



**First crush** In Astigarraga, cidermakers pulp apples for pressing

# DAY TRIPPER

## A Good Time for Cider

**TXOTX!** WITH A CRY, GABRIEL Lizeaga pulls a tiny stick—the *txotx* itself—from the face of an immense wooden barrel. A thin stream of straw-colored liquid carves an arc several feet long through the air and into a waiting glass. One by one, Lizeaga's clients remove themselves from their lively conversations and platters of fried cod, and make their way over to fill their glasses. "In the past, you would come just to try the new cider," says one

reveler. "Now it's a big party."

And everyone's invited. From January until early May, *txotx* season—named after that all-important little stick—takes over this part of Spain's Basque region. Cider houses in the Gipuzkoa countryside around San Sebastián open their doors to a convivial ritual that is at once deeply Basque and thoroughly welcoming. The best place to experience it is Astigarraga, three miles (5 km) south of

the city. During the *txotx*, this small town is cider central, with 17 cider houses ranging from the intimate Lizeaga to the large, beam-ceilinged Petritegi.

The ritual originated when cidermakers began offering restaurants and culinary societies the chance to place orders for that year's vintage before it was bottled. Potential clients would bring their own

**During the *txotx*, the small town of Astigarraga is cider central**

food to help offset the lightly alcoholic effects of the cider. But for the past few decades, the cider houses have done the catering. For around \$40 a head, patrons can enjoy all the cider they can drink and a set menu of salt-cod omelette, salt cod with peppers or immense grilled steaks, followed by local Idiazabal cheese served with quince and walnuts—all eaten standing up from shared platters.

"You stand so that you can go over to the barrels more easily," says Arantxa Eguzkiza, president of the Gipuzkoa Natural Cider Association, as she joins in the fun at Petritegi. "And because it's more communal." Indeed, most every aspect of the *txotx* is about community—from the way patrons scrunch around tables to make room for latecomers, to the tight lines they form at the barrel to make sure not a drop is missed of the pale, naturally effervescent liquid as it travels from tap to glass. When Petritegi's owner opens a new barrel, a crowd quickly gathers around it. Watching a group of Brazilian tourists laugh with some older local men as they wait to get their drinks, Eguzkiza smiles approvingly: "At the *txotx*, everyone is friends for the night." —BY

LISA ABEND

# AMUSE-BOUCHE

## Bespoke Chocolates

IMAGINE BEING GIVEN FREE CREATIVE rein in England's most exclusive chocolate factory, one that uses the latest equipment and specializes only in top-end ingredients. It's a fantasy come true for any chocolate connoisseur—and the man who can make it happen is Bill McCarrick, master chocolatier at Sir Hans Sloane Chocolate House in Surrey. The newest player in the increasingly competitive world of elite chocolatiers, McCarrick wants to take cocoa appreciation to a higher level by letting clients create bespoke handmade choco-

lates. "Conventional definitions of luxury chocolates are passé," he says. "This is a different echelon of luxury to do with rarity, and I'm offering a creative personal experience."

First, McCarrick asks about your taste preferences, especially for fruits and wine. Once you've decided what flavor to imbue your filling with, the tasting starts, with McCarrick helping to pick from a range of *couvertures* (the mixture from which the chocolates are made) to find the

best match for your chosen center. It's *terroir* rather than cocoa content that counts; you may want Panamanian chocolate redolent of tobacco, a more floral Madagascan, or a Venezuelan infused with red berry and raisin. Production starts only after more fine-tunings to ensure your chocolate is just right—whether it was conceived to complement a certain wine, to encapsulate a spice remembered from a special holiday or simply to attain the ultimate in chocolate indulgence.

The \$2,400 tailor-made package includes tasting consultations, a handmade rosewood-and-maple inlaid box containing 60 customized chocolates, and a backup box of another 60. As all good chocoholics know, it wouldn't do to run out. [www.sirhanssloane.com](http://www.sirhanssloane.com) —BY SUDI PIGOTT

Your choice *Custom chocs* let cocoa fans express themselves

