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UNPICKING PINTXOS

in San Sebastián, Spain

IMAGE: BETTY

With more Michelin stars per person than anywhere else on Earth, San Sebastián is a culinary dream, finds Marti Buckley



It's the weekend, midday, and the stairs of the Santa Maria del Coro Basilica are packed. The couples chatting and older ladies in their Sunday best aren't pouring out from mass, though. They've got a drink in their hand and, like me, appear to be worshipping a slice of bread topped with a single ruby-red piquillo pepper and two glistening brown salt-cured anchovies.

We're in San Sebastián, the sun is shining, and lunch stretches out before us like the Promised Land. Indeed, we're in a peculiar type of heaven, one in which bar tops heave under the weight of plates of *pintxos*, wine flows and splashes as abundantly as water, and seared foie gras is easier to find than salad. This place, I think, is truly a food-lover's heaven.

San Sebastián is one of the biggest cities in Basque Country, a small area in northeast

Spain and southwest France whose true borders are cultural. The locals speak Euskera, an ancient language with no known links to any living tongue. Euskera, or Basque, is thoroughly different from the Spanish and French it's surrounded by — locals in San Sebastián proudly declare themselves to be *Donostiarra*s, from the Basque name for the city Donostia. Basques have lived in this corner of the world for a very, very long time, fending off invaders from all sides to preserve their unique culture, language, and, yes, food traditions.

Pintxos, the small bites that I'm currently on a mission to consume, are a much more recent phenomenon, dating back to early 20th-century San Sebastián. *Pintxo* culture is a dream — pop into a bar, grab a snack off the counter, rinse it down with wine and repeat. The cardinal rule of *pintxo* hopping?

Pintxos in San Sebastián

Left: View of Calle Mayor street and the Museo Diocesano De San Sebastián

Previous page: Marinated anchovies served with fresh tomato, olive oil and parsley on slices of toasted bread

IMAGES: ALAMY; BETTY





SAN SEBASTIÁN NATIVES

1 Txangurro a la donostiarra
A unique crab species found along Spain's Atlantic coast are sizzled in fragrant garlic and butter, flambéed in cognac and baked in their own shells.

2 Idiazabal
The Basque Country's answer to Manchego is a staple in San Sebastián. The smooth, nutty cheese is made from the milk of Carranzana sheep.

3 Kokotxas de merluza
To make this Bay of Biscay specialty saute hake glands in garlic-infused oil and serve with fresh parsley and a squeeze of lemon.

Don't overload at a single bar — get a taste and move on. To that end, my friend and I leave the steps outside of Atari, one of the city's most popular *pintxo* bars, for round two.

We duck into a wood-facade bar with big block capital lettering: PACO BUENO. The lighting is bright, the place is packed, and conversations echo and crash into shouts from bartenders toward the kitchen. We shuffle our way through crumpled paper napkins, which in *pintxo* bars are often tossed to the floor to be swept up as the day goes on.

The place looks like it hasn't changed in years — family photos line the wood-paneled walls and sports memorabilia gather dust on shelves. Two tiny beers (*zuritos*, as they are called here), help with the pacing and are slid our way across the granite countertop, followed by two golden mounds on a plate.

Gambas gabardina, shrimp dipped in batter and fried golden, are the bar's specialty and have been since the first generation opened the bar in 1950. The recipe for the batter is secret, known only by family members who mix it delicately by hand before each service, and it really is that good. It's hard not to order another round but there are too

many tempting spots in the city, which often claims to have the most bars per person in the world.

With Santa Maria at our backs, strolling down Calle Mayor (or Kale Nagusia, because everything here has a double identity) I have a perfect view of the Buen Pastor Cathedral in the distance. Constructed in the 1880s, it marked the beginning of a boom period for the town, when it became a frequent summer spot of the Spanish royal family. The turn-of-the-century saw the construction of the city's most emblematic landmarks, Belle Epoque behemoths built in sandstone from the nearby Monte Igueldo, including the Victoria Eugenia Theatre and the Hotel Maria Cristina.

My next stop is for, yes, more anchovies. But these delicious morsels are different — oh, are they different.

It's common knowledge that Bar Txepetxa is the home of the world's best anchovy. These are not the salt-cured anchovies we had early, they are gorgeous, white, vinegar-marinated anchovies, bought fresh and prepared by hand by Manu Marañón, the owner and second generation of the bar.

Our waiter reaches for the bottle of wine we've ordered — it's in a long, slender green



Clockwise from top left:
Ondarreta Beach, San Sebastián; Basque pintxos with prawns; the view along Calle San Sebastián; the interior and counter at Casa Vergara pintxos bar



PERFECT PAIRINGS

With meats

Much of Spain's Rioja wine is produced in the Basque Country. Try pairing your meaty *pintxos* with a local Rioja Alavesa — the region's reds are velvety, floral and deliciously complementary.

Accompanying anchovies

A light, crisp white wine with a citrus-laden spritz, the Basque Country's own Txakoli wine pairs perfectly with San Sebastián's favourite salty snacks.

