Mientras en casa los nacionalistas unionistas españoles se empeñan en negar la existencia de Euskal Herria (y por lo tanto la existencia de un conflicto político), persiguen símbolos como la Ikurriña en Nafarroa o incluso prohíben el mapa de Euskal Herria en los libros de texto; a miles de kilómetros, al otro lado del Atlántico, el archiconocido rotativo neoyorkino New York Times ilustraba un artículo sobre la nueva cocina vasca con un mapa en el que podía observarse Euskal Herria.

El pasado 29 de Julio la sección de viajes del New York Times recogía un interesante artículo sobre restaurantes ubicados en Hondarribia. A la hora de ubicar geográficamente la localidad el NY Times utiliza un mapa en el que puede observarse perfectamente la silueta de Euskal Herria dentro de una línea discontinua entre los estados español y francés. Se trata nada más y menos que de la Euskal Herria formada por los 7 territorios que forman la Comunidad Autónoma del País Vasco, la Comunidad Foral de Navarra, y el País Vascofrancés (Iparralde).

Mientras PP, PSOE y UPN niegan y tratan de silenciar las voces discordantes que afirman la existencia de un pueblo asentado a ambos lados del pirineo, con su propia lengua, cultura e idiosincrasia; parece ser que en la gran manzana alguien ha conseguido escuchar el eco de nuestra voz.
A Dining Explosion in a Tiny Basque Town

By INGRID K. WILLIAMS

Published: July 29, 2010

TRY to imagine the gustatory experience of running up a mountain. Drawing a blank?

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Delightful Bites in Hondarribia

An avant-garde dish called Juego de Verdura claims to be just that. On a small plate there are two short glasses, one spewing cloudlike vapor and the other containing layers of egg, mushroom, vegetable soup and spinach-tinged foam. Strangely delicious, it also makes sense: Envision jogging upward past hens (there’s the egg), then mushrooms and small vegetable gardens (that’s the green soup and foam), and, upon reaching the summit, being surrounded by early morning mist (that’s the bartender’s cue to pour hot broth over dry ice, unleashing a swirl of fog over the table).

This is just one fantastical example of the innovative cuisine being dreamed up by a crop of talented young chefs in Hondarribia, a hamlet in Basque Country on the northern coast of Spain.

For the last decade, Basque cuisine has held a vaunted status in the culinary world; the region is awash in Michelin-starred restaurants headed by first-rate chefs like Juan Mari Arzak and Martin Berasategui. With the brightest stars orbiting around San Sebastián, that city is a revered destination for food enthusiasts eager to taste delicately constructed, technologically complex dishes that challenge every notion of what food could be.

But in the last few years, the apprentices of these acclaimed kitchens have struck out on their own, extending lofty new standards across the region.

With its abundant variety of local produce, a daily influx of fresh seafood, and what has become a critical mass of new talent, the tiny town of Hondarribia has emerged as one of the best places to experience the region’s ambitious cuisine, and without the parading crowds of San Sebastián, just 13 miles away.

Hondarribia, Spain

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“Here there are 15 or 20 young chefs and they are all very motivated,” said Bixente Muñoz, a local chef, former protégé of Mr. Berasategui and the mastermind behind the award-winning mountain dish, the Juego de Verdura (Vegetable Game). The chefs, he said, “try to do their own thing; some are more traditional, some are more innovative, but everything has to do with the love for the products.”

Situated on Spain’s Atlantic coast, Hondarribia sits on the banks of the Bidasoa River, which flows into the ocean just beyond the town’s port. On the other side of the river — a seven-minute ferry ride away — is France.

The center of town is anchored by two historically relevant neighborhoods: the ancient Parte Vieja, where a maze of cobblestone lanes winds past medieval stone palaces and traditional Basque wood-beamed houses; and the fishermen’s village known as the Marina, where old men congregate on benches along San Pedro Kalea, a tree-lined street packed with lively pintxo bars.

A touchstone of Basque culture and a focal point for the new breed of chefs, pintxos are small, often bite-size creations similar to Spanish tapas. The tradition of txikiteo, or pintxo-bar-hopping, is to go from bar to bar, grabbing a pintxo or two and a drink before moving on to the next. Throughout Basque Country, pintxo bar chefs strive to outdo one another, and formal pintxo competitions up the ante. In recent years, Hondarribia bars have competed against San Sebastián’s with favorable results, earning regional and national recognition for their tiny masterpieces.

Mr. Muñoz’s Gran Sol is perhaps Hondarribia’s most successful pintxo bar and has trophies and plaques to prove it. After achieving national acclaim for his miniature creations, Mr. Muñoz sought another challenge, so in 2008 he opened a new restaurant in town, Sugarri, where he presents his gastronomic artistry on larger plates.

But it was back at Gran Sol, on a recent sunny Thursday afternoon, that locals packed the bar, munching on his creative bites and sipping glasses of cider or txakoli, a local dry white wine poured from a height to grand effect.

