

Sommelier'en



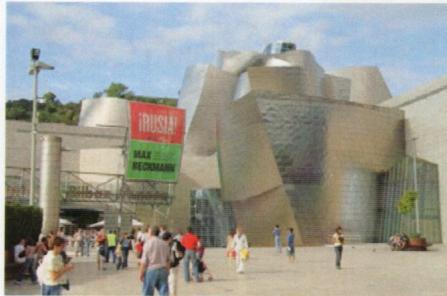
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Avant-Garde Cuisine at the Guggenheim Bilbao

By Laura Stadler-Jensen

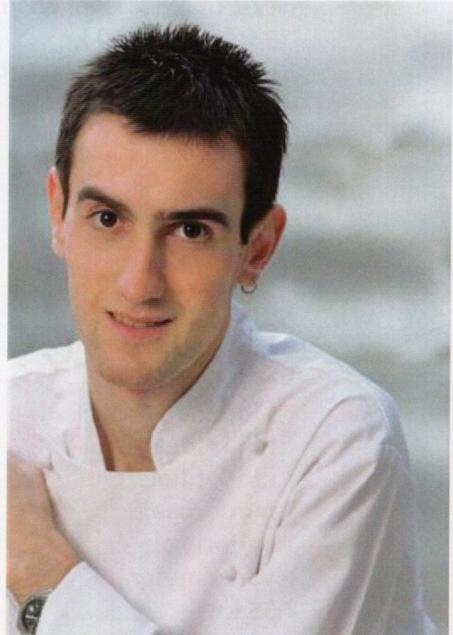


Most people go to the Guggenheim museum to enjoy the artwork. While we didn't see any pieces by Max Beckmann or sculpture by Richard Serra, we did see several works of culinary artistry made by one of the most exciting up and coming chefs in the Basque Country, home to more Star Michelin restaurants per capita than anywhere else on the planet.

During our stay in San Sebastian this summer we traveled to Bilbao to visit the Guggenheim. My husband, Lasse Fredrik Jensen, chef at the American Embassy in Copenhagen, and I were there because he was spending the week observing the kitchen at Restaurant Arzak, currently the world's ninth best restaurant with a total of three well-deserved stars. Being the dutiful wife that I am, I went with him for moral support and it was only a bonus that San Sebastian is located on the perfectly shaped horseshoe Bay of Biscay.

After informing Elena Arzak about our plans to visit Bilbao, she offered to call the chef to arrange a reservation for lunch. On our way to Bilbao, about 50 kilometers or a one-hour drive from San Sebastian, Elena phoned us to say that the restaurant hadn't opened yet, but that she would call us back in one hour; "I will call in one hour; no? You understand?" "Si, si, gracias, Elena," my husband replied. "Balle, balle," she said.

We arrived in Bilbao and there it was. The enormous oddly shaped titanium building. Its



Josean Martinez Alja

smooth curves and sculpted pointed corners made the building look like a warped formation from somewhere in outer space. Once a parking garage was found, Elena called again to inform us that the chef had agreed to seat us at a special table they would arrange at 1:30 because they were fully booked. We had 20 minutes to find our way to the restaurant and made it just in time.

Owned by Martin Berasategui, the Guggenheim restaurant contains an outdoor café and an indoor cafeteria for museum visitors, a dining-room with a set menu at lunchtime and a gastronomic restaurant. Other well-known restaurants owned by Martin Berasategui include one named after himself, Martin Berasategui, as well as Kursaal, and Bodegón Alejandro, located in San Sebastian.

Upon arrival we were greeted by the hostess who introduced us to the chef, Josean Martinez Alja. Josean spoke Spanish while the hostess translated his words into English. He



was tall and thin with a very serious professional composure. We chatted for a few short minutes and he quickly disappeared off into the kitchen. We were then handed off to the head waiter, Urko, who gave us a tour of the kitchen and explained the various stations as we watched the organized chaos flow around the kitchen like an orchestra playing harmoniously.

Once seated at a table in the back of the restaurant with a view of the entire room, we settled into place for what would become a culinary exploration of the senses. Shortly after, Urko poured us a glass of Aguirreberro Txaroli, a white wine from the region, and said they had a lot of interesting things for us to try, but they were in the process of translating the menu into English for us.

Next, the restaurant manager presented us with the typed-up menu on an official Guggenheim card. He explained that the menu consisted of suggestions from the chef that would provide a complete sampling of the kitchen and their cooking styles, as well as a way to learn about the Basque traditions and ingredients. He left us for a few moments to decide. After quickly scanning the menu, which consisted of eight courses and two desserts, we didn't see any items that we weren't fond of or allergic to, so decided to give it a go and go for the gusto. We placed the menu card to the side and studied it while we waited for what was in store.

At 2:15 an appetizer was served. Urko clasped his hands together, smiled wide and pushed his Basque-like thick black eyebrows down to focus his attention totally on us and said, "Well, now we begin." "This is just an appetizer to get the taste buds going," he said.

He explained that the concept of the kitchen is to keep the tastes neutral and use cooking methods that bring out the product's own tastes and intensify the flavours.

Three small meatballs in sherry sauce with a small piece of lemon rind confit and the heart of bell pepper were served. The small white heart of the pepper still had its seeds in tact and gave a slightly crunchy texture when eaten together with the soft meatball. The lemon gave a perfect zest and was full of intense fresh lemon flavour, like the taste of summer in Spain.



The sommelier was the next one to visit us and came with the wine list. She recommended two different Riojas that she considered to be the best examples from the region. We chose the Evento de Castillo de Mendoza 2001 Rioja. When she returned with the bottle, she elegantly poured the wine into a beautiful carafe.

It had an intense almost zinfandel-type flavor that was heavy and strong but smooth and light at the same time.

Urko came with the first course. Roasted and raw wild asparagus dressed with kefir foam, a type of cultured milk with a sour taste like buttermilk, and gomasio, or ground roasted sesame seeds with salt. He explained that the idea was to take one single piece of asparagus and prepare it two different ways. The cooked piece was whole and the uncooked piece was cut into thin long strips. The taste was salty, sour, and sweet. The texture of the raw asparagus was slightly soft from the foam and the gomasio sprinkled on top added another dimension to the dish. For some strange reason it brought out the memory of taste of wasabi.

After finishing, another waiter came to collect our dishes and silverware taking the cutlery



Roasted and raw wild asparagus dressed with kefir foam.



Raw green bean juice.



Char grilled seasonal squid.



Each set of cheeks were paired with a drizzle of a retro emerald green mint sauce.



Roast sea-bass loin.



Cream of pumpkin.