

Elena Arzak



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The third generation of Arzaks to run the eponymous restaurant, Elena Arzak has maintained the three Michelin stars awarded to the restaurant back in 1989 and kept the Arzak name at the top table of the restaurant world.



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Elena Arzak grew up in a restaurant kitchen in the building that her great grandparents built in 1897 (previously a wine bar and tavern). In 1966, Elena's father, Juan Mari Arzak, and her grandmother, Francisca Arratibel, took over the cooking. In 1974 the Arzak restaurant gained its first Michelin star and in 1989 Arzak restaurant was awarded the three Michelin stars that it has maintained ever since.

Elena has been cooking at Arzak since the 1990s, eventually becoming joint head chef in the late 2000s and, now, running it almost entirely alone.

'It wasn't inevitable that I would become a chef,' she says, 'my sister also grew up working in the restaurant and although she loves food and cooking she didn't want to do it professionally and became an art historian. My parents constantly warned me about how hard the job is, how long the hours are, and pointed out that it was only worth doing if I really wanted to, but I knew that it was from an early age.'

Keenly aware of the skills needed to run a 3* restaurant Elena left Spain to study, firstly at a hotel school in Lucerne in Switzerland and then at various top-end restaurants in Europe such as Le Gavroche in London and La Maison Troisgros, Le Louis XV and Restaurant Pierre Gagnaire in France, before returning to Spain to work at El Bulli and eventually back to Arzak. 'I knew if I was going to maintain the standards we had at Arzak I needed to travel around and work elsewhere and learn from the best. While my food is very much grounded in Basque produce and I often joke that I am incapable of making a dish without parsley and guindilla pepper, my work elsewhere and my continuing travels have expanded my vision of cooking and has a heavy influence on what I do at the restaurant,' Elena explains.

That grounding in Basque produce and techniques is very much in keeping with the new concepts of field to fork popular across the world but they are long held fundamentals in this region, 'it seems like the rest of the world is catching up on concepts that we have always held, as we have always principally dealt with local producers here and had close relationships with them. What I have noticed is that there is a new generation of small farmers who are far more informed. They want to know what we are going to do with their produce at the restaurant so that they can grow the best for us; they want me to visit their farms and know more about the growing process. I can spend whole afternoons discussing cabbage leaves or varieties of carrots.'



Seared beef
by Elena Arzak



Carabineros with a crust
by Elena Arzak

Those skills and Elena's care for produce mean she has become known as the 'Queen of Basque cooking', and the affection for her in her hometown of San Sebastian is obvious. 'On my way to this interview,' she tells me, 'a woman stopped me to tell me that her and a group of friends have been putting money into a kitty for months so that they can come and eat in the restaurant. We get a lot of local people like that visiting us and it is a real honour to know that people here trust me to give them an experience worth saving up for.'

And what an experience they get. Elena's food is famous for combining innovation and tradition, using the latest culinary techniques and influences from around the world rooted in Basque produce, to produce some of the finest culinary dishes available while still retaining that Arzak signature. There's a modern version of the signature San Sebastian dish of txangurro (spider crab) as well as monkfish, which has been smoked in whisky-soaked cedar wood; the entire menu at Arzak is a marriage of innovation and tradition.

Elena and her father have always had a close culinary relationship, similar to that of her father and grandmother, and from the very beginning of her career her father asked for her advice and valued her opinion. She tells a story of her father phoning her at hotel school, as he had just been asked to cook for the British Queen during her state visit to Spain in 1988. 'I told him to go easy on the garlic on the txangurro. He did, and got a delightful letter from the Queen thanking him for the dinner he made her.'

She can't repress a smile when saying that her father, who is over 80, still comes into the restaurant almost every day to see what is going on and say hello to the staff. Does she think the family business will continue with either of her daughters? 'You know I have no problem if the Arzak restaurant ends with me. My daughters, like most teenagers, seem to be more interested in their mobile phones than anything else, and I would say the same to either of them exactly the same as my parents told me. You should only do this if you really want to. You can't continue this restaurant out of duty, or any reason other than an absolute love of the job and a desire to cook the best. It will never work for you otherwise.'



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