



Spanish Treasure

Silvery Basque baby eels are one of the world's most prized delicacies— but first you have to catch them.

BY DAVID LYON

“**Y**OU ALWAYS REMEMBER your first time eating baby eels,” chef Fernando Canales tells me as we hurtle down twisting country roads to the Basque coastal village of Gorliz. It is five in the morning and neither of us has had a drop of coffee, but Canales is pumped. “It is like the first time you make love or the first time you see a live football match.”

It is well before dawn on a winter dark of the moon, and the air is bone-chilling. We are meeting José Luis Oliver, president of the Cofradía de Anguleros de Vizcaya, the brotherhood of the

province’s 546 licensed eel fishermen.

An electrician by trade, gourmand by inclination, and outdoorsman by calling, the short, powerfully built Oliver is known all along the coast by his Basque nickname, Txetxu (CHEH-chew). Probably no one alive knows more about catching elvers, one of the great delicacies of Basque cuisine. A sideways rain pelts us and Txetxu jubilantly raises his arms. “*Perfecto!*” he exclaims.

Conditions could not be more miserable—which is to say, perfect for eel fishing. The three of us don chest-high rubber waders, strap on



For just two months a year, the waters off the Basque coast of Spain yield a tiny catch of the baby eels called angulas. “Other people have caviar,” says Juan Mari Arzak, a legendary Basque chef. “We have angulas.”