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small WORLD

A kind of travel column

Bilbao's hidden secrets

Spain's Basque country has long been fiercely independent, with an ancient language, wonderful countryside and delicious food. Travel writer Brendan Harding finds some more reasons to visit this friendly and welcoming part of the world

I DON'T know why I chose to walk through those exact doors, but for some uncanny reason I knew it was the right thing to do.

As the first drops of rain fell on the narrow streets of Bilbao's Old Town, I felt a pang of guilt. My first time here in this great Basque city, with its overflowing wishlist of delights, and I was skulking the back streets like a chastised mongrel. I consoled myself with the notion that I had at least glimpsed the warped and waving edifice of the Guggenheim Museum – albeit from the back seat of a speeding taxi. And hadn't I glimpsed the San Mamés stadium, the government buildings, a stately hotel or two and what appeared to be a giant dog made from flowers. Anyway, I rationalised, it's never good to rush your sightseeing when time is at a premium.

The Ariatza Bar was exactly what I was looking for. On my journey from the Petit Palace Hotel, set close to the banks of the Nervión River which meanders through the city at the pace of a Sunday stroller, I had passed a hundred places I could have stopped. A hundred delicious places whose bars groaned under the weight of their rich and varied display of *Pintxos* – the tapas of the Basque country. But I was on a mission.

It was on Goienkale, a long, narrow, gorge-like street just like all the others, that Ariatza stopped me in my tracks. It was neither a beautiful place nor an ugly but it dripped with freshly fallen rain and the simplicity I required.

There were two others sitting at the bar when I entered: a young man and woman snacking on gastronomic creations which resembled a master gourmet's handiwork, instead of the workings of a humble back street bar. They spoke in hushed sentences, checked their watches and left me alone with the bearded barman.

I ordered a beer (something which I've learned to do in over 20 languages, thankfully) and got out my notebook to write. The barman eyed me as I, in turn, eyed his vast selection of delicately arranged *Pintxos*. Unable to control myself any longer, I pointed at the



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two I wished to try and made the international silly signs for wanting to eat.

Pedro, I discovered, spoke perfect English as he prepared my snack. He had lived in Japan for many years and also spoke Japanese, making my hand gestures appear like the contortions of an escapee from some Victorian asylum. Our conversation continued on the subjects of football and economy, his Irish landlords when he had

lived in London and international politics, as I mumbled, oohed and aaahed over each bite of spicy chorizo and roast baby pig wrapped in delicate folds of *Jamon Iberico*. I was in heaven.

It was just then that another man entered Ariatza, ordered a beer and tucked into a huge triangular portion of sunflower yellow tortilla. Pedro must have told him I was Irish and for some reason best know to God and his Angels he came and sat beside

me, heartily slapping my back for good measure. I tried to converse in broken Spanish – which does tend to improve after my second beer – and learned he had been to Ireland once, travelling through Kerry, Cork and the other usual tourist spots. It had made a big impression on him, it appeared, as he bought me another drink.

It was time for me to leave and at least try to find something more meaningful to write about than some of the most delicious

Pintxos I had ever tasted and a bar owner named Pedro who spoke Japanese. I paid my ridiculously small bill, said my goodbyes and left.

As I was walking away, I heard a call from behind, "Irishman!"

That would be me, I thought, and turned. My new friend was running towards me babbling loudly. "Come, come," he said with a rather friendly smile, "I show you, big story."

I really have no idea why I haven't been murdered and dismembered by now, but I decided to follow the stranger anyway. He guided me through several back streets before stopping at a large wooden door and declaring proudly "*Txoko Zazpi-Kale*". I had heard of the Basque *Txoko*, the legendary and secretive private dining clubs where a select group of men (for it is the preserve of men alone) come together to cook for one another, drink, play cards and sing into the early hours, and now I was about to see one first hand.

Inside, the room full of stout wooden tables was empty except for three elderly men in one corner playing cards, drinking wine, smoking cigars and breaking into spontaneous bursts of song. There was a small bar heavily stocked with wines and spirits and a large open-plan cooking area where presumably the members could watch their *marmitako*, *piperade* or *percebes* being prepared to perfection by the chef of the night (possibly while singing and playing a hand of cards).

My new friend poured a bottle of sparkling wine in typical Basque style, spilling it from a height into glasses the size of milking buckets. "*Te gusto?*" he asked. I nodded that I did like it, very much in fact, so he poured again, and again, and again...

Eventually, the three older men joined us at the bar and felt the need to sing once more. Then it was my turn.

I never imagined for one single moment as I left my hotel room earlier in the day that I would end up here, in a legendary Basque *Txoko*, drinking wine with strangers and singing *An Poc ar Bhuille*, while outside in the drizzling streets Bilbao got ready to sleep ... Or did I?