

# Learning to Speak Cerveza

Spain's food and drink landscape is as rich with history as it is with innovation, but the country as a whole has lagged behind in beer... until now. Still in its infancy, a new, nebulous beer movement is emerging, and given the fertile culinary ground from which it springs, hopes are high. At the forefront are a few Americans, one straight out of San Diego's most famous brewery.

BY MARTI BUCKLEY KILPATRICK PHOTOS BY MARKEL REDONDO

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Co-owners of Basqueland Brewing Project chef Kevin Patricio (left) and brewer Ben Matz enjoy a few beers in the sun at Restaurante Ganbara in San Sebastián.

Chef Patricio gets a fresh pour at Restaurante Ganbara.



**Outside a warehouse in northern Spain**, three Americans throw a football back and forth in an empty parking lot. Kevin Patricio, a 39-year-old chef with origins on the East Coast; Ben Matz, a brewer with white-blond hair and a surfer's tan; and Benjamin Rozzi, whose San Diego Padres baseball cap is always on (outside of the wine bodega where he works). They stop their game of catch to slice into cured, dark-red chorizo and pop open three bottles of beer.

If this were Spain just a few years ago, the beer they hold in their hands would have been an industrial light lager—weak, watery and generic. But these three Americans are an important part of Spain's fledgling craft beer movement, one that is growing at a pace that defies both statisticians' attempts to track it and economists' talk of the still overhanging recession. And the beers they hold are similar to those they brew at Basqueland Brewing Project, a part of the relatively recent, globally inspired boom in Spanish craft beer.

San Sebastián sits regally on the northern coast of Spain, in Basque Country. It has more Michelin stars per capita than any other city in the world, and for a reason—residents take eating and drinking very seriously. Patricio runs La Madame, a well-regarded restaurant in town, and he would often commiserate about the lack of craft beer with Rozzi, who sold the restaurant its wine. When Patricio finally created a craft beer list for the restaurant, it was more for his own entertainment than good business sense...or so he thought.

"Pretty much overnight it went from 100 percent sales of these industrial beers to 95 percent sales off the craft list," says Patricio. "It was just this eye-opening experience." Patricio and Rozzi realized that maybe the region was ready for something different. So Rozzi called up an old surfing buddy in California, Ben Matz.

"The first question I had was, is there an ocean? The second, are there waves?" says Matz. "After he said yes, I said, 'Ok, maybe I'll come.'" Matz's passion for surf is equaled only by his passion for crafting beer. His brewing resume reads like a Cinderella tale set in America's best microbreweries—he started sweeping floors at San Diego's Pizza Port, where he subsequently moved up to assistant brewer, before leaving for a senior brewer spot at Stone Brewing. He left Stone to brew at Wendlandt, in Mexico, where he retains his position now from the other side of the pond. Matz flew over to gypsy-brew Basqueland Brewing Project's first rounds of beer, and is now relocating to San Sebastián to be head brewer and co-owner of BBP.

The Basque region, along with Catalunya and Andalucia, is a leader in the burgeoning Spanish craft brewing movement, according to Ivó Castells, co-author of "Guide to Discovering the Best Artisan Beers" and part of the team at Cerveza Artesana Homebrew S.L.

"In the North, there is this culinary culture of high quality," Castells says. "The culture of drinking beer with tapas is widespread, and there is a relatively high density of microbrewers." Castells should know. From its outpost in Barcelona, Cerveza Artesana juggles everything from importing ingredients to consulting with new beer brands to running the Institute of Artisan Beer (Instituto de Cerveza Artesana).

Archaeologists recently unearthed brewing artifacts outside of Barcelona dating back 6,400 years, meaning Spain is no newbie to the brewing business. In fact, consumption of beer (albeit industrial) surpassed that of wine back in 1987. However, craft beer is just taking its first steps. Stats are outdated and generally untrustworthy, but they put the estimated number of microbreweries around 200.



Beer is finding its place in Spain's lush culinary landscape.

"All the brewers disappeared over several generations, and with them the firsthand knowledge and local traditions of beer making," says Castells. "The beers we are making are foreign styles. We don't have anything that is Spanish style." What Spanish brewers lack in tradition, training and expertise, however, they often make up for in creativity—like the artichoke beer from Badum or Er Boqueron, brewed using seawater.

Pep and Kevin Andreu have been brewing since the inception of the country's modern craft brewing movement, and their trajectory is a familiar one in Spain: a homebrewing endeavor that went from garage to brew-house. Their brewery, Cervesa Marina, is based out of Catalunya, which many consider to be ground zero for the artisan movement in Spain.

"Like BBP, we started because we liked good beer," says Kevin Andreu. "This was 16 years ago, and there wasn't any." The brothers pioneered several aspects of the Spanish artisan beer scene—creating the big beer festival, Birrasana; collaborating (and being the first to do so) with a foreign brewery, Steel City Brewing Co., to make a 168-IBU IPA. They also brew a beer called Vinya Hop, produced with juice from grapes used to make cava and fermented with Champagne and beer yeasts.

Although BBP has American roots, they strive to serve the Basque culture, known for its fierce independence. BBP has brewed eight beers including limited editions, whose labels feature local folkloric imagery. Currently, four are on shelves, with plans for more in the near future: Kölsch de Oro, a dry-hopped kölsch; Arraun, an amber ale with tropical fruit aromas; AUPA, smelling of bread and tasting of pine and citrus; and Imparable, an überbalanced IPA with 60 IBUs.

"I'm most stoked on the IPA," says Matz. "I love the big, hoppy nose, the grapefruit, the guava, and citrus. We can't

make enough of it." While remaining true to their standards of quality and personal style, they have learned along the way not to underestimate the Spanish palate, like when they brought seven cases of special edition beer to a wedding, thinking it would be ignored amidst the wine and bubbly.

"Women, some of them 75 years old, were pushing each other out of the way to get beer," says Patricio. "And that weekend we got two of our biggest investors to help start the brewery." The new BBP brewery is currently under construction a few miles outside of San Sebastián, with upwards of a million dollars in investment and an impressive roster of equipment.

"Once we have our own brewing system, it's frightening as to how good our beer is going to be," says Rozzi. "We definitely have an advantage. What the majority of people who are starting microbrewing can do and what Ben Matz can do are not comparable."

In a country where 84 percent of citizens cite "drinking a beer on a terrace" as a favorite summer activity (according to the A.C.E., Spanish Brewer's Association), whether the market exists is not the question. So why is craft beer late to the table?

Many say the answer is as simple as a game of catch-up, a country repressed by civil war finally coming around. Others insist it is the role that beer plays in Spanish society, as a thirst-quenching drink rather than a beverage made to be savored. Still others blame a lack of raw materials, such as malts and hops.

There is one point that everyone agrees on—Spain, with shady regulations regarding breweries, is still the Wild West for craft beer.

"It's a young market in all senses of the word. People are discovering a new world," says Andreu. "We have no limits." ●