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## [Basking in the Culture and Cuisine of Spain's Basque Country](https://gazellemagazine.com/basking-in-the-culture-and-cuisine-of-spains-basque-country/) (<https://gazellemagazine.com/basking-in-the-culture-and-cuisine-of-spains-basque-country/>)

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The terraced vineyards on the Bay of Biscay, located outside San Sebastián in Spain's Basque Country *photo by Suzanne Corbett*

Basking in the joys of the good life is where paradise is found. One such paradise is [Spain's Basque Country](https://tourism.euskadi.eus/en/) (<https://tourism.euskadi.eus/en/>) – a culinary and cultural epicenter where food, history and art collide. A place where foodies can bask in the pleasures afforded to visitors who explore the country's spectacular coastline, lush hillside vineyards, medieval villages and cosmopolitan cities.

Spain's Basque Country is located in the northwestern corner of Spain, bordered by the Bay of Biscay and the Pyrenees Mountains, an area of natural beauty and abundance that drives its cuisine and defines its culture of gracious living. It's a lifestyle visitors can experience from its seaside eateries and eclectic pintxo bars (miniature small plates), to luxury dining at Michelin Star restaurants and hotels.



The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao photo by Suzanne Corbett

## Bilbao and Guggenheim

Begin exploring one of Basque Country's most intriguing cities, Bilbao. Follow the streets of Old Town (<https://www.bilbaoturismo.net/BilbaoTurismo/en/historia>) to Bilbao's main tourist attraction, the Guggenheim Museum. (<https://www.guggenheim-bilbao.eus/en>) A museum of modern and contemporary art, the Guggenheim in Bilbao was designed by renowned architect Frank Gehry ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank\\_Gehry](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Gehry)). A masterpiece of architectural sculpture, Gehry's masterpiece utilized titanium, limestone and glass to achieve its flowing open design.

A structure that's become the most recognizable icon of Bilbao, the Guggenheim's curvilinear walls seem to roll and wrap around itself. Walk around building to get a better design perspective. Doing so will take you past two of its popular sculptures: "Maman," a towering

stylized bronze spider that welcomes museum's guests on Nervion River side, and the 40-foot-tall topiary by sculptor Jeff Koons, "Puppy," covered in an estimated 38,000 blooms standing watch at the front entrance.

Tour the Guggenheim's contemporary art and interactive avant-garde installations. Allow plenty of time to build up an appetite, which is best satisfied by grazing at Old Town's pintxos bars.



Pintxo bars, where friends gather to nosh on small bites and sip on local wines and ciders  
*photo by Suzanne Corbett*

### **Pintxos and San Sebastian**

Similar in style to tapas, which date back to the 12th century, pintxos are relatively new. Credited to having been invented in bars in San Sebastian in the 1940s, pintxos are the Basque downsized version of tapas. These small bites held together traditionally with wooden picks

are placed on bars under glass domes as a serve-yourself concept. The bill is based on how many picks you have when you're finished. Each pintxo is priced per piece and can range from 1 to 5 euros, depending how it's made and what ingredients are used.





The Gilda, the first pintxo created in honor of Rita Hayworth. Photo by Suzanne Corbett

The first pintxo was a speared trio of a semi-sweet guindilla pepper, a salty anchovy fillet and an olive. Named the Gilda in honor of Hollywood legend Rita Hayworth, who starred as the femme fatale in the film of the same name. Gilda in the film is said to mimic the pintxo, salty and hot.

With the abundance of seafood, look for Txangurro (spider crab), what the Basques call the ox of the sea. Txangurro appears as a topping for bread pintxos or made into bite-size croquettes. Jambon Croquettes is another pintxo specialty. Jambo is a Spanish ham similar to its Italian cousin, prosciutto. Jambo has a deep color and a saltier, nutty, earthy flavor.

San Sebastian, the birthplace of pintxos, dotted with eateries and vineyards, is a great hub to launch day trips to nearby wineries, cider houses and seaside cafes. [San Sebastian Tourist board](https://www.sansebastianturismoa.eus/en/) (<https://www.sansebastianturismoa.eus/en/>) can assist in booking pintxo bar tours.





Basque cheesecake, as taught at MiMo Show Cooking school *photo by Suzanne Corbett*

To master a few of Basque Country's signature dishes, including pintxos, take a cooking class at MiMo Show Cooking (<https://mimo.eus/showcooking>). Housed in the luxury Hotel Maria Cristina (<https://www.marriott.com/en-us/hotels/easlc-hotel-maria-cristina-a-luxury->

[collection-hotel-san-sebastian/overview/?scid=f2ae0541-1279-4f24-b197-a979c79310b0](#)), classes are taught in English by local cooks and Michelin star chefs. Most popular classes emphasize Basque culinary culture. Consider one of the basic classics, traditional Basque cheesecake, a decadent thick cheese filling that has a charred appearance. Other classes worth considering, Pintxos & More and the Market Tour, which takes to the streets to buy ingredients you'll cook in class. Shopping the food shops is the best way to meet the locals and explore San Sebastian's backroads.

### **Basque Wines and Cider**

Meals without Basque wine or cider would be incomplete. Wineries and cider houses are found throughout the countryside where apple orchards are plentiful.

