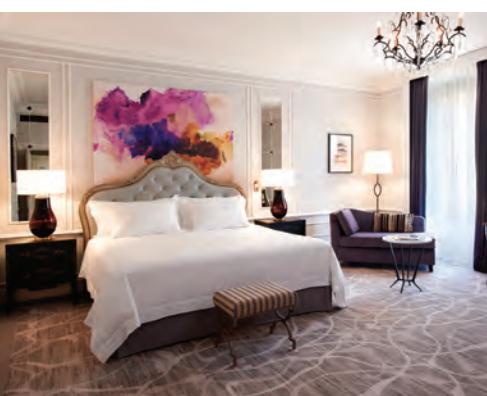




A TASTE OF SPAIN

EMMA JOHNSON visits beautiful, intoxicating San Sebastian and finds a foodie heaven par excellence





There is something about San Sebastian that, for any foodie, makes it an essential destination for a culinary pilgrimage. This small seaside town's gastronomic reputation is one of the best in the world – if you mention it to anyone who has been, you will always get the same reaction.

"Ah, San Sebastian..." they proclaim wistfully; accompanying this statement with an involuntary hand to the stomach, a dreamy gaze into the distance and a long, satisfied sigh.

This is the land of the Basque people, renowned for many things – some less good than others – but without question people who love their food. San Sebastian, or Donostia as the Spanish call it, has retained a very classic Basque food culture and remains one of the most exciting places to dine in Spain.

Eating in San Sebastian takes two forms – at one end of the scale a host of stunning Michelin-starred restaurants serve some of the most adventurous food in the country in luxurious surroundings. At the other, much more fun, end, is the tradition of pinchos. Pinchos make traditional tapas seem like unimaginative plates of stew – these beautifully-crafted, bite-size dishes are the sushi of the Basque world, intricately created, boasting a wealth of flavour and unique ingredients. Crostini with anchovies topped with caviar and chilli, grilled asparagus and foie gras, vast plates of Iberico ham, baby eels with red peppers and guindillas (green peppers) – there is so much choice you could never leave San Sebastian having tried everything it had to offer.

Pinchos are served, and charged, individually and are piled high on every bar in San Sebastian. Customers take – or ask for – a plate and get busy choosing; they then remember what they've had and tell the barman afterwards. You eat standing up, leaning against the bar, while silver or wooden troughs run around the base of the bar to catch wayward food and discarded cocktail sticks. You order one or two dishes, a glass of something to drink, eat it, and then move on to the next place. It's not glamorous, per se, but it's great fun.

The good thing about San Sebastian is its size; it takes minutes to find your way around, the intricate cobbled streets of the old town are clearly marked and easy to navigate – or get happily lost in. We started off, map in hand, plotting our way to recommended bars and restaurants, but soon decided that happening upon these places (as so often occurred), while discovering several new ones on the way, was much more fun.

In this way we discovered Txepetxa – a tiny bar, with Spanish football on a knackered TV in the corner, and a menu of nothing but marinated anchovies in various guises; Conchada san Telmo, packed to the rafters, serving huge slabs of foie gras; La Cepa – who served the best hams and grilled peppers; Martinez – whose endless bar was piled high with intricate pinchos at amazing prices; and Borda Berri – a

friendly place with no on-bar pinchos but one of the most interesting menus we'd come across.

At this stage we'd both had enough vino tinto to risk playing a bit of menu roulette – ordering unpronounceable items from the boards behind the bar and hoping for the best. There were some successes – salmorejo (a delicious cold Spanish soup with garlic, tomatoes, ham and chopped eggs) and garbanzos con chorizo (chickpeas and spicy sausage stew), but we also mistakenly ordered gelatinous pigs ears, hake throat and fish cheeks. It's not for the faint-hearted, but it's the best way to get to grips with some Spanish delicacies.

All this walking, standing and eating is great for variety, but by day three we were ready to sit down and actually eat something with proper utensils and plates. So we headed to Getaria – a pretty seaside village with a small fishing port, a 20-minute drive from San Sebastian. Lunch was booked at Elkano, renowned for its fish cooked on an outside grill or brazier, and a favourite of the locals. As we took our seats the head chef came over – apologising for his track-suited attire. "I am still cleaning and gutting the fish from this morning's catch," he explained. There can be no better way to convey just how much this was reflective of the divinely fresh fish we proceeded to devour, which included grilled anchovies, crab and a whole turbot, shared between the two of us. An amazing meal.

Eating isn't the only pastime at which the Spanish excel; drinking comes pretty high on the list too. In San Sebastian, Txakoli, for instance, is the local tipple of choice, a sour, sparkling fizz, served in a pint glass, poured from a great height to encourage the bubbles. At €1.50 it's the cheapest drinking option in the town – and it cuts through the variety of rich dishes we're consuming with perfectly matched precision. If you fancy something more decadent, then head for Bideluze, which boasts some of the most amazing Spanish wines, all available by the glass. Order a glass of Belondrade y Lurton, arguably Spain's best white wine, which will set you back just €10, or splash out and plump for a glass of Vega Sicilia, a dreamy Rioja, available here for €16 a glass.

There are plenty of boutique hotels to choose from, which offer a more rustic way to enjoy the town, but San Sebastian also has a grand, regal elegance that is perfectly matched in 100-year-old Hotel Maria Cristina, situated on the harbour front with views across the bay. The recently refurbished Belle Époque interior is lavish and elegant, greys and purples dominate, and rooms are generous in size, with glorious marble bathrooms, chandeliers and vast beds. Our room looked out over the turquoise Cantabrian sea, and boasted a separate dressing room and lobby. Breakfast every morning was an equally lavish affair, which we approached carefully every morning, knowing how much other delicious food was awaiting us just steps away. ☕

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