The thrills and grills of San Sebastian

27 Jan 2011 by Nick Lander/FT

The culinary revolution that swept through the kitchens of San Sebastian initially, and then through the rest of Spain, had its origins, the story goes, in a culinary demonstration given by two French chefs, Paul Bocuse and Raymond Oliver, in Madrid in 1979.

Juan Mari Arzak and Pedro Subijana, then two young Basque chefs, were in the audience that day and promptly returned to their stoves not just inspired but also, in time, to inspire many others. Arzak has had a particularly avuncular and beneficial influence on Heston Blumenthal of The Fat Duck, for example.

But having just returned from San Sebastian, I am convinced that this is an over-simplification. Revolutions definitely need leaders but I don't believe that these two chefs would have achieved so much had the audience they were preaching to not been quite so enthusiastic.

For there is no doubt in my mind that the citizens of San Sebastian enjoy eating and drinking more than anybody else. This is most obvious in the tapas bars that litter the city - one map listed 35 in just one part of the old part of town - and the manner in which this style of food manages to satisfy all the senses.

This became most obvious on a stroll around the town at 7 pm. The bars were still empty but the chefs had obviously been busy. Every available centimetre on every available counter was packed with delicious things to eat. The colours, aromas and sense of abundance were a joy just to look at.

Over a coffee the following morning at Ibai, a tapas bar with a small restaurant underneath that is so popular with those who work nearby that we were unable to get a table, there was a similar, more personal experience.

A woman in a simple black dress came in, shouted '*Hola*' to the whistling but otherwise taciturn barman and placed a small package on the counter. He took this, handed her another one and, they had exchanged a few more words, she left.

When I caught his eye I quizzically mentioned the word drugs. He laughed and began to unravel the package to reveal several black truffles. As I began to inhale he ducked under the counter, ran down to the kitchen and returned with the biggest black truffle I have ever seen, certainly bigger than a boxer's clenched fist. 'It's from Teruel, north-east Spain', he explained with great pride.

On our return to Ibai the next day we were no more successful in securing a table but the visit did yield an unforgettable tapas moment. A glass of La Gitana manzanilla sherry poured from a just-opened bottle combined with two slices of crisp, white bread securing a couple of fresh-salted anchovy fillets and a slice of egg held together by a thin, oily mayonnaise. A second would have easily led to six.

It was this sense of consummate ease and confidence with the food and the manner in which customers are to be treated, as much as what we ate and drank, that left the strongest impressions at Arzak and at Elkano, 15 kilometres to the west of San Sebastian in the fishing village of Getaria.

Arzak is now in the hands of Elena, Juan Mari's daughter (father and daughter pictured here), whose quiet elegance as she takes the orders and then moves back to the kitchen (there is a discreet buzzer attached to the back of her apron) is entirely at one with the ultra professionalism of the all-female waiting staff.

Dressed in grey, Dickensian pinafores, they put on an exceptional performance, delivering the bread, olive oil, pouring the mineral water into a glass jug that is then left on the table, and then serving the food with unbridled enthusiasm. And they never once interrupt the table's conversation with an unnecessary or untimely explanation.

Dinner began modestly with two small bowls of earthy black bean with apple and corn soup. The local speciality of grilled baby eels followed and then a dish described on the menu intriguingly as 'Low tide monkfish'. This was a monkfish fillet

grilled and set beside an edible, colourful seashore: shells made of mussel puree, barnacles, jellyfish and seaweed, on a viscous 'beach' that constituted the dish's sauce.

Elkano is even more ship-shape in approach. The building itself resembles the prow of a ship; the wooden interior exudes the air of a first-class cabin; and the waitresses, here in black, dance to the tune commandingly laid down by its long-term captain, Pedro Arregui, who has been here since 1968, his wife and their son Aitor.

This ship runs so smoothly because there is a very clear division of responsibilities. Pedro is responsible for the dining room; Aitor does the buying, which takes him from the nearby quayside up to the one remaining dairy farm nearby for cheese and cream for their excellent ice creams (all the other farms have switched to growing the more profitable grapes for Txakoli, the light local white); and one chef outside by the entrance to the restaurant is responsible for the 'sea grill'.

This monster of a barbecue, at least two metres wide, takes everything that is put on it - clams, bass, turbot, bream, steaks - in individually shaped metal baskets and delivers an intense heat that crisps the skin of the fish, cooks the centre perfectly and turns the procession of the waitresses to the table into a visual treat.

Elkano's final attraction is a wine list studded with some very fine wines, particularly French, at very attractive prices.

Ibai, Getaria Kalea 15, San Sebastian 0034 943 428764

Arzak, San Sebastian www.arzak.es

Elkano, Getaria www.restaurantelkano.com