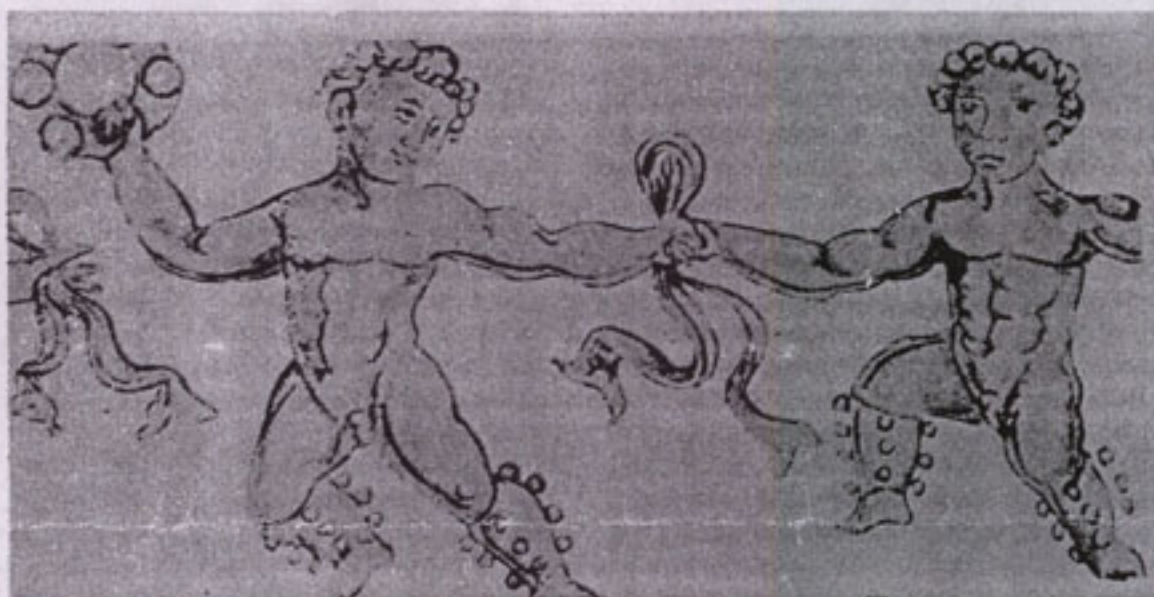


Favorite things

A quarter of a century of running bulls has brought Joe Distler much experience of what northern Spain has to offer. Here is a selection of some of his most treasured "finds".

MUSEUM OF NAVARRE



This absolute gem built in the remnants of an old hospital is everything a museum should ideally be. Spacious, uncluttered and full of natural light, it offers a limited look at some magnificent treasures: Roman artifacts, sculpture and miscellanies; a small ivory chest of Hispanic-Muslim origin (A.D. 1,005); an alabaster Virgin and Child from a monastery in Olite, as delicate as any I've ever seen; one of the most important collections of Gothic mural paintings in all of Spain. Among my personal favorites are four small paintings by Ricardo Baroja (brother of the famous author Pio Baroja) and a work celebrating *Chakoli*, the great white wine from San Sebastian. When you go up to the fifth floor of the building you are afforded one of the truly fine views of the fabulous old city of Pamplona.

MUSEUM OF NAVARRE
Cuesta de Santa Domingo
Pamplona

Open Weekdays 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. and
5 p.m. to 7 p.m. Sundays and holidays
11 a.m. to 2 p.m. Closed Mondays.

RESTAURANTE REKONDO

On a hill overlooking San Sebastian, this restaurant needs no introduction to most gourmets. But the revelation to me this year was when my friends Fermin and Yolanda got me a tour of the wine cellar. When I die, bury me here! Why there aren't 100 Guardia Civil guarding this treasure is beyond me. There are over a half mile of wines stocked and labelled and kept, of course, at the perfect temperature. When I was there, ten cases off Chateau Petrus had yet to be stored and were lying casually in the ante-room. While there are wines from every country in the world, the collection of Riojas is second to none (the wine list, for example, has 54 different choices of CUNE alone!). There are large private rooms here and the walls are covered with signed photos of everyone from Curro Romero to Juan Carlos. If you can convince them to give you a tour of the cellar by all means do so. If not, open the wine list and be amazed!

RESTAURANTE REKONDO
Paseo de Igueldo
San Sebastian
Tel: 212 907 / 211175

BAR/RESTAURANTE ECAY

Anyone who has spent time exploring the phenomenal little pueblos of Navarra has a favorite restaurant. Mine is a rather plain, unassuming little one about twenty minutes outside Pamplona. Don't let the simple look fool you. A limited but excellent menu awaits. The cook, dressed immaculately in white apron, comes out of the kitchen to greet you. The "escalope" is as fresh and succulent as any in Spain; home made *patatas fritas* and beans that have never seen the inside of a can complete a satisfying meal. The local wine and a glass of Pacharán round off a repast that in top name restaurants would cost five times as much. The locals are always friendly and if you drop a few words of Basque you'll become family in no time. Then explore the nearby countryside - unspoiled and breathtaking.

