

BASQUE.

1 X 02. ENEKO ATXA: FROM GRANDMA'S KITCHEN TO THE MICHELIN CONSTELLATION

ENEKO: There is something I always do whenever I visit a new country. The first thing I do is visit the local market.

OIER (OFF): Markets are a tool we can use to listen to, understand, feel and decipher a country.

ENEKO: You go to a market, and you see how it's organised, whether there is light, whether there is electricity. How they organise the produce. What products are on sale. Who is buying what. How much things cost. Just a quick analysis, you know? To get a feeling of where you are.

OIER (OFF): My name is Oier Aranzabal and this is BASQUE., a podcast by the Etxepare Basque Institute that offers a glimpse into the contemporary Basque culture and creativity, in each episode we will visit the home or the workplace of the people who create and shape our culture, we seat down and talk with them about their creative inspirations and ideas. They may be writers, artists, or who knows? Cooks.

ENEKO: We don't just have one Basque Country; we have many of them. I'd even say that we have a different Basque Country every season. Different smells, different colours, different ways of feeling things. The aromas are different, as are the flavours. Sticking with just one flavour would be a shame for such a rich culture as ours.

OIER (OFF): Today, in BASQUE., we will talk with the three Michelin star chef Eneko Atxa.

ENEKO: One, two, three, four, five my name is Eneko Atxa, chef at the Azurmendi Restaurant. I was born in Bilbao but have lived most of my life in Zornotza. I'm 46 years old...

OIER (OFF): The Basque Country is the region with the highest concentration of Michelin-starred restaurants in the world. And one of the brightest stars in that constellation is Eneko Atxa. His restaurant, Azurmendi, received the accolade 'the most sustainable restaurant in the world'. But like the world, the Basque Country is made up of many different flavours. Eneko Atxa analyses them, he proposes them. From the Basque market to the world, and vice versa. His famous Azurmendi Restaurant is located in Larrabetzu, but he has many others also elsewhere, including Tokyo, Seville, Madrid and Bilbao.

ENEKO: The noise of the kitchen and musical hubbub. I'd call it musical hubbub, because there's constant bustle and activity, but it's always exciting and attractive, you know?

OIER (OFF): Atxa has many childhood memories linked to kitchens.

ENEKO: And the smells. The constant smell of something cooking on the stove, the banging and crashing of pots and pans and the adults talking nonstop. Grandma, mum...

ENEKO: I often get flashbacks to my childhood. It's a bit like those fast-paced TV shows you get today, in which characters constantly appear and disappear. That was our kitchen. Our aunt, uncle and cousins who lived upstairs would suddenly appear out of nowhere along with their dog, the uncle who lived with us and all sorts of other people. But the queens of that kitchen were undoubtedly my grandma and my mum. It makes me sad to think that new houses are built with tiny kitchens and huge sitting rooms with enormous televisions. It's such a shame, because kitchens always used to be the centre of everything. A place for chatting. For learning and listening. In my case at least was a place for listening more than talking. Listening and learning. Those are things I've always loved. And I think it comes from there - from our kitchen. I'd listen to them, learn from them, share things. There were sad moments, but mostly there were good ones, happy ones.

OIER: And where did your love of cooking come from?

ENEKO: It came late, that much I can tell you. And it's not a vocation. No way. I liked to eat and found being in the kitchen magical. The smells, helping Grandma with the products she brought back from Musika. For example, when she brought back beans, we'd help shell them. Or we'd wash the vegetables. I saw cooking like craftsmanship, and I still do. It's like deciding to learn a craft, a trade. So, I started, and suddenly I realised it was something I felt passionately about. Every day I would learn something new, something I could apply. Something I could use in my everyday activities. For example, food technology - understanding what exactly a product is, where it comes from, how it gets processed and transformed, what can be done with it, how you can cook it, what things you can make with it. I entered a world of infinite possibilities, in which every door leads you to another, and then another, and then another. That's when you really start to become a chef. That's when you start learning. To me, contemporary cuisine is a universal language with a huge number of different dialects. And that's what happened. I started learning the different dialects. The world of gastronomy is incredibly rich. Take the Basque Country, for example. We're a small region but look at what we have: bars and bar snacks, cider houses, grill houses, popular recipes, gastronomic clubs and associations, and haute cuisine too.

