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# WINE ENTHUSIAST®

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THE TRAVEL ISSUE

# 10

## BEST WINE GETAWAYS

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# BASQUE COUNTRY

Expect unique wines and boundary-pushing cuisine in this ruggedly beautiful region.

The Basque Country, or País Vasco, in northern Spain includes the must-visit cities of San Sebastián and Bilbao. Its arresting terrain lies between the Bay of Biscay, the Ebro River (which nourishes the vineyards of Rioja and Navarra) and France.

The region's complex history has yielded a fiercely independent spirit preserved in Basque wine and cuisine. Traditional yet trendsetting and abundant in local seafood, renowned Spanish Chef Ferran Adrià has called San Sebastián's food, "The best in the world."

In the towns along the coast, medieval cathedrals and winding cobblestone streets sit alongside modern architectural marvels, all within a stone's throw of scenic Atlantic beaches, not to mention bars offering pintxos (small plate appetizers) with each glass of delicious wine.

—Mike DeSimone & Jeff Jenssen

## WHERE TO DINE

Juan Mari Arzak has been consistently cited as one of the world's top chefs for adapting traditional Basque cooking to his high-style cuisine. His restaurant, **Arzak**, has garnered three Michelin stars since 1989. Under Chef Andoni Luis Aduriz, **Mugaritz**, located in the middle of a beautiful oak forest in Ereñeria, has long been considered a temple to gastronomy. It artfully bridges the gap between avant-garde and traditional Basque food.

## WHERE TO STAY

**Hotel María Cristina**, located in the center of San Sebastián's historic district, lies just steps away from the city's pristine beaches. Its 107 rooms and 25 suites are decorated in the Belle Époque style that was popular when it opened in 1912. Meet friends for a drink in the elegant Dry San

Sebastián bar, and continue on for a memorable meal in the hotel's Asian-themed Café Saigon or its regional gourmet restaurant, Pensión Easo.

## OTHER ACTIVITIES

Scenic walks abound in the region. Head from the town of Zarautz to Zumaia, taking in views of vineyards and seaside cliffs. Cross a stone bridge from Bermeo to the island of San Juan de Gaztelugatxe, and climb 241 steps to a tiny church dedicated to John the Baptist. It's a perfect way to work off those rich Basque meals.

## BUDGET TIP

If you plan to visit the **Guggenheim Museum Bilbao**, buy a Bono Artean ticket—the discounted price of \$15 gets you into the **Bilbao Fine Arts Museum**, too.



HOTEL MARIA CRISTINA



MUGARITZ



SIDRERÍA PETRITEGI



### « LOCAL IN THE KNOW

Dhane Chesson, who grew up summering near San Sebastián and now works for Wines of Rioja in the United States, recommends visiting Zarautz (nine miles from San Sebastián) for its beautiful beach and wonderful restaurants. Among her favorites is **Kirkilla-Enea Jatetxea**. The traditional décor contrasts the inventive cuisine prepared in the open kitchen. Tasting menus are accompanied by wine and cider from the extensive list.

### PROMINENT WINES

Fresh and slightly effervescent Txakoli wines offer crisp flavors and bright acidity that pair well with local cod, shrimp and tuna. Txakoli is made predominantly from Hondarrabi Zuri grapes, which grow on vines kissed by sea spray, adding a soft touch of salinity to many expressions. Since portions of Rioja Alavesa cross into Basque Country, look for bottles of Rioja Crianza, Reserva and Gran Reserva to enjoy alongside Iberian pork or *chuleton de buey* (ox steak). Nearby Navarra is known for its Garnacha wines, so seek out fruit-forward reds and refreshing rosés made from this native Spanish grape.

### WHEN TO GO

The best times to visit are spring and fall, before and after the crush of summer tourist season.

### WHERE TO TASTE

In San Sebastián, stop by **Lukas Gourmet Benta-Berri**. The wine shop also has a bar and restaurant on premise, and it's a terrific place to taste (and load up on) new releases of Txakoli, the region's zesty white wine.

The Basque Country is also famous for rustic, lively cider houses (or *sagardotegi*). Cider season kicks off in mid-January and runs until April or May, but **Sidrería Petritegi**, located about 15 minutes from San Sebastián, is open year-round. It offers tours of its apple orchard, as well as hearty cuisine and cider tastings.

Venture to the walled village of Laguardia for a traditional wine-tasting experience at **Bodega El**

**Fabulista**. It has a wine press from 1903 and ancient stone vats where grapes were once crushed by foot.

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