“For a long time it was San Sebastián, but now I think the food in Hondarribia is best,” said Alvaro Larramendi, a local sailor and Gran Sol regular.

In addition to a stop at Gran Sol, any good Hondarribia txikiteo will include Vinoteka Ardoka across the street, and Enbata a few blocks away.

Opened in 2008, Vinoteka Ardoka is a chic wine bar with black and white décor that serves modern pintxos to a younger crowd. At Enbata, businessmen in suits are more likely to be sidling up to the polished counter, eating elegant pintxos like grilled jamón ibérico with warm tomato salsa.

With a charming old town, a breezy riverfront promenade and a sizable slab of sandy beach, Hondarribia is a natural destination for Spanish and French vacationers. But the town has yet to begin attracting anywhere near the international crowd that flocks to San Sebastián, a state of affairs reinforced by the lack of new hotels. Instead, Hondarribia is still a place primarily for residents; most restaurants are occupied by local families and couples, not tourists.

“The fact that there are so many high-level restaurants here is because of the high degree of gastronomic cultivation of the people in the region,” said Gorka Txapartegi, the chef at Hondarribia’s only Michelin-starred restaurant, Alameda.

After training at Martín Berasategui’s three-starred restaurant in Lasarte that bears his name and in the starred Zuberoa kitchen in nearby Oiartzun, Mr. Txapartegi returned to Hondarribia to head the kitchen of his family’s restaurant, which has evolved from the simple tavern that his grandmother opened in 1942. Earlier this year, he was named chef of the year by the Basque Academy of Gastronomy, an impressive honor in such a food-crazed region.

“Technical knowledge allows you to dare and try new things,” he said, which at Alameda means
light, modern cuisine without any hocus-pocus. Instead, it’s the skillful presentation and delightful surprises — a tangy shot of creamy cheese in an amuse-bouche of pea soup and smoked salmon, or tiny violet flowers adorning succulent jamón ibérico and white asparagus — that help make Mr. Txapartegi’s food so pleasurable.

But one needn’t be a foodie with a fat wallet to enjoy Hondarribia’s offerings. As Mr. Txapartegi put it, “good restaurants here are not just for people with a lot of money.”

In fact, demand for quality cuisine at reasonable prices means that some of the best places for a sit-down meal are surprisingly unassuming locations.

From Alameda, it’s a leisurely 15-minute walk into the hills past twittering birds and grazing sheep to Laia Erretegia, a rustic restaurant and cider house where the 16-euro ($20) three-course lunch might end with an outstanding, ephemeral rice pudding.

Closer to the Marina, Abarka Jatetxea serves pitch-perfect food, but from the sidewalk, the restaurant could easily be mistaken for an ordinary home. And on another residential street snaking away from the Marina, the yard and swing set outside Arroka Berri give no indication that awaiting inside are elegant dining rooms, crisp linens and a kitchen that produces divine sea bass and delectable crème caramel.

In a town where one can spend the day murmuring “This is the best thing I’ve ever tasted,” it’s reassuring to hear Mr. Txapartegi’s prediction for gastronomy in Hondarribia: “The cuisine will certainly evolve, but without forgetting its roots.”

IF YOU GO

GETTING THERE
San Sebastián Airport is actually located in Hondarribia, and a recent online search for September found an Iberia Airlines flight from Kennedy Airport, with a connection in Madrid, for about $750.

WHERE TO STAY
Formerly the stomping grounds of Spanish royals, the Parador El Emperador (Plaza de Armas 14; 34-943-645-500; paradores.es) is a 10th-century castle that’s been converted into a luxury hotel in the Parte Vieja. Doubles start at 224 euros, or about $280 at $1.26 to the euro.

Hotel Obispo (Plaza del Obispo; 34-943-645-400; hotelobispo.com) is a more affordable, 14th- or 15th-century palace with similar medieval charm. Doubles start at 96 euros. For more modern luxury, Hotel Jaizkibel (Baserritar Etorbidea 1; 34-943-646-040; hoteljaizkibel.com) is a tranquil, wood-paneled oasis. Doubles start at 100 euros.

WHERE TO TXIKITEO

Ardoka Vinoteka, San Pedro 32; 34-943-643-169.

Enbata, Zuloaga 5; 34-943-641-400; hoteljauregui.com/restaurante.htm.

WHERE TO EAT (WITH A SEAT)
Alameda, Minasoroeta 1; 34-943-642-789; restalameda.com.

Laia Erretega, Barrio Arkolla 33; 34-943-646-309; laiaerretega.com.


Sugarri, Nafarroa Behera 1; 34-943-643-123; sugarrirestaurante.com.

A version of this article appeared in print on August 1, 2010, on page TR9 of the New York edition.
Información detallada sobre el País Vasco se puede encontrar en Euskadi.net.
Otras posibilidades de actividades turísticas están descritas aquí.
Mapa de Euskal Herria