned inspired to start their own food revolution, so they gathered another 10 local chefs and began to push the boundaries of traditional food. They set in motion significant culinary change, not only to their reputation in the world, but right down to raising the bar in creativity for pintxos.

Joining Arzak and Subijana in the three-star club is Martin Berasategui, with his eponymous restaurant. Other leading Michelin-star restaurants include Zuberoa, Mugaritz, Alameda, Miramon, and Kokotxa. Also highly regarded (although without stars) are Fagollaga and Kursaal. Visit one to get an insight into world-leading cutting-edge cuisine.



TRAVEL & ACCOMMODATION

San Sebastian is about a five-hour bus trip from Madrid, about seven by train from Barcelona, or less than two hours by plane. Also, you are just across the border from France (about an hour from Biarritz by bus). Through travel website rumbo.com, you can search for and book the best deals in flights and accommodation.

Pension Altair (pension-altair.com) in Gros is a 10-minute walk from the old town and a few minutes to the surf beach. It's a quiet, comfortable retreat with modern interiors and wonderfully friendly, helpful staff. Rooms start from around €48 in low season.

Arrizul (arrizul.com) has a range of accommodation, including a small hotel across from the beach, Playa de Gros, a hotel several blocks back from the beach and apartments in the centre of the city. Prices start from around €60 in low season.

Hotel Maria Cristina was designed by French architect Charles Mewes of Paris Ritz fame, built in 1912 and is named for the former Spanish queen. It's the city's premium hotel – fit for royalty – with palatial rooms priced to suit. The hotel is under renovation until July this year, when it will reopen to celebrate its 100th year in grand style (hotel-mariacristina.com). 

Michelin woman

San Sebastian's Elena Arzak has gone against trend to become a high-achieving female chef in a male-dominant industry

Chef Elena Arzak is among the few women to be awarded Michelin stars. Not that she would ever claim them as her own. Since the late 1990s, she has been working with her father, Juan Mari Arzak, at his San Sebastian restaurant. Located in what started out as the family home in 1897, Arzak, the restaurant, originally opened as a humble wine cellar and tavern. Elena is the fourth generation of her family to work there. Juan Mari elevated Arzak to Michelin-star status and he and Elena now share the helm of one of the greatest names in dining, boasting three Michelin stars.

For Elena, it's not the least bit unusual as a woman to be a leading force in the kitchen or in food culture – as well as commitments in Europe, she has presented at the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival and featured on Australian MasterChef. "The Basque Country has always been matriarchal and strong across everything. We have six women chef de partie in the kitchen. I've never really noticed that there should be a difference for women," she says. And despite men dominating in professional kitchens, Elena is sure this will change. "Before at a cooking school it was mostly men but now it's equal."

The food at Arzak has been groundbreaking in Spain and internationally. It is cutting-edge but prepared with an innate Basque influence, says Elena. "Taste is stored in the mind, what I call a code of flavours, and it has been influenced since childhood, such as squid ink and peppers that are local to here, but we are open to the world. Unconsciously we cook with this code of flavours. In Australia I loved lemon myrtle but I will use this in the Basque way with my palate."

Because there's only so much information the brain can store, Elena



has a spice room containing 1287 flavours, aromas and grains from around the world, with information on their texture, flavour and origin. She spends a lot of her time in the test kitchen formulating ideas and a dish can take five days or a month or even a year to finalise.

Father and daughter are in almost constant dialogue about food, which is key to their success. It also helps that they share a similar palate. "When we taste separately, 99 per cent of the time we like the same thing. We both add to and subtract from the

other's cooking. My father is very open-minded and since the beginning he has encouraged me. He would take risks with my ideas and it was very important that he trusted me. At the same time I wanted him to like what I was cooking. He has always had the capacity to be with the times and be current with food, with the restaurant, with everything."

About the only thing the two of them don't agree on is men and women. "For him, a woman's cooking is more sensible than a man's. I don't see the difference!" she laughs. 