

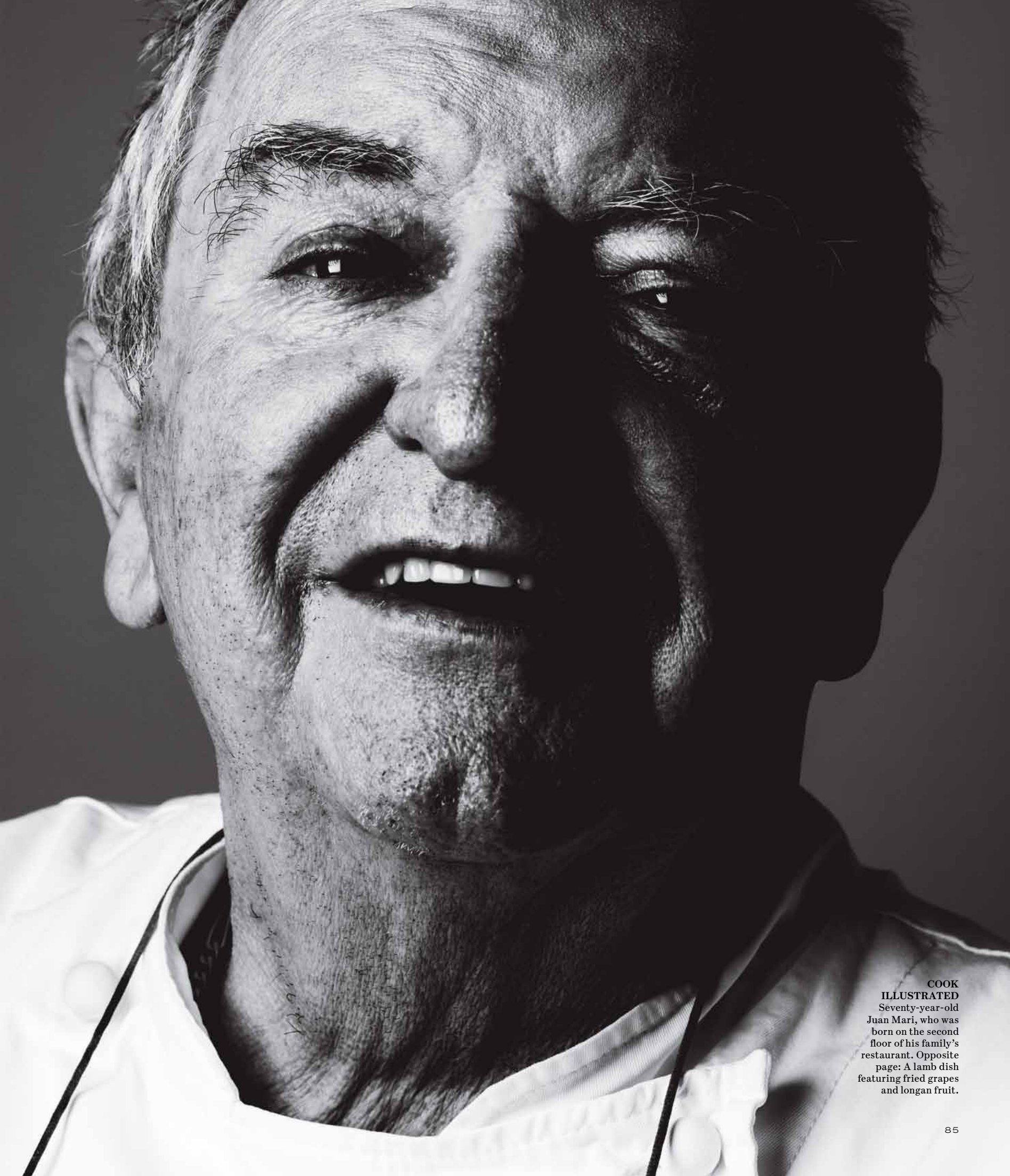


# KITCHEN AND KIN

Pioneering Basque chef Juan Mari Arzak and his daughter, Elena, serve some of the world's most daring, avant-garde cuisine—all from their 116-year-old family restaurant in San Sebastián, Spain.

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BY HOWIE KAHN PHOTOGRAPHY BY BEN HASSETT



**COOK  
ILLUSTRATED**  
Seventy-year-old  
Juan Mari, who was  
born on the second  
floor of his family's  
restaurant. Opposite  
page: A lamb dish  
featuring fried grapes  
and longan fruit.







#### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Filet of sea bass served with various versions of potatoes. Opposite page: Elena Arzak, who briefly interned at El Bulli. “She’s like family,” says Ferran Adrià. “She didn’t work for me. She came to my home and saw me work.”

**D**ON’T EAT,” Elena Arzak warns me. She’s about to leave me with her father, Juan Mari Arzak, the 70-year-old patron saint of Basque cuisine, at San Sebastián’s central La Bretxa market while she heads back to their family’s 116-year-old restaurant, Arzak, to get lunch started. He’s been here for about an hour—evaluating the fish, hugging everybody. At the market’s entrance, it was Zamorita the Boxer, his hands as thick as Ibérico hams; downstairs, near the monk fish livers, it was a woman with carrot-colored tendrils. “We got our driver’s licenses together over 50 years ago,” she says, exchanging smiles with Juan Mari. Elena stands by relatively unnoticed. “I have a double life,” she says, smirking. “In the streets very few people recognize me. But in the restaurant, it’s always like, ‘Ah, Elena!’”

With her dark hair neatly parted down the middle and her frameless glasses afloat on her nose, Elena Arzak—43 years old and celebrated as one of the best chefs in the world in her own right—reminds us we’re to be back at Arzak at 2 p.m. for lunch. In a dining room that’s held three Michelin stars for almost 25 years, she’ll serve the pioneering, playfully inventive food that’s made Elena’s family famous since the mid-’70s, when her father decided he wanted to raise traditional, blue-collar Basque cuisine to the level of avant-garde art. High-concept and cheeky—a fish filet encrusted with beef-colored potato slivers is presented as “steak and potatoes”—Juan Mari

established a new way of thinking about food in Spain, setting a precedent for the kinds of evocative dishes that would become the backbone of Spain’s culinary renaissance. Because of Juan Mari, chefs like El Bulli’s Ferran Adrià—today considered one of the most important culinary minds in the world—could feel liberated to pursue a cuisine without limits. “He’s the most important figure in Spanish cooking,” says Adrià, 51. “Juan Mari is the hinge between generations. He is more than a chef. He is a leader.”

Elena, her father’s collaborator and eventual heir, points at Juan Mari and issues another warning. “Don’t be too late,” she says. “If he relaxes...” She looks knowingly at her father, then suggests time will float away by fluttering her fingers while raising her hands. “...oy.” Juan Mari flashes a mischievous *who? me?* smile. “We’ll just eat a little,” he says. Elena departs and Juan Mari, a resolute five-foot-five, barely taller than his daughter, pulls a bucket hat from the pocket of his expedition-grade Prada raincoat. He unfolds it and puts it on, protecting his few remaining gray hairs atop his head before heading out into the unseasonable springtime hail, his hands clasped behind his back.

“Walk close to the buildings,” he says. “You won’t get wet.” The high-walled, pedestrian-only passageways of the city’s Parte Vieja (“Old Part”) are paved with cobblestones and slim enough to get bottle-necked every time Juan Mari encounters friends—every 20 feet. We pause. He runs his hands across the cheeks of a woman in an ocelot jacket. We pause. He links arms

with a giant man in a trench coat. We pause. A couple of buddies and Juan Mari spend a happy several seconds laughing and slapping one another in the face. “It’s kind of like walking around with the pope,” says Gabriella Ranelli, an American-born friend of the family who runs a local travel company, teaches at the Basque Culinary Center and also acts as Juan Mari’s translator. Ranelli remembers her first Juan Mari sighting, 23 years ago on these same narrow streets. “He was carrying a case of champagne through an alleyway,” she says. “He was on his way to a feast at four in the morning.”

It’s all evidence of Juan Mari’s deep roots here, a testament to the way his family has tended relationships locally for over a century. Even their decision to open a new restaurant in London in March—the didactically named Ametsa With Arzak Instruction within Belgravia’s Halkin hotel—was informed by their almost umbilical connection to home. “People in San Sebastián,” says Elena, later in the day, “we like London very much. There is a mixture between tradition and modernity there like there is here. They respect both.” The Arzaks could have opened in Las Vegas or Dubai—but London, they say, with its like-minded thinking, was the only place that made any sense.

