

## GOING PLACES

Europe's newest foodie frontier is the Basque region of Spain, where inventive chefs put new spins on traditional fare



## Local flavor

Here's a trio of destinations sure to please even the most discerning global gourmand

By Michele Peterson

**I**f you're interested in experiencing a foreign culture, why not do so through your taste buds? Each of the following epicurean adventures is guaranteed to excite your palate and satisfy your wanderlust.

**Hot and steamy** Whether it's pho—a steaming broth brimming with rare beef and rice noodles best eaten streetside in Hanoi's Old Quarter—or juicy lemongrass prawns sizzling in a wok amid the colorful markets of Ho Chi Minh City,

the food of Vietnam can wow your taste buds and inspire your imagination. But don't count on experiencing the genuine article in fancy restaurants or tourist hotels. Many of the most unforgettable meals are to be found in humble surroundings. "As long as the food is being freshly cooked in front of you, you should consider exploring local street stands and family restaurants," says Naomi Duguid, the Toronto-based co-author (with Jeffrey Alford) of *Hot Sour Salty Sweet*, an award-winning cookbook that chronicles the culinary landscape of Southeast Asia.

A good place to begin your exploration of Vietnamese cuisine is the town of Hoi An, located on the country's central coast. This UNESCO World Heritage

Site is best known for its white sandy beaches, 17th-century colonial architecture and silk shops, but its fusion cuisine is what draws food aficionados. You can trace the culinary legacy of centuries of Chinese, Japanese and European traders among the modest family restaurants along the historic Thu Bon River.

Adventurous diners are rewarded with dishes such as white rose, an incredibly light rice dumpling stuffed with shrimp, or cau lau, a rice noodle dish topped with slices of pork, bean sprouts, and assorted greens such as basil, lettuce, and mint. Visitors can also arrange to experiment with traditional cooking utensils and participate in cooking classes.

**Details:** Horizon & Co., a Canadian boutique travel agency, offers epicurean expeditions to exotic destinations. Pricing for trips to Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia begins at \$4,650 per person/double occupancy, excluding airfare. Visit [www.horizon-co.com](http://www.horizon-co.com) to find out more. The Viking Life, a venture of the people who make Viking cooking ranges, offers trips created by The Culinary Institute of

America. Pricing for Vietnam is \$5,295 U.S. per person/double occupancy, excluding airfare. For further details, visit [www.thevikinglife.com](http://www.thevikinglife.com).

**The other Spain** While Barcelona is already firmly established on the foodie trail thanks to Ferran Adrià, the superstar chef of El Bulli, and Madrid boasts a bounty of enticing tapas bars, a growing number of culinary pilgrims are heading to a new frontier: Spain's Basque region. Where else do thousands of men gather weekly to shop, cook, eat, drink, swap recipes and sing? While these exclusive *sociedades gastronómicas* are off-limits to outsiders, food lovers can get a taste of traditional Basque fare such as cogote (hake's head served with garlic-infused oil) and marmitako (a light summer fish casserole made with fresh tuna, potatoes and tomatoes) if they head to the region's culinary hub, the city of San Sebastián.

This seaside resort boasts 250 gastronomic societies and reportedly has more Michelin starred restaurants per capita than any other city. Revered chefs such as Juan Maria Arzak and Pedro Subijana, credited with shaping modern Spanish cuisine, draw fans who want to experience seasonally inspired dishes based on ingredients such as wild autumn mushrooms foraged from the Basque hills or scallops, sole and mussels purchased straight from fishermen's boats.

One favorite is Martín Berasategui's restaurant, located in the village of Lasarte just outside San Sebastián. Treasured for its blend of modern techniques and local ingredients, it offers classic Basque fare served with Txakoli, a Basque white wine. Meals often conclude with Idiazabal, a local sheep's milk cheese that originally drew its smoky flavor from shepherds' night fires. Another favorite is Elkano, a fish

house in nearby Guetaria that overlooks the sea. It is known for its deliciously simple treatment of char-grilled lobster, wild barnacles and fresh turbot.

