



# CULTURE

magazine

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# Aste Nagusia in Bilbao

Fun, food and festivities in sunny northern Spain

Text Tara Lee / Photos Bilbao Tourism Board & Eusko Guide



*Aste Nagusia* is the largest festival in Bilbao, the capital of Biscay province in northern Spain. Also called *la semana grande*, or the *Big Week*, the festival takes place over nine days at the end of August, commencing on a Saturday, when crowds gather at the iconic Arriaga Theatre.

Once a rocket is shot into the sky – *'txupinazo'*, in Basque dialect – the festival's mascot, *Marijaia*, makes her grand entrance onto the balcony of the theatre. She is usually portrayed with voluminous blonde hair and a brightly coloured scarf tied around her head, and wearing traditional Basque apparel.

With her hands raised high in the spirit of festivity, *Marijaia* oversees the following days of feasts of wine and tapas, parades, concerts and of course, the bullfights. *Aste Nagusia* is a full-fledged celebration of the Basque people, the ethnic group thought to be the first settlers of the Iberian Peninsula.

I arrived three days into the Big Week. The streets were lined with tents serving the region's signature drink *Kalimotxo*, a wine and Coca-cola based cocktail. The patrons crowding into the tents wore blue scarves around their necks, as per the Basque custom during festivities.

The day I arrived was coincidentally the night of a football match between Real Madrid and Atletico Madrid, both vying for the European Super Cup. Already swollen by tourists from around the nation and abroad, the city emanated extra vibrancy.

The main gastronomic district was teeming with locals, tourists and football fans by dinnertime. I drifted away, through the plaza, towards the Nervion River, which flows through the heart

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of the city centre. A few steps away from the bridge, I noticed an alleyway with four restaurants and a street musician duo.

On breezy summer nights it's not uncommon to see more customers dining outdoors than inside the restaurants. Over the musicians' tasselled sombreros I saw a waiter move another table outside and ask customers to be seated.

The waiter turned out to be the owner and the chef of Lar, Miguel. As he spread the cotton tablecloth on the table, he asked, "Now, for tonight, how about sardines spritzed with olive oil for appetizer and some beef fillets for main?" I scanned the table, the bar, and each side of the entrance for the menus. When he leaned in and said, "We don't have a menu, but I'm here to bring you the best food around," I knew I had signed up for a special night. But was he ready to take on the challenge of a newly converted vegetarian?

Spain is renowned for their rich selection of *Jamón Serrano*, or cured ham, and the Basque region is extolled for their exquisite seafood from the Atlantic coast – all of which I had forsaken for the previous year.

"*Es una vegetariana?*" – *You're a vegetarian?* – "Don't worry. How about a salad topped with asparagus and a ratatouille?" Unhinged by my announcement, he didn't take more than a few seconds to make an adjustment and disappeared into the kitchen.



Just as I left the restaurant, the nightly fireworks began. Pyro-technicians from all over Spain and European countries light up the sky all seven nights as part of a week-long competition

While I feasted, a family of four enjoyed a pot of steamed mussels at the adjacent table. Next to them, an old couple each had a codfish salad and a plate of beef stew. Miguel prepared each of the patrons a spontaneous suggestion from his menu, known only to him, followed by an impromptu wine selection.

As the evening progressed, more crowds flocked around, their eyes fixed on the soccer game. Miguel was no exception. While cooking and serving, he would exclaim "Huy!" or "Bah!" at the television mounted next to the bar. The game was a draw, with one score for each team, which I assume was acceptable, as Miguel treated me with a shot of complimentary dessert liqueur – a pink amaretto.

Despite its name, the hospitality business can be less than hospitable towards guests, especially during the bustling festival week. Miguel's restaurant, Lar, offered attentiveness more comforting than the promised consistency of fast food chains and spontaneity more exciting than the high speed train from Madrid that I took.

Just as I left the restaurant, the nightly fireworks began. Pyro-technicians from all over Spain and European countries light up the sky all seven nights as part of a week-long competition. From the bank of the Nervion River I watched the fireworks reflected over the water. The sound of the explosions echoed off the buildings in the old district. Children sat on their father's shoulders and teenagers stood on fire hydrants for a better glimpse.

On the last day of the festival, I returned to the restaurant hoping for a farewell supper before leaving the city. Unfortunately, it was closed, as most places in Spain reserve Sundays for their Catholic tradition.

Lar was an unexpected gem of a restaurant I hope to revisit again. ☑

While waiting, he brought out a wine of his selection, a 2002 Rioja wine. Named after La Rioja region in Spain, Rioja wines have an ancient lineage dating back to the Phoenicians. The earliest written evidence dates back to the ninth century, and their first legal recognition by the King of Navarra and Aragon to the twelfth century. Rioja wine flaunts a quality as regal as its traditions. "You would have to pay a lot more for a wine of this quality elsewhere, and it still won't be as good as Rioja!" he added with a wink.

A blend of Tempranillo grapes aged in oak barrels characteristic of the region, the charming bottle heightened my expectation for the meal even more.

The salad topped with white asparagus and fresh tomatoes was a promising start. The texture of ground salt and pepper added a dimension to the otherwise tame dish. The ratatouille's sautéed courgette, tomatoes, bell peppers and zucchini had a hint of garlic and a scent of bay leaf. The grill marks on cubed and chiselled vegetables added an aesthetic pleasure, while sweet caramelised onions brought all the ingredients together.