“*Mira, mira, mira,*” says Juan Mari, slipping into Ganbara, a favorite local *pintxos* bar. He’s pointing at the eye-level display of mushrooms, the *cèpes* he intends to feed me, but before he can order he’s intercepted by a man with the skinny-legged, barrel-chested physique of a bull. The man is José Andrés, the Spanish foods advocate and Washington D.C.-based chef (Minibar, Jaleo) who grew up in nearby Asturias worshipping Juan Mari. Andrés happens to be in San Sebastián this morning to prepare the menu for his brother Edu’s wedding, and he’s unabashedly fired up to see one of his closest friends—a man to whom his own modern Spanish cuisine owes a deep debt of gratitude. With the gusto of a stadium’s public address announcer, Andrés, standing near the back of the bar between platters of peppers and morels, roars: “*El grande. El unico.* Juan. Mari. Arzak.” The chefs embrace. Juan Mari orders wine, the crisp local white. “Tres Txakoli,” he says. Glasses are filled, as is customary, from way up high—the wine, literally, flowing.

Juan Mari bites into a croissant. Crumbs amass on the lenses of the rimless glasses hanging from his neck. He passes me a plate of roasted peppers and a plate of *cèpes* with egg yolks yellow as a cartoon sun. He asks if I want more wine and if Andrés wants more wine. “Txakoli, Txakoli, Txakoli,” he says. Juan Mari passes around a plate of Ganbara’s proprietary potato salad with tuna—it takes four hours to make, I’m told—and proceeds to go over the wedding menu with Andrés. Even though Andrés is a master chef and, at 43, the same age as Elena, he eagerly absorbs Juan Mari’s maxims: *This is how you cut asparagus. This is how you open the oysters. This is how you make merluza.*

Andrés urgently wants to convey what Juan Mari means to him and to Spanish cooking. To get his point across, he grabs me by the shirt. “It’s 1991,” says Andrés, beginning his rapid-fire sermon. “I left for the States after working at El Bulli when it was unknown. I went to New York, and it didn’t work out. I was 22, living in Harlem surrounded by marijuana



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—JOSÉ ANDRÉS

**FLAVOR PROFILE**  
Arzak’s ideas room contains about 1,600 plastic boxes, each filled with a unique ingredient that may one day inspire a new dish.



plants. I had other offers—in Chicago, in Japan. But I only wanted to work at Arzak. Starting at 14, I used to clip Juan Mari’s recipes from *El País*. I couldn’t wait for them to come out. I’d study them. Arzak was the name. The entity. The father.” Andrés called Arzak seeking a temporary position. “What tells you everything about Juan Mari’s level of detail—and, obviously, his food is genius—is that he picked up the phone himself to talk to a kid looking for an internship. I couldn’t believe I was actually speaking with him, with Juan. Mari. Arzak.”

Still visibly moved by the brief conversation from 22 years ago, Andrés releases my shirt. “He didn’t hire me,” says Andrés. “He didn’t have the space. But that five minutes on the phone still gives me inspiration to this day.”

I’m about to eat another helping of the egg-soaked, parsley-specked mushrooms when Ranelli notices the time. “Okay, stop eating,” says Juan Mari, placing his hand on my shoulder.

He winks, passes a plate of battered fish and nods at the three empty glasses:

“Txakoli?”

**E**LENA ARZAK, now decked in perfectly pressed chef’s whites, was 4 years old when her father’s kitchen took hold of her imagination. One of her first memories is of an old stockpot. Relative to her stature, it seemed gigantic, even mythic. “I’d enter the kitchen,” she says, standing just where she did as a child, “and they’d be boiling the crabs. The smell was always the same and very intense. And everyone was very busy with their tasks. It was like a fantasy.” For his part, Juan Mari grew up living in the building. He was even born here. “Just above the kitchen,” he says, raising his eyes toward the ceiling.

The building that houses Arzak was built just before the turn of the 20th century by Juan Mari’s grandparents, José Maria Arzak Etxabe and Escolástica Lete.

It’s four stories tall, brick on the ground level and painted a light shade of pink on the higher floors. It sits on the Alto de Miracruz, an unassuming residential and commercial stretch of four-lane road 10 minutes from the Old Part by car. At first, as Juan Mari tells it, Arzak was largely known for the poor quality of its wines (a forgivable and common domestic offense). But good company trumped bad wine and Arzak endured. The food earned greater acclaim once Juan Mari’s parents—Juan Ramón Arzak and Francisca Arratibel—took over, transforming the tavern into a proper restaurant. They earned a reputation for their richly flavored stews and classic fish preparations, like the batter-dipped morsels Juan Mari and I just shared at Ganbara.