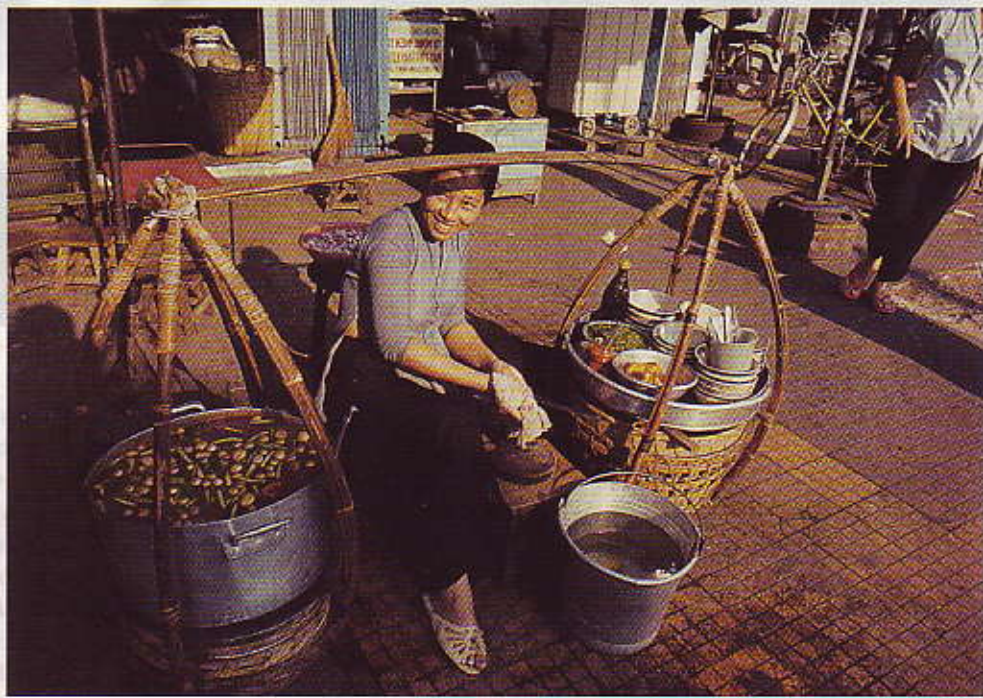
**Details:** Book reservations online for Arzak ([www.arzak.es](http://www.arzak.es)), located in a Spanish farmhouse outside San Sebastián, or Akelarre ([www.akelarre.net](http://www.akelarre.net)), a modern restaurant overlooking the sea. Prices range upwards from €110 for a set meal without wine, tax or tips.

**French revolution** It's easy to spend as much on a meal in a top-tier Parisian restaurant as on the plane ticket to get you there, but an upheaval in dining is underway. Several top chefs have opened casual restaurants that promise affordability and creative French cui-

You can accompany your meal with any of 400 carefully selected wines.

Another hot spot is Le Comptoir, where Chef Yves Camdeborde has developed a cult following. His inventive €42 *prix fixe* menu often features unexpected treats such as cream of celery soup with black truffles or green pea and mint soup with pieces of foie gras. If you want to dine here, book your table at the same time as you arrange your plane ticket.

Other bistros with buzz include Mon Vieil Ami, which was launched by three-star Michelin chef Antoine Westermann. The €39 menu can include luscious sweetbreads with wild mushrooms, herb risotto and a perfectly poached egg atop a white-bean salad with delicious slivers of smoked haddock.



Sizzling soups will tempt your nose and delight your palate in Ho Chi Minh City

sine in laid-back surroundings. Known as "gastro bistros," these informal eating places are swiftly growing in popularity.

Food lovers are flocking to Benoit, the only Parisian bistro to boast a Michelin star. Although Benoit first opened its doors in 1912, the comfortable bistro was purchased by superchef Alain Ducasse in 1995. It now offers spectacular food for about a third of the cost of dinner at one of his lavish three-star establishments.

**Details:** Meals at top Parisian restaurants can easily reach €400 per person while set meals at traditional bistros average €25. Expect to pay up to €50 at a gastro bistro, although ordering à la carte can easily double this. Good choices include Benoit, 20, rue St Martin, Paris, 42-72-25-76; Le Comptoir, 5, carrefour de l'Odéon, Paris, 44-27-07-97; Gaya, 44 rue du Bac, Paris, 45-44-73-73; Chez Michel, 10 rue de Belzunce, 10th Arr., Paris, 44-53-06-20 and L'Os à Moelle, 3 rue Vasco-de-Gama, Paris, 45-57-27-27. **M**