RESTAURANTE ECAY, San Martin 13
Ecay-Longuida (Navarra)
Tel: (948) 33 65 47

VINOTECA MURILLO

A wine lover's dream come true. Enter the doors of this old well-preserved bodega and you know you've found nirvana. Here can be found one of the most fabulous collections of Rioja wines in all of Spain. Owned by the family of the great bull runner Tito Murillo, this store is a great find. Their cellars extend under the streets of the old town and, perhaps, with a little friendly persuasion, you can talk the manager to take you for a tour. Regardless, you'll find wines you may not see in many other shops. Prices are less than in Haro or Madrid and no picnic into Navarra should start before a short visit here.

VINOTECA MURILLO
San Miguel, 16-18
Pamplona
Tel: 22 10 15

THE BOINA

The old men still wear them as part of their formal dress. In every village in Navarra they can be seen on field hands and locals alike. Slightly larger than a normal French beret, they are usually worn on a rather rakish angle and are as much a part of the local identity as a glass of Pacharán or a *puro*. The finest I have ever seen are sold in Pamplona in an old and totally unspoiled shop called Aznarez. To walk through the doors of this store is to step back in time: Hand-polished wooden racks; large oval hat boxes filled with the very finest hats, and a feeling of being in another century. In the back, the owner sits at a sewing machine sewing linings in the boinas she has sold. You choose your hat, then a proper lining, and a few hours later you have it. Red, green, blue, gray and the always traditional black are all available. The label, a jota dancer, distinguishes these finest of boinas. This most unassuming of shops on the outside is one of the finds of Pamplona.

AZNAREZ
Calle Zapateria, 21
Pamplona

CAFE ROCH



Founded in 1898, this is the closest thing to an artist's café you'll find in all of Spain (that includes the Gijón in Madrid!). Old marble tables run along the sides of the walls and a tiny, hand-made wooden bar with a few mirrors is all there is to this simple, totally unspoiled little bar. But the atmosphere is wonderful. One can spend all day here writing or reading without ever being hurried along. I've been there when an artist set up his palette and proceeded to paint for hours! Newspapers are provided on a rack by the bar and the tapas are limited but always fresh and miraculously appear through a small window which when explored one sees leads to a stairway! A glass of tinto and a roquefort cheese on bread or just a cup of coffee enjoyed here is a pleasure to be savored. Local "characters" are a side show that add that extra flavor.

CAFE ROCH
Calle Comedias, 6
Pamplona
Tel: 222390

CUAJADA

A traditional yoghurt-like dessert made from goat's milk is a long time favorite in the North. The very finest I've ever had is made at the Hostal Anaiak in the tiny village of Alcoy, a few miles north of Pamplona. Here the cuajada is made the original old-fashioned way in large jugs, by hand. The somewhat smokey flavor is due to the systematic addition of hot stones to the batter. Now that most cuajada is mass produced (it even comes in plastic tubs!), you cannot imagine the joy of savoring the magnificence of the real thing. The Hostal also serves good, inexpensive meals and, of course, provides rooms. But the cuajada alone is worth the trip.

HOSTAL ANAIK, Alcoy (Ulyama)
Navarra
Tel: 31 30 05

LA CEPA

To say San Sebastian is the greatest city in Spain to "tapa-hop" is to repeat the obvious. To drift the Casco Viejo and savor tapas in bar after glorious bar is one of the true joys of life. The best for me is and has always been La Cepa. Famous for their *jamón serrano* and Emmenthal cheese, they offer a tremendous variety of tapas. Any you choose that need cooking or frying are handed to one of the many women at the stove and cooked before your eyes. Tapas don't get much fresher than that. Begin with a glass of Chakoli, the crisp, fresh, local wine itself a revelation) and scan the huge bar for your favorite tapa. But save room; you have a hundred other bars to visit! The owner of La Cepa, Santiago Mayor, is a grand *aficionado* of the *toros* and some wonderful bullfighting memorabilia grace the walls.

LA CEPA
31 de Agosto, 7-9
Parte Vieja, San Sebastian

PIMIENTOS RELLENOS

A favorite dish all over the north, the very best are still served at the Monleón restaurant in Pamplona. A large dining room with large, old wooden tables surrounded by huge wine barrels, the Monleón is a Pamplona stalwart. Here, if you are lucky, you will be served by Juan de Dios or Gerado, certainly two of the finest *camareros* in all of Spain. Come once and they never forget you. The menu is wonderful, but the pimientos are a marvel. Fresh red peppers stuffed gracefully with the finest meat and served in just enough salsa to satisfy dipping your tasty "Roman" bread. When I eat here I have the pimientos as a first and second course to the astonishment of my friends who are languishing in the *pochas*, *costillas de cordero*, or some other such delicacy. No matter, to each his own.

RESTAURANTE MONLEON
Calle Amaya, Pamplona

MUSEO DEL WHISKY TABERNA

Keen's Chop House in New York City boasts 88 single malt scotches; forget it! This small bar in San Sebastian has close to 200! The owner claims to have over 2,000 different whiskeys on the premises and they are displayed in cases around the bar in all their glory. Decanters of very size and shape as well as a bottle supposed to be the smallest ever produced (1/2" high bottle of *White Horse* Scotch complete with a certificate from the Guinness Book of Records) fill the show cases. Cigarettes are laid out on silver trays for the customers to take, and while other drinks are served here one cannot imagine coming for any other reason than to discover some delicious, never before savored whiskeys.

MUSEO DEL WHISKY
Alameda del Boulevard 5,
San Sebastian.

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