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THE FOOD SPECIAL

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NEW RESTAURANT SCENE  
WHERE TO STAY WHILE  
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A FRESH TAKE ON  
TRADITION IN LADAKH  
COMBING THE DEVON COAST  
FOR THE BEST SEAFOOD

MEET THE GLOBAL PIONEERS  
CHANGING HOW WE EAT  
FROM ACCRA TO ALENTEJO



— The Food Special —

# NEW PORTS OF CALL

SAN SEBASTIAN FINALLY HAS THE HOTELS TO MATCH ITS MICHELIN STARS. BY PAUL RICHARDSON

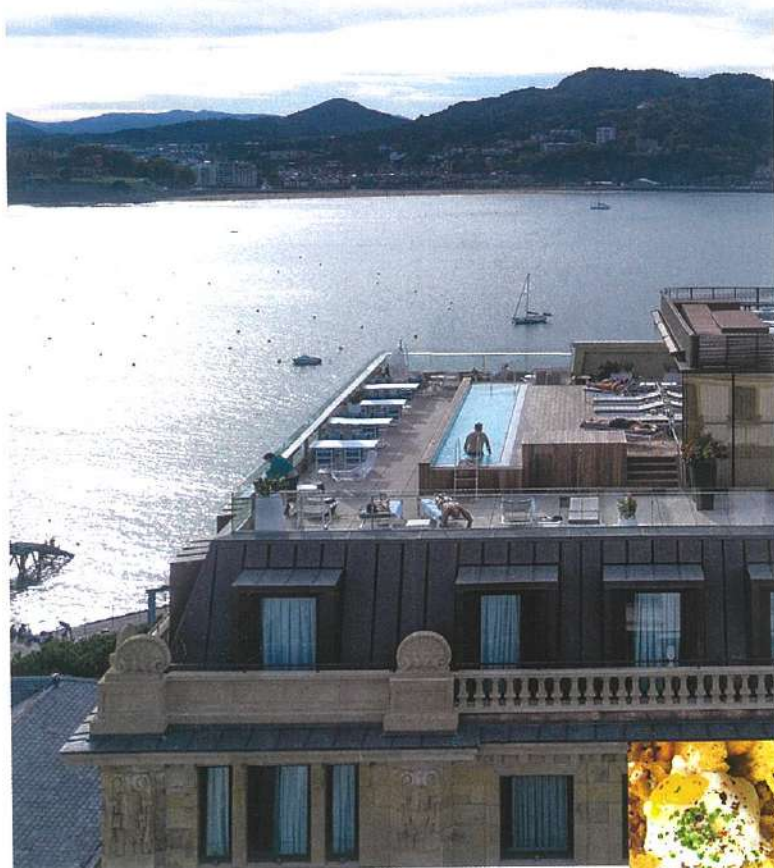
SATURDAY NIGHT IN THE PARTE VIEJA, GROUND ZERO OF SAN SEBASTIAN'S legendary food scene, and the party's in full swing. Calle 31 de Agosto, bristling with pintxo bars along its length, is a roaring river of humanity — the hum of pure pleasure echoing between its stone walls. There are couples devouring mushroom croquetas at Gandarias; platters of artichoke hearts in crisp tempura batter making their way towards greedy customers over the bartop at Martínez. I see Lourdes Erquicia, a local food guide I've come to know over the years, leading a group of New Yorkers on their evening gastro-ramble from bar to bar — her first such tour in months — from prawn brocheta and crab tartaleta to anchovy on toast with foie gras and blueberry jam. Lourdes grins and waves in my direction. Shepherding the group into the downstairs bar at Casa Urola, she calls to the barman over the heads of the garrulous crowd: "Six Riojas, Inaki, when you can!"