For dessert

Pair your decadent Basque cheesecake with a glass of Pedro Ximénez, from the southern Spanish region of Andalucía.



bottle, and he holds it high above the glass to pour, splashing the straw-coloured white liquid off the side of the cylindrical glass. This is *txakoli*, the local white wine, whose slight fizz and saline taste pair beautifully with the anchovy toasts we've ordered.

The place is boisterous, and I observe everyone from foreign families with small children to local, beret-sporting retirees. Good food erases social boundaries, and that is one of the best parts of the *pintxo* experience; it truly is all ages. Our toasts are ready: both are still slightly warm slices of baguette topped with two silver-shiny fish each. Across the top of one toast is a strip of shiny black olive pâté, dotted with a small pile of chopped onion. The other, the *jardinera*, has been showered with green and red peppers and onions.

We tear into them, but immediately stop after the first bite, nodding slowly in appreciation. These toasts represent everything that is Basque cuisine — simplicity, appreciation for the raw ingredients, briny and fresh flavours, and loving care and attention. These anchovies are delicate, white and silver epiphanies that convert even ardently professed anchovy haters.

When *pintxos* began, they were just a few ingredients (olives, peppers, cured seafood) stuck on a toothpick, a lazy effort designed to soak up the alcohol when drinking all day and all night. They evolved, however, into something much more sophisticated, merging with the city's fine dining scene — San Sebastián vies with Tokyo for the most Michelin stars per person in the world — to become a unique form of haute cuisine. Not to be confused with tapas, *pintxos* are smaller yet more elaborate, a miniature dish that can be eaten in just one or two delectable mouthfuls.

The definition of a *pintxo* has expanded over the last few decades, and the next step is the perfect example of the modern *pintxo*. I step into a bar that couldn't be smaller or more narrow, with a kitchen that can barely hold the three chefs mad at work on the stoves. La Cuchara de San Telmo has no food on its countertop — all *pintxos* are scrawled on black chalkboard menus and come fresh out of the kitchen. They also happen to be creations worthy of fine dining — foie gras with apple compote, pig ear drizzled with *tximitxurri*, and all other manner of typically rare and expensive proteins, portioned into *pintxo* size and served as mini entrees.

IMAGES: ALAMY, GETTY

Clockwise from top: People relax in a chic sidewalk cafe near La Concha beach; *pintxo* menu sign in San Sebastián; red peppers with anchovies on bread



Clockwise top left: Cafe in Plaza de la Constitución (La Consti), the Old Quarter; burnt Basque cheesecake; San Sebastián bar La Viña; more delicious pintxos



+ ESSENTIALS

When to go: The weather in the Basque Country is notoriously wet, but the summer months tend to be on the sunny side. September is great for a less crowded experience.

Currency: Euro CAD \$1= €0.75

Language: The two official languages of the area are Spanish and Basque (also known as Euskera). Knowing just a few words of this ancient language will ingratiate you with the locals.

Getting around: San Sebastián is a perfect city for walkers. Enjoy the views strolling around the compact city centre.

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Here I order two *pintxos*, because I simply can't decide. The octopus comes out on a small, white, round plate. It's charred to perfection, paired with a tender cabbage, redolent with the smell of the grill. I immediately want another one. Then the oxtail arrives, which is covered in a shiny demi-glace that would pass muster in a Michelin spot. The plate is quickly empty, and I reflect on how this dish would be perfectly at home on a white tablecloth, yet I'm currently smushed, sardine-like, with dozens of other food lovers, happy to have a tiny square of counter space to prop my glass of Rioja on. This is *pintxo* perfection.

I couldn't resist breaking the cardinal rule at La Cuchara, and, unsurprisingly, my stomach is quite full as a result. Just around the corner, a line snakes out of one of the oldest bars on Calle 31 de Agosto — La Viña. That can only mean one thing — Basque burnt cheesecake time.

It doesn't seem to matter how famous it gets, La Viña's cheesecake is always the same brown-spotted, creamy perfection. Baking perfect, silken *pintxos* since 1959, the

casual cafe has never faltered in its dreamy delivery. The line moves quickly, thankfully, as it feels a more amusement park than *pintxo* hop, and we enter the hallowed walls of the ultimate hotspot for cheesecakes. A wooden bar juts out in an 'L' shape from the left side of the bar, terminating in a wall of shelves stacked full of cheesecakes. Springform pans with crispy burnt parchment flowering out of them await their moment, pulled from the shelf and divvied up into '*pintxos*' of the world's most viral cheesecake.

What makes this cheesecake so special is not its internet fame or how good it looks in photos. It's the browned exterior, which takes on a delicate caramelized flavour in a hot oven. Meanwhile, the inside stays perfectly creamy, enough so to have become a global sensation. While sweet *pintxos* are about as far from tradition as you can get, I don't really mind as I elbow in with fellow pilgrims, swiping the last bit off my plate. I'm full and happy, so I toss my napkin on the floor, decide lunch is over, and set out for maybe just one more drink. □

IMAGES: ALAMY; STOCKFOOD; ILLUSTRATION: LIS WATKINS