When Juan Mari’s father died unexpectedly in 1951 (Juan Mari was 9), the restaurant briefly changed its name to *Viuda de Arzak* (The Widow of Arzak). In subsequent years, it would become the most popular spot in town for milestone celebrations—nuptials,

communions and baptisms—thanks to Arratibel’s faculty for banquet-making. As a boy, Juan Mari would help his mother by manning the bar. “And I’d check the clams,” he says. “If the meat fell from any of the shells, I’d put it back in.” These days, everybody in San Sebastián knows the restaurant because everybody seems to have his or her own personal and historical connection to it, which, for a prestigious three-star eatery, is a rare if not singular achievement. Even the taxi driver who drops us off happily informs Juan Mari that his parents were married at Arzak.

Juan Mari declares, “This is not a luxury restaurant. This is a family restaurant.” In fact, it’s both. Servers and cooks who work at Arzak leave when they retire. The valet parker is a cousin. Aside from Elena, Juan Mari’s most trusted deputy chefs, Igor Zalakain and Xabier Gutiérrez, have been developing recipes in the lab upstairs for decades, resulting in an astounding 50 new dishes a year, every year. They preside over a windowless room uniformly lined and stacked with 1,600 small, transparent plastic boxes, each of them numbered, labeled and containing a flavor that might one day be emphasized on the restaurant’s menu: Box 763 contains verbena; box 474: colored sprinkles; box 484: boxthorn fruit. Others contain preserved black lemon from Iran and various Malaysian salts.

A dedicated room in which to deposit ideas is a luxury. So is the lab-grade Telstar Cryodos machine in the corner, which can basically freeze-dry any organic substance on Earth (it comes in handy if, say, you want to reduce raw lamb to a powder and use it to season a lamb dish—the result being lamb that tastes profoundly self-realized). “Arzak,” says Alex Atala, the Brazilian chef whom *Time* magazine recently included in its list of 100 most influential people in the world, “is amazing because it is a centenary restaurant and yet, everything there is always new.”

At Arzak, experiments have always been encouraged and nurtured with deep familial support—even if it sometimes takes years for a dish or a concept to gestate. Almost as soon as Juan Mari began working the line under his mother in 1966, he’d felt driven to create a menu that started new conversations about food rather than relying on the kinds of homemade favorites that usually fall under the rubric of family cooking. “I did whatever my mother wanted for the first year,” Juan Mari says. “She was the boss. But then I took over a tiny part of the restaurant for myself, five tables, and began to develop my own food. Nobody came.”

Juan Mari kept pushing, never leaving behind the pillars of Basque eating—olive oil, parsley, fish and eggs—but always looking for innovative ways to bring those flavors across. It all started to click in the early ’70s, around the time Arzak became the first-ever Basque restaurant to earn a Michelin star. “Juan Mari used a strong local baseline from which to abstract,” says Ranelli. “He went from specializing in grilling meats over a charcoal fire to breaking all the rules and giving everyone else in Spain the freedom to experiment. He’s radical. It’s like Picasso—obviously he knew how to draw first.”

One dish represents the tipping point. In 1970, Juan Mari took a scorpion fish—a traditional ingredient for soup stock—and used it as the base for a Basque-style terrine by whipping it to custard-like consistency and

setting it into a mold. The dish evolved further when Juan Mari presented it in bite-sized portions, coating it with shredded phyllo-like *kataifi* and serving it on a stick. By elevating the scorpion fish from a mere soup starter to something more rarefied, Juan Mari changed the ingredient’s context, just as he would for many other ingredients in this new iteration of Basque cuisine. (It’s since been widely replicated, first by other chefs and then by Spain’s industrial food companies, which now sell it in supermarkets.) And by tweaking the presentation, he introduced a kind of lightheartedness that would quickly become an Arzak hallmark. To this day, Juan Mari maintains a large collection of toys and adheres to a joy-based bottom-line theory of eating. “If it isn’t fun,” he says, “what is the point? I’ve never eaten and not had fun.”

That scorpion fish creation, called *kabrarroka*, is perhaps the most well-known example of what Juan Mari now calls his “research-based, cutting-edge, evolving Basque signature cuisine.” It’s a movement that started with him, but he’s quick to point out he and his daughter now work in tandem. “Without Elena,” he says, “this cuisine would be impossible.”

