

Sagardo Naturala

De Maison Selections, Inc.

Sagardo 101

The History of Basque Cider

For well over 2,000 years the people of the Basque Country have been enjoying sagardo naturala, or natural cider. The climate of this region of Spain is ideal for apple orchards so it wasn't too long before the locals started making cider. It is believed that the production of cider started off as a desire to put excess apples to use. But over many centuries the demand for cider grew and today cider production is the primary use of natively grown apples; apples are even sometimes imported from neighboring regions of France and northern Spain to meet the demands of cider production.

What Makes Basque Cider Unique

Basque cider differs from most other ciders in a variety of ways. Basque cider is natural cider, meaning that according to Spanish law it is produced using traditional methods without the addition of sugars and with only its natural carbonic gas. The resulting cider is still (with only mild residual carbonic gas), more bitter than most ciders and has an alcohol content that is typically between five and six percent by volume. This traditional method starts with the apple harvest in the fall: apples of various native varieties are sorted, ground and pressed. The resulting juice is transferred into kupelas (large, oak barrels) and allowed to ferment until txotx season (January through April). Once the cider has been thoroughly taste tested it is bottled unfiltered directly from the kupelas to preserve the uniqueness of each batch. The slight variations from one kupela to the next and the sediment in the bottle are seen as earmarks of quality and proof that the cider is natural.

Txotx!

Txotx season is the most widely known characteristic of Basque cider and its surrounding culture. From mid January until April cider houses, called sagardotegi, host tasting events where their cider is served with the traditional meal of cod omelets, fried cod and barbequed steak with local cheeses and menbrillo for desert. The term txotx refers to the tapping of the kupelas and is shouted to signify that it is time to get a glass of cider. The tradition started in the middle ages from local consumers, merchants and culinary societies being invited to the sagardotegi to taste the new vintage of cider before it was bottled. The guests (particularly the culinary societies) would bring food to eat at the tasting and so parties would often break out. Eventually the sargardotegi started to provide their own food and the events became an opportunity for the community to gather and celebrate.

Drinking Basque Cider at Home

As with everything about Basque cider, drinking it has its own rituals. The cider should be served cold in a wide glass. When pouring cider from a bottle; the bottle should be held at a great height above the glass to mimic the high-pressure stream from the kupelas. This method breaks up the residual carbonic gas and helps to bring out the aromas and flavors of the cider. Only a small amount should be poured into the glass, just enough for one sip (or gulp if you prefer) at a time. If you enjoy the other famous Basque beverage of txakoli these methods may seem familiar, and for good reason: the traditions surrounding txakoli were based on those of sagardo.

