



The complete foodie guide to Cantabria and the Basque Country

by Great British Chefs • 27 October 2022

The north east of Spain is famous for its fertile landscape in '150 shades of green' and some of the best food in the whole country.



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Spain's north coast - from the French border to the Picos de Europa mountains - is the heartland of what is known as 'Green Spain'. It's an area also renowned for its love of fresh fish, and fishermen from the Basque Country, famous throughout Europe for their love of cod, were said to chase shauls as far as Newfoundland. Today, the Basque people are more likely to be found catching hake in the region of Cantabria, while the small town of Santoña has become a centre for anchovy processing thanks to a 19th century Sicilian merchant - Giovanni Vega Scatagliola - who realised that the Cantabrian Sea was home to some of the best examples. He decided to set up business there, triggering the beginning of the thriving Santoña anchovy industry.

The three main cities of the area are Santander, the capital of the autonomous region of Cantabria, and the Basque cities of Bilbao and San Sebastián. In the UK, the name Santander may be more synonymous with a bank than the city that it was named after, but for those in the know, it is a coastal town with pristine beaches and even better food to lose yourself in for a few days. The long standing Santanderino tradition tomar el blanco, the aperitivo hour, may have shrunk from a week in length to more of a Sunday tradition due to the vagaries of modern life, but it is no less important. Locals pile into bars or stand outside for some tapas and beer, wine or vermouth to 'open up their hunger' for the main event: lunch. One of the most iconic dishes of Santander is rabas - floured and deep fried squid cut into straight strips rather than rings, which you can order as a full portion (rackle) or half depending on the size of your group.

Bilbao and San Sebastián are steeped in the Basque tradition of pinchos (pinxtas in Basque), which are small pieces of bread topped with every combination of food imaginable. Locals have one with a small beer (caña) or glass of wine and move on to another place before their main meal: a sit-down lunch. The old parts of both cities are packed with pincho bars, all check-by-jowl, so the idea is to make a short visit to each one until your hunger has properly opened up rather than just sitting or standing in one venue.



San Sebastián: the food capital of Spain
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In San Sebastián, the most emblematic dish of the city is txangurro - stuffed spider crab cooked with tomato, butter and brandy, and one of their most famous chefs, Elena Arzak, has made her own version of the dish in homage to its significance. Some of the other major fish dishes of importance to the Basque Country are lakostas, hake cheeks, and to a lesser extent nowadays, cod, which is cooked in a garlic, white wine, gulfilla chilli and parsley sauce. Pil pilcod, which is cod cooked in garlic and olive oil then shaken slowly to emulsify with the fish juices, is also really popular.

The interior of both regions is breath-takingly verdant, and the hills, mountains and valleys of the Basque Country and Cantabria are said to boast more than 150 shades of green. The people of each valley, and even sometimes each hill, have their own special way of cooking ingredients. There is a wide variety of beans available, many of which are used in regional stews. The most famous bean of the Basque Country is the PDO protected Tolosa bean, which can only be grown in the area surrounding the town of Tolosa. Cantabria, meanwhile, has its famous cocido montañés, made using white beans and different types of meat. These stews are traditionally very heavy food made for peasants doing hard physical labour but nowadays there are also lighter versions available, made with more vegetables and less charizo and black pudding.

The lush pasture makes the region ideal for producing both dairy and beef as sheep and cattle thrive. The most famous cheeses of the area, both of which have protected PDO status, are Idiazabal, an unpasteurised sheep's milk cheese available all across the Basque Country; Navarra, made from the milk of three different breeds of sheep; and Picón Bejes-Tresviso, a cave-aged blue cheese, made from a mixture of goat, cow and sheep's milk from two mountain villages (Bejes or Tresviso) in the Cantabrian Picos de Europa. Both Cantabria and the Basque Country boast their own PGI statuses for beef, assuring its high quality, and a high light on many restaurant menus across the area are chuletones (steakones in Basque) huge t-bone steaks, which can serve at least two or three people.



Valles Pasiegos - a particularly verdant sub-region of Cantabria

The main drinks made here are cider and white wine, the most famous of both coming from the Guipúzcoa province surrounding San Sebastián. Cider apples are grown across the entire area nowadays but the most traditional places for cider making and drinking are the towns of Hernani y Astigarraga. To get the full flavour from the cider you pour the cider to a depth of about two fingers into a glass from a height, then drink it almost immediately. Basques say you drink cider little and often.

The wine in the area comprises three D.O.s and is mostly white wine from the indigenous Hondarribi Zuri grape known as Txakoli. A light semi sparkling white wine, it's now an integral part of the Spanish white wine revolution where state of the art methods married with artisan techniques are used to make high quality wines.

One of the traditional desserts of the rural areas in the Basque Country is Intxaursaltsa, a hefty autumnal pudding of chopped walnuts cooked in milk and sugar, while in the cities, pastel vasco, - a sweet shortcrust pastry case filled with patiserie cream - is very common. In Cantabria, the most famous of their cakes are sobaos, ultra-rich buttery sponge cakes from the Pisu Valley, so-called because they are hand mixed so, sobao.

The food and drink of Cantabria and The Basque Country reflects the rich fertile nature of the land and the harvest from the sea. If it seems that there is an embarrassment of riches when it comes to food and drink in this region of Spain, that's quite simply because there is. The combination of climate, fertile terrain and rich traditions combine to make this north east area of Spain a world-class destination for lovers of food and drink.



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