See? See how many dialects I've mentioned in just 15 to 20 seconds within the language of Basque cuisine? During those years, I discovered and absorbed as much as possible, adapting everything I learned to my own style, to this cuisine.

OIER: With what flavour do you tell the story of the Basque Country?

ENEKO: Oh my! There are so many! There isn't just one Basque Country; there are many of them. December is nearly here, and the weather is turning cold, so there's the smell of hearth fires, right? That smell evokes warmth, comfort, wood, the colour of autumn leaves, and the image of red peppers being roasted over an open flame. It also reminds us of the smell and noise of roasting chestnuts. That would be the colour you can smell and taste today in the Basque Country. But that's just today. It'll be completely different in a few days time.

OIER: This podcast will be broadcast in early spring or late winter. So, what flavours will we have then?

ENEKO: Well, thinking about the colours and smells of spring, the birds are singing once again, the bees are coming back, and we have the smell of pollen. And something similar happens to both us and plants: plants starting budding and we get ready too for a fresh start. Winter is over and we become ourselves once again. Right? Each season has its own smell, its own flavour, its own colours. And this is particularly true in the Basque Country.

ENEKO (in the kitchen): Come in! Come in! This is Pilar, our head chef.

ENEKO (in the kitchen): Our kitchen staff is spread all over at the moment. Some are at the production centre right now. All the produce that arrives first thing in the morning gets sorted into different batches and pre-prepared. Once they finished prepping, the staff start coming into the main kitchen. This is the main kitchen. As you can see, some are already here in the main kitchen. Here's the bakery and dessert batch.

OIER OFF: The kitchen at Azurmendi is huge.

OIER OFF: And the dining room is right next door. Everything is visible from there. You can see the kitchen staff working. Collecting plates, preparing dishes, bringing in fresh produce...

ENEKO (in the kitchen): This long table here is where the dishes are placed just before serving. It is where they are finished off before being taken into the dining room.

OIER (in the kitchen): How many tables do you have?

ENEKO (in the kitchen): It depends on the day. The tables get arranged in accordance with the different groups of diners. Sometimes you have individual tables, other times there are more tables of four, or two.

OIER (in the kitchen): It varies then.

ENEKO (in the kitchen): Yes, it depends. The arrangement changes from day to day.

OIER: Is it hard to build a restaurant?

ENEKO: Yes, it's very hard. Just like in any discipline, right? It's always hard to build something. I mean, even building an idea and maintaining it over time, and intellectually enriching it, that's hard too. And for me, there is something else that has always been hard: human relationships. We humans are highly complex beings and one of the greatest challenges for me has been learning how to work on that, how to work together and enrich our relationships. And that really has been, and is, a huge challenge. Everyday collaboration.

OIER: Working together without getting angry.

ENEKO: Yes, without getting angry and learning from others and humbly and modestly teaching them too, as far as you can.

OIER: So how did it happen? I mean, I'm here, and I see a large building with huge windows, but I get the feeling there's a story here. Am I right?

ENEKO: Yes.

OIER: What was it like to create all this?

ENEKO: It's not something that happens overnight. The story gets written bit by bit, you start building your experience bit by bit in your head. First of all, in my case at least, I started creating my own narrative about what the gastronomic experience I had always dreamed of should be like, so I could offer it to others. And then I thought about who these 'others' should be. Locals or people from all over the world? And I thought about what I wanted to convey, and how to do that. And you gradually build that idea in your head. I never go anywhere without a load of pencils and small notebooks. And I start trying to draw these intangible ideas in my notebooks.

It turns them into something more than ideas; into something you can almost touch. The idea becomes something else. Something bigger. The next step is to share your ideas with your friends and partners. You have to use that strength you have gained to share your ideas with others and convince them, see whether or not they want to be a part of it. Then you have to find a way to build it together, and you have to determine what things they agree with and what they want to change.

ENEKO: The ideas pass from head to paper through a pencil. And then from your notebook they come to life through your hands. And that is often the most exciting, beautiful and difficult moment.