# WHERE TO STAY

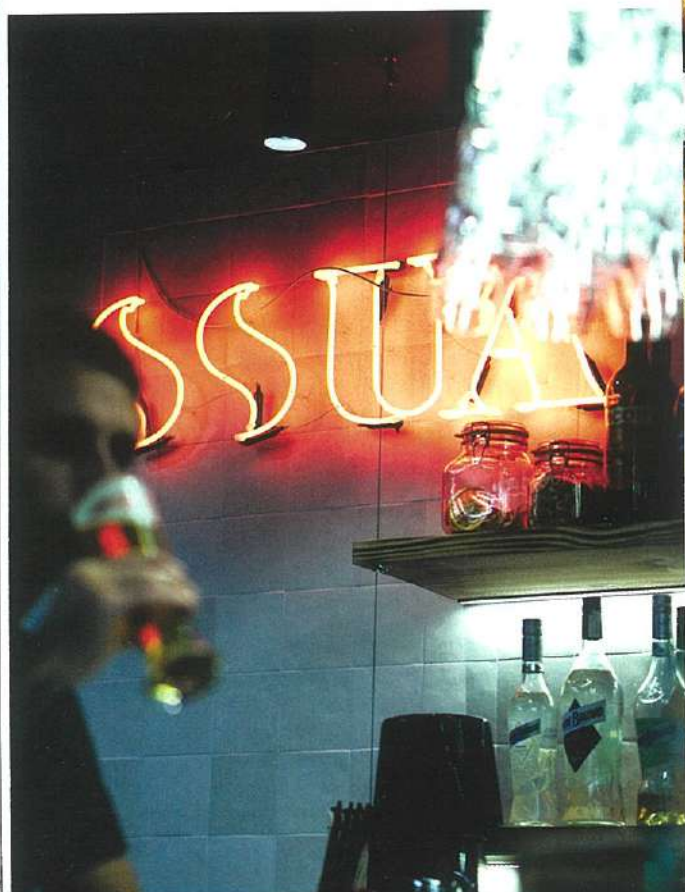


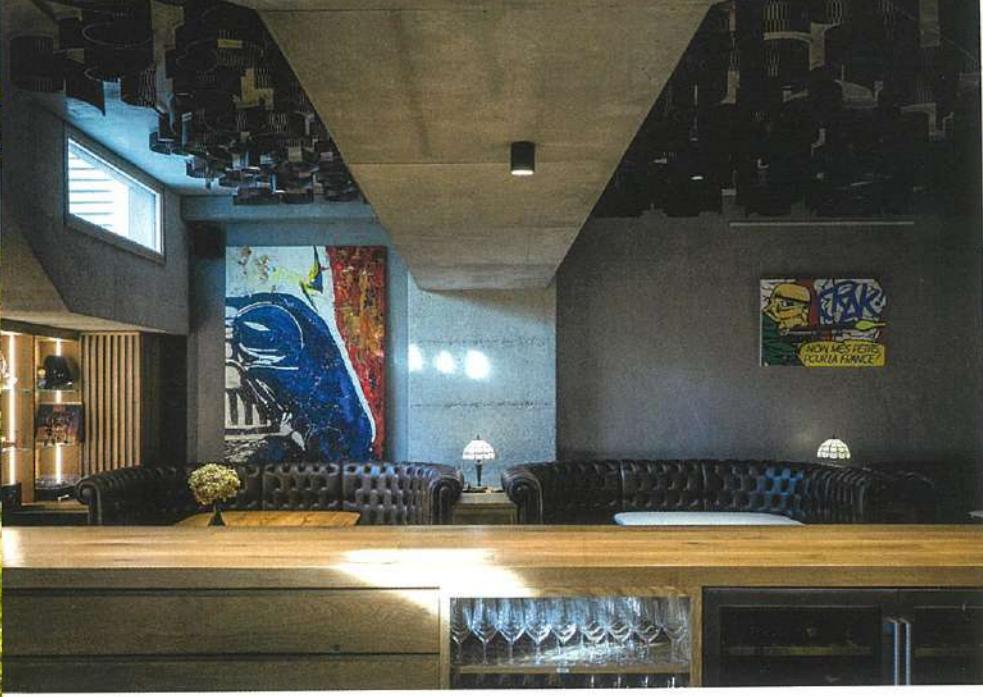
PHOTOGRAPH: ANA LUI

WHERE TO STAY — The Food Special —



Clockwise from top left: Lasala Plaza rooftop; plating up at Amelia; cocktail at The Blind Pig; dining room at Villa Soro; Ssua bar; dish of migas al pastor de Gorbea at Matalauva. Opposite, from left: Villa Soro exterior; minimalist style at Amelia. Previous pages, La Concha bay