**T**HERE ARE TWO TAKES on lunch at Arzak. The first is in the dining room, which features bright overhead lighting and frosted glass panels but no view of the outside world. There, Juan Mari and Elena are constantly present. They frequently enter and exit, greeting or saying goodbye to all of their guests. The kissing never stops. If somebody doesn’t finish an item, either Juan Mari or Elena (or both) will appear tableside, asking sincerely for criticism and offering solutions in the form of more food. Every lunch starts with *kabrarroka* and continues over a stretch of several hours. A meal might feature sole presented on a digital video monitor with whitecaps crashing beneath the filets. It might include crispy-shelled cromlechs, presented upright to resemble their namesake—ancient stones—and stuffed with onion, green tea and foie gras. It might include a triptych of lobster and greens with two clothespins derived from reduced lobster stock and gelatin sitting at the bottom on the plate. “That’s wordplay,” Elena says, having inherited her father’s affinity for puns. “*Pinza*,” she says, making pinching gestures with her fingers, “means clothespin. It also means lobster claw.”

The other version of lunch only happens on Saturdays at a long marble table in the kitchen’s front alcove, and it is for family members only. When Elena was a child she’d come in for Saturday lunch with her sister, Marta, who’s now 45 and in charge of the education department at the Guggenheim Museum in nearby Bilbao (she consults on art-related matters at Arzak as well). “Marta’s not coming today,” says Elena, “because she was out last night until seven in the morning. That’s what people do here.” Elena usually stays at the restaurant every night until around 2. “I try to send my father home earlier than that,” she says. “Sometimes he’ll leave by one, but then he’ll call. He always wants to know what’s going on here.” The Arzaks are fiercely attached to their restaurant and to each other. “It’s their life,” says Ranelli. “When I ask Juan Mari when he’ll retire,” says Adrià, “he says he wants to die in this kitchen.”

In London, the British press has thus far judged Ametsa harshly. They’ve called its room-length, ceiling-mounted art installation of 7,000 glass tubes filled with multicolored spices phallic (it’s a nod to the ideas room in San Sebastián). They’ve labeled the food overwrought and have slammed the restaurant’s full name, taking the phrasing “with Arzak instruction” for a pretentious marketing gimmick. In fact, it’s an earnest way of explaining the family’s creative process. “We don’t understand when people say, ‘I have just one hour for lunch,’ ” says Zalakain about English eating habits. “But that’s what they have, one hour for lunch, so we’re changing the menu to make the experience shorter.”

The food, however, will remain a kind of Arzak’s greatest hits menu—everything at Ametsa was developed by Arzak with his London chefs. One early meal there featured shards of Iberico ham that resembled slick fragments of stained glass and a dish called “pigeon with shot,” an Arzakian riff on the idea that cooked Basque game birds were once brought to the table with bird shot still lodged in their flesh. In this instance, the shots were spheric silver BBs containing balsamic vinaigrette. Like the rest of the dish, they were pleasing and faultless.

For Juan Mari and Elena, comparing the two spots is almost laughable. “Ametsa can never be Arzak,” says Juan Mari. Elena agrees. One is an institution where the family patriarch was born and hopes to die. The other, located in a hotel, is only just beginning.

**S**TOP WRITING,” says Juan Mari, wagging a finger at my notebook, “and eat!” We’re seated around his family table. On one side sits Elena’s son, Mateo, who is 6, and her husband, Manu, an architect who designed the wine storage room upstairs (it winds around the tree that was once the building’s central support column). Elena sits next to her husband. At the head of the table is their daughter, Nora, who is 8. Juan Mari sits next to Nora and takes turns looking at his granddaughter and his daughter, smiling at both.

There are soft-scrambled eggs with mushrooms and the season’s first peas with favas, a yellow-green yinyang forming in my bowl. There’s *merluza* with clams and the simple green parsley sauce that Juan Mari’s mother once cooked. A plate of fire-roasted peppers is passed around and slabs of steak char on the wood-fired grill directly behind Juan Mari. Elena gets up to dart through the kitchen. In the restaurant, she seems to ping around as fast as an atom. Juan Mari eats fish heads and—always restless, always curious—starts to ask questions about cloud computing and QR codes and how those concepts might inspire a future menu item.

As we finish the cheese course, Mateo asks if he can show me the wine room that his father designed. He’s about to zoom up the stairs—passing through the kitchen where his mother has risen to greatness, passing the room in which his grandfather was born. Before he’s out of sight, Juan Mari turns to me. “Finding what you want to do in life,” he says, “is the best lottery you can win. The second best lottery is to have a daughter who wants to continue your life’s work.” Mateo is eager to get to the Riojas, and Elena doesn’t hold him back. “Otherwise,” Juan Mari continues, “it’s like there’s no point.” ●