OIER: Azurmendi offers a gastronomic experience. And for Eneko Atxa, creativity is intrinsically linked to food and drink.

ENEKO: In that experience, we often focus solely on the 'What' and forget to think about the 'Where' and the 'How'. But the 'Where' and the 'How' are often essential elements of the experience. That's how Azurmendi first came about. We started out by thinking about what kind of experience we wanted to create, and then set about creating a container for that content. And that is what this is. The result of that process is Azurmendi.

OIER: I referred to you earlier as an artist. I know it's a big word, but to a large extent, developing your own style of cooking is an inherently artistic undertaking. You're developing your own voice, your own way of telling a story, your own visual space.

ENEKO: Perhaps. But I see cooking more as a tool. It's a tool that helps us explain things. I don't feel very comfortable in that debate. 'Artist' is a big word. It's a word that applies to only a few and I don't feel very comfortable hiding behind their skirts. I feel more comfortable thinking of myself as a craftsman, although that implies a whole new range of contradictions, because craftsmen and women usually work with their hands, as well as their heads and their hearts. As do artists. But then you say: 'ok, well I'm a craftsman, but I'm also self-employed'. And being self-employed necessarily means being a businessman and managing different things on a daily basis.

OIER: What kind of people come to the restaurant? You've mentioned both locals and people from abroad.

ENEKO: It happened gradually. It wasn't a case of people from all over the world suddenly appearing in the restaurant. It was a gradual process. It still is. We still see that today. But locals

come too; locals love seeing how their local cuisine is being preserved. And they give us a sense of closeness with our environment. It's very important to us to feel appreciated by the local people; when local people come to the restaurant it's like receiving a warm hug. Not a literal hug, obviously. But we feel the love. And even when a lot of people from aboard come to the restaurant, we see it as an unbeatable opportunity to immerse them in our culture. It's also a fantastic chance for them to take our culture back home with them to their native country.

OIER OFF: Having a Michelin star, or in your case, three Michelin stars, has many advantages. But it also has drawbacks, right?

ENEKO: Not in our case. I've always adopted a laid-back attitude to it. When I was awarded the three stars, I said to my team: 'They didn't give them to us because of what we have to do now; they gave them to us because of what we've already done. So now, we have to try to keep them, but without losing our heads. It's just a case of asking 'what do we have to do today?'. We may go home with three Michelin stars, but when we come back the next day, we start out with zero Michelin stars. And today too, we simply have to think about what to give our guests. We want excellence to be a natural part of everything we do. Three-star excellence. And when we go home at the end of the day, after serving lunch, for example, we should go home with that feeling: today I earned those three Michelin stars all over again. It needs to be natural. You need to strive for excellence for your own sake. It's great being at the top. Is there pressure? There's always pressure in the world of excellence. In journalism, I don't know, sport, art, bricklaying... In all professions. Excellence exerts its own pressure. But you put the pressure on yourself, see? Personally, I like it. I find it motivating, I enjoy it.

OIER: Have you ever been afraid of losing the stars?

ENEKO: I mean, you're aware of the possibility. You strive for excellence as much as possible every day and you manage your team accordingly. And you interact with diners every day too. And the feedback you get from those relationships gives you a clue as to how well you are doing things. Usually, we find that things are going pretty well. We are good listeners too, and if we notice that a diner isn't happy with something, then we usually try to do something about it right away. We feel things are under control, but it's true that the ultimate decision is not ours to make. It's an outside decision. Inspectors have the power to give and to take away. So, we're in their hands but you more or less understand what is happening, you follow your chosen path, you follow what you think is the right path, judging by what your customers say, and if you think about it, as long as you keep your head, there's no reason for things to go wrong.

OIER: We're talking about the Basque Country, but you've travelled a lot. Which cuisine is your favourite? Which has enchanted you the most?