It's hard to imagine, as you contemplate the vibrant scene, that until a decade ago these old-town streets were grimy and forbidding; a corner where Basque separatist group ETA held sway. Equally, the misery of the past two years already seems like a distant memory. The pandemic hit San Sebastián with the force of an Atlantic storm. Hotel Maria Cristina, the city's reigning grande dame, was commandeered as a Covid hospital. For this gregarious town, not being able to rub shoulders with strangers in a noisy bar was both an indignity and a psychological blow.

But my recent visit has proved – to my great relief – that San Sebastián is not only back with a vengeance, but there's never been a better time to visit. Now, along with a galaxy of Michelin stars and a febrile creativity in its pintxo bars, cider-houses and asadores, there's finally a critical mass of good places to sleep. In a city once defined by characterless four-stars and cheap-and-cheerful pensiones, a glut of fine hotels has

places to eat: Zazpi at San Telmo Museoa, with its refined tasting menus; and Labe, attached to the Tabakalera arts centre, where genre-pushing locavore dishes are part of the self-styled food laboratory.

The Parte Vieja, too, is buzzier than ever. The fiesta atmosphere seems faintly unhinged, as if the city can't quite believe it has its old lazing/grazing lifestyle back. The classic pintxo bars – Ganbara, Txepetxa, La Cuchara de San Telmo and the rest – are still packing them in, but experienced pintxo pickers may prefer to head for a handful of newer places, including Ssua (“fire” in Basque), a must-try for its dynamic grill-based cooking, and fish-focused Kofradia Itsas Etxea.

At the same time, attention is increasingly swivelling away from the old town into less frenzied neighbourhoods. La Concha, overlooking one of the great urban beaches, has generally been trending downwards since its Twenties glory days, but the arrival of Villa Favorita is changing

## WHAT'S HAPPENING IS LESS ABOUT EXPERIMENTATION AND MORE ABOUT THE DESIRE TO BE ENTERTAINED. THERE ARE RELAXED NEW CONCEPTS SUCH AS BASQUE-MEX

come along at once, building on the 2017 arrival of Akelarre, the high-design addendum to Pedro Subijana's restaurant on Igeldo hill.

Chief among them is the revival of Villa Soro. Previously I wasn't overly taken with the place – its mash-up of Surrey Tudor and bourgeois Basque feeling somehow frowzy and purse-lipped. But following its purchase and reopening by the Soldevila Ferrers, the family behind the Sant Francesc and Can Ferrereta in Mallorca, the old building has a fresher edge. The makeover, in the careful hands of Núria Ferrer, maintains original elements such as the carved wooden staircase, the creaky parquet flooring and the stained-glass roof of the central hall, complemented with smart new furnishings, judiciously chosen modern art and bathrooms that nail the crisp Art Deco look.

San Sebastián's restaurant culture, once again firing on all cylinders, also feels like it's adapting. The hallowed gastro temples – Arzak, Rekondo, Akelarre, Mugaritz – are mostly booked out for the summer. But so much of what's happening is less about furrow-browed experimentation and more about a simple desire to be entertained. There are relaxed new concepts such as The Blind Pig speakeasy, supper club Cortázar Donostia and Basque-Mex gastrobar Gatzupa. Even art centres have smart new

that. This 23-room townhouse is bringing back well-heeled Europeans with its exquisite gleaming interiors of brass, mirrors and hints of maritime style. In the basement, Argentinian Paulo Airaudo's restaurant Amelia – which recently won its second Michelin star – shows the extent to which Latin American cooking is making waves here (expect more tacos, ceviche and cochinita pibil on pintxo-bar menus.)

Gros, behind Zurriola surf beach, is booming, too, as is the ever-more attractive Centro. The latter was always an administrative and retail hub but never had much to draw visitors until the opening of crisply minimal Hotel Arbaso a few years ago. Its restaurant, Narru, where chef Iñigo Peña creates stripped-down dishes based on cocina de producto, is just part of a growing local food scene. This is seen especially around San Martín food market, where new additions include smart grill bar Maun and Rua887, whose white tablecloths belie free-spirited cooking.