To get the story on Basque cider, visit [Basque Apple Cider Museum](#) (<https://tourism.euskadi.eus/en/towns/astigarraga/aa30-12375/en/>) in Astigarraga. Exhibits illustrate the history with century-old equipment taking visitors on the process from orchard to press to glass. Tours include cider tastings.







The art of filling your glass from the cider barrels at Alorrenea Cider House *photo by Suzanne Corbett*

Alorrenea Cider House (<https://alorrenea.com>) features hard cider stored in huge barrels. They line the walls in the dining room, where guests try to open the tap to fill a glass before the cider hits the floor, as locals who have mastered the taps stand by to help, if needed. Otherwise, cider glasses are filled at the communal tables where charcoal-grilled steaks can be ordered. Basque cider houses can be compared to steakhouses in the States.

After cider, search for wine. Unforgettable wine experiences await just down the road. Follow local maps or MapQuest through a landscape of vineyards and medieval towns to Laguardia, the capital of Rioja Alavesa, Spain's premier wine region, where terraced vineyards have

hugged hillsides for generations. Once in Laguardia, explore 600-year-old wine caves located in the center of the town, caves where one can still sample wine and enjoy underground dining at Hosederia de los Parajes. (<https://www.hospederiadelosparajes.com>)



Marques de Riscal City of Wine, where a 19th-century winery and its hotel designed by Frank Gehry are found *photo by Suzanne Corbett*

Plan to overnight at Marques de Riscal City of Wine in Elciego. The Marguée de Riscal (<https://www.marquesderiscal.com/en>) complex includes a collection of an award-winning winery that has been in operation since the original 19th century. Its sandstone buildings is a direct contrast to the Marguée de Riscal Hotel, designed by Frank Gehry, the same architect who designed Bilbao's Guggenheim.

**More places to sleep and eat:**

A pinxto bar chef displays the night's offerings *photo by Suzanne Corbett*

In Bilbao, the best views of the Guggenheim are had across the street from The Artist – Grand Hotel of Art (<https://hoteltheartist.com>) (formerly the Gran Hotel Domine). Its central location is within easy walking distance to Old Town for shopping and indulging in pintxo-bar hopping.

Beyond the pintxo bars, make plans to dine at The Artist- Grand Hotel of Art's OLiO, where chef Nelson De Silva oversees the kitchen. Don't miss brunch on the rooftop for up-close views of the Guggenheim, which is also spectacular at sunset.

After sampling the small bites at pintxo bars, dine at a Michelin Star restaurant. Zortziko (<https://www.zortziko.es>) is one of many choices. Opt for its tasting menu credited to chef Daniel Garcia, who is renowned for his contemporary spin on Basque Country cuisine.

In San Sebastian, the Maria Cristina Hotel defines European luxury accommodations. Built in 1912, it was designed by Charles Mewes, the same architect responsible for The Ritz in Paris. With a jaw-dropping view of Bay Biscay, the Maria Cristina became a favorite haunt for

celebrities as Julia Roberts, Brad Pitt, Bette Davis and Susan Sarandon, who discovered it while attending the San Sebastian Film Festival. The festival is held each September.

Visiting Basque County to discover and bask in the joys of its food culture is easy to plan with help of the Tourist Office of Spain (<https://www.spain.info/en/>) and the Basque Tourist Board (<https://tourism.euskadi.eus/en/>) They can also arrange for a private guide when touring on your own.

Another helpful resource for diehard foodie planning a trip is to download the free San Sebastian Gastronomic Guide (<https://spanishsabores.com/san-sebastian-gastro-guide-where-to-eat-in-san-sebastian/>) for restaurants, pintxo bars, wineries and cider houses.

When considering making a culinary tour to Spain's Basque Country, look for pre-planned trips to join as the September 2024 tour with St. Louis chef-restauranteurs Michael and Tara Gallina ([https://modernadventure.com/our-trips/basque-country-with-michael-and-tara-gallina/?utm\\_source=partner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=gallinas](https://modernadventure.com/our-trips/basque-country-with-michael-and-tara-gallina/?utm_source=partner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=gallinas)) of Take Root Hospitality. The Gallinas' Basque excursion will connect with the chefs, shepherds and winemakers, with arrangements made through Modern Adventure. ([https://modernadventure.com/our-trips/basque-country-with-michael-and-tara-gallina/?utm\\_source=partner&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=gallinas](https://modernadventure.com/our-trips/basque-country-with-michael-and-tara-gallina/?utm_source=partner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=gallinas))

Finally, to taste a bit of Spain's Basque County at home try Pimento Relleno, an easy pintxo recipe, compliments of Mimo Show Cooking.

Pimento Relleno *photo by Suzanne Corbett*

## **Pimento Relleno**

1 can of [Ortiz bonito white tuna](http://bit.ly/bonitotuna) (<http://bit.ly/bonitotuna>)

Mayonnaise

Whole grain mustard

Chopped shallots

Finely chopped dill pickle

Freshly ground black pepper and salt, to taste

[Espinaler piquillo peppers](http://bit.ly/piquillopeppers) (<http://bit.ly/piquillopeppers>)

Drain the can of tuna and place in a bowl. Mix tuna with a fork, adding mayonnaise, mustard, chopped shallots and chopped pickles. Spoon into a plastic bag with a corner cut off to enable it to be piped into peppers. Open pepper carefully and squeeze tuna into the peppers. Place on a plate, spear with picks and serve.

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