ENEKO: Oh gosh - there are so many! Look, there is something I always do whenever I visit a new country: the first thing I do is visit the local market. I arrive and someone always asks: 'what do you want to do first?' or 'what do you want to see?' or 'shall we go and do some cooking?' or 'shall we try this place?' and I always say: 'No! If possible, I want to go and have a look round the local market'. I go to the market and it's like a crash course in sociology. Don't you think? No offence to experts but that's how I see it. You go to a market, and you see how it's organised, whether there is light, whether there is electricity. How they organise the produce. What products are on sale. Who is buying what. How much things cost. Whether or not it's clean. I often ask the vendors what they do with their products. What recipes they cook. What people cook with each product. You know, it's like a quick scan of how people live, what their financial situation is like, etc. What their culture is like, how well they preserve their traditions, who goes to the market to buy food: women or men? How old are they? It's a quick, superficial scan. Just a quick analysis, you know? To get a feeling of where you are. But for me, even that is attractive. It gives you a fair idea of what your gastronomic experience in that place is going to be like. I always search for authenticity when I travel. And no matter where I go, I try to avoid international cuisine. I understand that it needs to exist, but I much prefer to seek out authentic culinary experiences. There are authentic dishes to be found everywhere, in all countries. We have very close ties with Japan. We've had a restaurant there for many years now. Japanese restaurants are... Well, I said before that we have many dialects here in our culinary tradition. Well so do they. You've got Yakitori, Ramen, Nigiri, Kaiseki cuisine and so many other things besides, and that's so exciting. And then if you go to Peru, it's just the same. And Mexico. Mexico is one of the jewels of this world. The street food is amazing. It's fantastic. And they eat so well at home too. They are fabulous cooks. There are so many different types of cuisine. Every region in Mexico has so many different dishes. And it's the same in Thailand, and many other countries also. Everywhere. I expect you're thinking, 'what about the UK?', right? Can the same be said of that country? And what about the USA? Well let me tell you, in the USA there is an incredible variety of different private, small-scale projects. It's a huge country with a great many projects. And you meet so many people who are so aware of the importance of cuisine; they have a huge treasure trove of knowledge there. And people just think, oh yeah, America: hamburgers and hot dogs! But there are many other things too. And hey, there are many interesting things going on in the world of hamburgers and hot dogs too! You always have to look at each country's gastronomic scene with fresh, unbiased eyes.

ENEKO: I remember once in Cuzco, for example, I went to the market. And you could see what it was like from outside. It was like going back in time 300 years or so. Members of the indigenous

population selling their wares. Sharing their knowledge and products. There was no electricity. It was like going back in time. Going back to see how they lived all those years ago. How they ate. And how exchanged goods amongst themselves. It was a truly amazing experience.

OIER: That's where gastronomy starts, right?

ENEKO: That's what I think at least. That's where gastronomy starts; it started with the discovery of fire. Although I guess gastronomy still existed when we ate everything raw. Gastronomy exists from the first moment we begin to eat.

OIER: How do people outside the Basque Country see us? You move in culinary circles. What do they know about us? What has stayed with them?

ENEKO: They know that, for us, eating and drinking is much more than a sociological exercise. They know that cuisine is an integral part of our culture. And they know that, in our DNA, the term gastronomy can be summed up as follows: the time spent around a table. For Basques, that time is not just about eating. It's not just a moment to enjoy a meal; it's not just about that particular place. When a baby is born, we celebrate it around a table. Whenever there is anything to celebrate in life, whenever something goes well at work, or someone gets married, or we go to see a football match, or we have a Sunday get-together with relatives we haven't seen for a while, everything happens round the table. A table signifies any meal for us. When someone dies and we want to say goodbye, we often do so sitting around a table. So, it's almost something spiritual for us. When things are going well, it's a way of sharing and enjoying. And over the years, as we got better and better at it, so what we today call gastronomy developed.

OIER: So, what are you looking for now?

ENEKO: I'm just trying to enjoy the moment. I don't know. I've spent my life thinking about how beautiful it will be at the top of the mountain; always striving to climb the highest peak. And now I'm almost there the view is amazing! But I've realised over the years that I enjoy the journey more than the arrival. So that's what I'm focused on now: enjoying the journey, day by day, knowing that I'm heading towards my goal. It's the journey that's the main thing.

OIER: Thank you so much, Eneko.

ENEKO: Thank you, it's been a pleasure. Really.



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