



miner's headlamps, and waddle to the beach.

Txetxu hands us homemade *cedazos*: stainless mesh baskets on long poles. We position ourselves along the shore, where the rising tide meets the freshwater runoff of small streams. We plant our *cedazos* broadside to the waves to strain the ocean as it sweeps up the streambeds. Between waves, we check the mesh for the squirmy, transparent wormlike creatures that the Basques call *angulas* to differentiate them from mature eels, or *anguillas*. The numbingly cold work requires muscle, stamina, and infinite patience.

Perfect as the conditions may be, we harvest very few *angulas* before a pewter sky begins to brighten and the creatures withdraw from the shore. Txetxu throws in the towel. "Ten years ago, we would have a kilo," he says. "Now the catch on a good night is about 200 grams." To help the fishery recover, the Basque government has issued no new licenses since 2009, limited the daily catch to 500 grams, and shortened *angula* season to mid-November through January. But none of that has dampened Spaniards' enthusiasm for the delicacy, and demand for *angulas*, sometimes described as "spaghetti with eyes,"



peaks around the winter holidays.

"It's what people want to eat for Christmas," explains Canales, the chef-owner of Etxanobe, his Michelin-starred restaurant in Bilbao. He may be as handsome as a matinee idol, but even he looks goofy in a knit cap with dangling earflaps. "Basque people have



*The angulas are slightly sweet, modestly salty, and strangely satisfying in the mouth.*

an emotional connection to food. *Angulas* are part of our culture."

The Homeric life cycle of the eels only adds to their mystique. In the fall, eels that have grown to maturity in the rivers of Basque Country swim downstream to the Atlantic and

*At Restaurant Arzak (top), a Michelin three-star restaurant in San Sebastián, angulas can set off a ripple of excitement in the dining room. Chef Fernando Canales serves angulas in a traditional sauté (above) and a contemporary salad (above right).*