

BASQUE FOOD

FROM FAMILIAR TO INNOVATIVE



A plate of freshly-made paella (a rice, seafood and vegetable dish) is ready to serve at a Basque gastronomy society dinner in San Sebastian.

Photo Asife/Shutterstock.com

Q ■ What do kids in Basque country eat for lunch?

A ■ **Fish**, and lots of it!

Let's back up and start our sampling of Basque food more broadly. A major clue to understanding Basque food is a map of Basque country. With three provinces stretching across the Bay of Bizkay, many types of fish and seafood are popular. Local fish include tiny anchovies and sea bream. In farmland nestled into the valleys of the Pyrenees Mountains, sheep are raised for meat, and their milk is made into delicious cheese. A variety of fresh seasonal vegetables and fruits are showcased at outdoor markets. Wild and cultivated herbs are harvested to flavor dishes.

In addition to their native bounty, the Basques have learned from the many cultures passing through their lands. This love of trying new things has also affected their cuisine. Olives and wine came with the Romans between 218 and 210 B.C. Peppers, which originated in the Americas, came to Spain in the 16th century and made their way to Basque country where many local varieties can be found today. Cod, not a native fish to Basque shores, was caught in northern waters, preserved with salt from Basque salt mines, and used as shipboard rations to extend the reach of early Basque whalers. Today, salt cod dishes still regularly grace Basque tables. Spanish and French influences are also evident in Basque cooking, just as Basque products and recipes have affected those cuisines.

How else does Basque cuisine set itself apart? Basque country boasts more than 40 Michelin starred restaurants — the “gold standard” of fancy eating establishments. For more down-home eating, locals and tourists head to cafes and taverns serving *pintxos*, small servings of savory meats, fish, and marinated vegetables, often anchored with bread, and speared with a toothpick to hold everything together. Seasonal *sidreria* (*sagardotegi* in Basque), or cider houses, serve salt cod dishes,

steak, and a dessert of sheep's milk cheese, quince jelly, and walnuts, along with cider made from local apples.

Basques love competitions and festivals. Food figures into both. Cooking contests take to the streets during local celebrations. One of the most famous contests takes place in October in the town of Balmaseda, Bizkay province, and is named after a large bean pot, the *putxera*. Chefs use the pots to slowly cook local red beans, mixed with whatever they prefer for flavoring — onions, peppers, tomatoes, garlic, ham, or sausage. The winning bean team takes home a trophy *txapela*, an embroidered beret.

Gastronomy clubs, called *txokos*, have existed since the 1870s. During Francisco Franco's Spanish dictatorship, the language and culture of distinct groups such as the Basques were under attack. The *txoko* became one of the few places where men were allowed to meet legally to speak and sing in Basque while enjoying cooking and eating hearty meals, but talk of politics was forbidden.

Along with traditional Basque recipes, the male cooks would experiment with ingredients and preparations. Some of the most famous Basque chefs trace their training to their involvement in *txokos*. Women were sometimes permitted to join the meal, but only recently have been allowed to become members and cooks.

Food is a family affair for the Basque people. One world-renowned culinary family, the Arzaks, are a good example. Chef Juan Mari Arzak owns a Michelin starred restaurant in San Sebastián called Arzak. The restaurant started out as a humble tavern owned by Juan's grandparents, then his parents. His career was spurred by helping in the restaurant from a very young age. Juan's daughter, Elena Arzak, is the fourth generation and a famous chef in her



The town of Idiazabal hosts a feast of delicious food and drinks after the annual cheese contest. Notice the large kegs of cider at the back of the town *frontoia* (gymnasium room).

Photo by Mary Linn, Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, Smithsonian Institution

own right. Other siblings, cousins, and family members also work in the business.

Elena says that as a child, the kitchen of their 116-year-old family restaurant was “like a fantasy.” And, speaking of fantasies, the Arzak family dreams up new versions of Basque classics in their own food laboratory upstairs. There, this family of chefs experiments with new dishes to “wow” their patrons.

The Basque love of innovation is raised to an even higher level at AZTI Tecnalia (which stands for the Basque language version of “Center for Expert Technology and Innovation in Marine and Food Research”). At this ultra-modern facility, food scientists toil over high-tech equipment to create more healthy and sustainable foods and to raise the level of food safety. Whether it’s developing a new dehydrated food with a pleasantly crispy texture, or a delicious gluten-free cupcake, AZTI workers help put Basque country at the forefront of gastronomy and food science.

The question remains, though: What do Basque kids eat for lunch? Smithsonian Curator Mary Linn collected a school menu while doing research in the region. The October 2015 menu

from the Begoñazpi Ikastola school featured fish baked with tomato sauce, fish with mayonnaise and lemon, fish empanadas, fish soup, and fried fish. Beans were also prominent, including lentils and garbanzos. Not a hamburger nor slice of pizza was to be found, but the menu did include yogurt, fruit, meatloaf, chicken dishes, and potatoes in many forms.

So, chances are you will find some familiar foods if you travel to Basque country, but you also might want to try something new. To try your hand at bite-sized pintxos, see the recipe on the next page.

FAST FACTS:

- San Sebastián (Donostia) has more Michelin starred restaurants than any other city in the world.
- The *putxera* bean dish made during the Balmaseda competition is often called “railway stew” because it originated with railroad workers cooking big pots of beans over coal stoves to keep warm.
- In 2014, half a piece of Basque Idiazabal cheese sold at an auction for more than \$14,000. It is the most expensive piece of Idiazabel cheese ever!

Judges of the bean-cooking contest at the annual festival in San Severino carefully evaluate this regional dish as they peek into each *putxera*, or bean pot.



Photo by Mary Linn, Ralph Rinzler Folklife Archives and Collections, Smithsonian Institution