

## Culinary Autonomy

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in the *casco viejo*, or old quarter, and find one bathed in a warm yellow light. It is pintxo heaven: Inside, hungry tasters are packed into the narrow bar like sardines and the atmosphere is convivial. The pintxos – anchovies on grilled peppers, asparagus wrapped in salmon, baguettes crowned with crabmeat or ham, even white fish that could pass for Basque sashimi – are stacked on white plates along the bar. In true Spanish style, toothpicks and napkins are tossed on the floor and the bartender calculates the bill by trusting the customer's own tally. Small squares of waxy paper serve as cocktail napkins, but do little to soak up the olive oil on my hands. The bigger challenge, I realize, will be to leave each tapas bar after only a taste or two.

"Can you take our picture?" Four young Spaniards dressed in white T-shirts are holidaying in San Sebastián en route to the Running of the Bulls. Javier Moreno, who runs a catering company in Madrid, is so inspired by the array of food on display at the bar, he snaps digital close-ups of the *bocadillos* and variations of toppings piled on toasted rounds of bread. "In Madrid, we don't have tapas like this, not like these pintxos," explains his

friend, Javier Marin. "Tapas in Madrid are kept behind glass cases – not piled high and covering every inch of space on the bar."

The *madrileños* invite me to join them in search of another tapas bar. It's still far too early for dinner in Spain, which is usually eaten after 9 p.m. A light rain has started to fall – the narrow pedestrian-only streets of the old town are already slick – but there are no awnings or overhangs to duck under, so we dash into the first bar we find on the grand Alameda del Boulevard, separating the old town from the more modern *zona romántica*. The bar's interior is decorated with black-and-white photographs of traditional Basque sports – strong-man competitions and handball, or *jai alai* – a reminder of a culture radically different from the rest of Spain. My Castilian friends, I realize, are just as puzzled by this cultural shift as I am. I look around the bar. The origin of these Basques and their language remain a mystery; genetically, the Basques are different from other Europeans; and the Basque language, *Euskera*, is arguably the oldest living European language. But one thing is clear: despite countless invasions and occupations, the indomitable Basques have kept their culture alive for thousands of years.

### sketches of spain

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A stay at El Molino promises hands-on instruction from well-known Canadian painters such as Richard McDiarmind and Suzanne Northcott, gourmet meals and Spanish or cooking lessons if desired. Workshops are rounded out with excursions to nearby hill towns (Ronda) and attractions (the Alhambra).

**the basics:** \$3,200 to \$3,800 per person for a 13- to 16-day package, including all meals, accommodation, courses, excursions and transportation to and from the airport. □

**i** 1-888-986-2262; [www.aflavourofspain.ca](http://www.aflavourofspain.ca)

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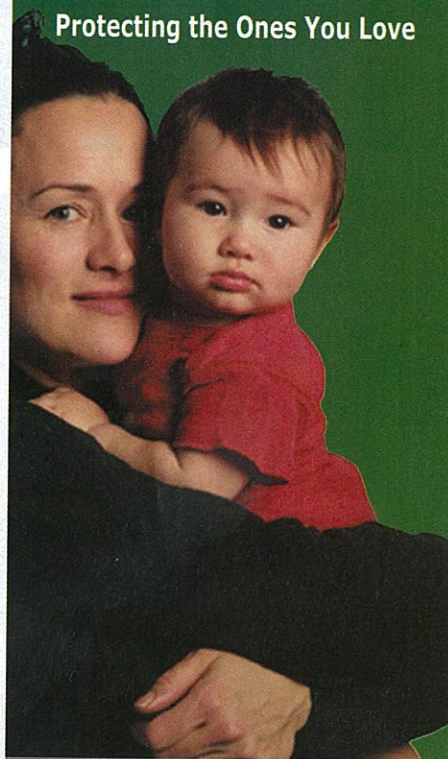
**i** [bcaa.com/spain](http://bcaa.com/spain) or your nearest BCAA sales office (see page 94).

**My last evening** in San Sebastián, a friend and I dine at one of the many restaurants specializing in *nueva cocina vasca* (new wave Basque cuisine) in the old quarter, not far from the oldest gastronomic society. We share the eight-course *menú degustación*, starting with foie gras yogurt and gazpacho shooters garnished with clover and daisies, followed by octopus, hake and a surprising potato-and-apple salad.

At a nearby table, one couple trades forkfuls of their dishes, smokes cigarettes between each course and, at the end of their languorous two-hour meal, politely bickers over the bill. The *marmitako*, I realize, is symbolic of the Basque region's cuisine and culture. The slow food movement has been embraced wholeheartedly here, by the gastronomic societies and the best chefs, as well as the locals. Soon the tourists will leave, as they always do, for the Running of the Bulls in Pamplona, and San Sebastián will fall back into its own quiet rhythm. I, too, will come away from the city with a fuller impression, of a place far more layered and complex than the one encountered on my first visit. And this time, I'll know better than to wait so long to return. ▣

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