One day, I spy a family enjoying the sunshine on Rua887's terrace. Tacos of smoked pork rib have just arrived on the table, along with huge carabinero prawns and a platter of oysters with cava foam. “What fun!” exclaims the father, as they all tuck in – a remark that describes the current mood in a city that is very much enjoying life. 🍷

PHOTOGRAPHS: PAULO AIRAUDO; UNAI PEREZ AZALDEGUI/STUDIO MANDRAGORA PHOTOGRAPHERS; ANA LU

## WHERE TO STAY — The Food Special —



Clockwise from top: sheep's-milk ice cream with cider gel at Ssua; staff member at Bar Arenales; bar at Villa Favorita; pumpkin ravioli at Arenales

## FRESH TAKES ON THE CITY

### WHERE TO STAY

**VILLA SORO** Dating from 1898, this former summer house on the outskirts of Gros still has quirky charm, but the new owners have added a certain arty cool, as well as vintage holland bikes for jaunts to the beach. *Doubles from about £125; villasoro.es*

**HOTEL ARBASO** It's the sort of place San Sebastián has been oddly lacking – a cool townhouse boutique with interiors of oak, marble and iron. Suites are almost apartment-sized and look over the cathedral from ornamental balconies. Narru restaurant has become a cult destination for its creative seasonal food, from pig's tail and scarlet prawns to spider crab and Iberian pork jowls. *Doubles from about £130; hotelarbaso.com*

**VILLA FAVORITA** Opened mid-pandemic, this elegantly whitewashed seafront offshoot of the Hotel de Londres has quickly claimed the title of the city's most glamorous new address. Check out the trompe-l'oeil murals by Paul Christopher McKenna. Amelia restaurant is overseen by Paulo Airaud, whose other projects include top trattoria Da Filippo and speakeasy The Blind Pig. *Doubles from about £140; hotelvillafavorita.com*

**LASALA PLAZA** At this breezily modern spot in a grand stone building on an old-town square, the standout feature is the rooftop bar, with a long, slim pool and wide-screen harbour views – as good as any hotel in the city. *Doubles from about £125; lasalaplazahotel.com*

### WHERE TO EAT

**KOFRADIA ITSAS ETXEA** Now in its second season, this gleaming pavilion on the harbourside is a laudable project serving sustainably caught and lesser-known species of fish. The "brotherhood" behind it also runs net-repairing workshops and guided tours of the fishing port. *About £50 for two; kofradia.eus*

**BAR ARENALES** What was once a neighbourhood hangout on the boulevard is now a bistro that breaks new ground for traditionally minded San Sebastián, with a modern take on plant-based cooking and natural wines. *About £50 for two; @arenales.bar*

**GAIA** Toledo-born chef Ismael Iglesias follows his success at Kata4 and Rita with this interesting venture at the Zenit hotel in the newly built Morlans district. The emphasis is on long-cured meats and locally landed fish, cooked skillfully on the charcoal grill. *About £60 for two; gaiaadonosti.com*

**GATXUPA** Playful Basque-Mexican fusion by Bruno Oteiza – try the spider-crab tostada with green chilli and peanuts – in a cool space in Gros, where the industrial look is spiced up with blasts of tropical colour. *Pinxtos from £8; gatxupa.com*

### WHAT TO DO

**VILLA MAGDALENA** Cy Schnabel, son of Julian, has created a contemporary gallery in the artfully weather-beaten space (formerly his father's studio) below the family house in Igeldo. By appointment only. *villamagdalenaa33.com*

**ISLA DE SANTA CLARA** Cristina Iglesias's monumental, lava-like bronze sculpture inside the lighthouse on Santa Clara, an islet in La Concha bay, is a major talking point in San Sebastián. Ferries to the island leave from the old harbour.

**MIMO BITE THE EXPERIENCE** This bijou gastro-tourism outfit, run by chefs Patricio Fuentes and Eneko Irizar, offers Basque cookery classes and foodie tours from within the Hotel Maria Cristina. *mimo.eus*