

and dropping it in his mouth. The lemon balances the slight fishiness of the eel, while the oil brings out its unctuous nuttiness. “This is the best way to eat angulas.” His customers tend to agree.

BASQUES CHERISH THEIR culinary traditions, but they prize gastronomic innovation. The avant-garde Spanish cuisine that has swept the West was pioneered nearly four decades ago in Basque Country by several chefs, including Juan Mari Arzak of Restaurant Arzak, which his grandparents founded in San Sebastian at the end of the 19th century. Today Juan Mari and his daughter Elena run the Michelin-three-star kitchen jointly, devoting one day a week to experimenting with new dishes. They dress like they cook: Their crisp chef’s whites are conservative, but their designer eyeglasses are cutting-edge.

Elena is droll when she speaks about Basque gastronomy. “Food has always been very important here. Nobody knows why,” she says. “When we cook, we have tastes in our minds. It is our code of flavors, a result of our history, of what we ate as children.”

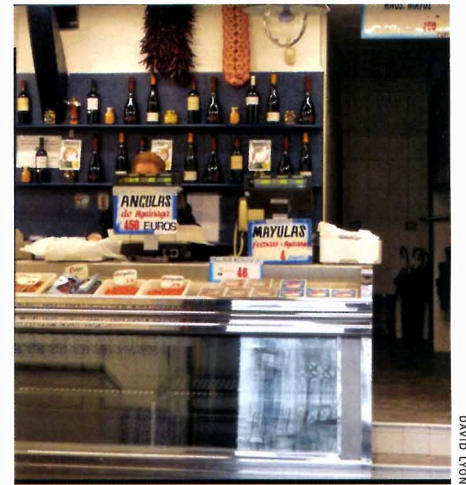
Both she and her father count angulas among their earliest taste memories. “I cannot remember a time without angulas,” says Juan Mari. “Other people have caviar, but we have angulas—one of the greatest of Basque plates.” Indeed, there are other baby eels—originating in the Indian Ocean and Sea of Japan, and often frozen for export—but none match the mystique, rarity, or gastronomic acclaim of angulas. Juan Mari concedes that the taste is very delicate, “but they have a unique texture that we prize very highly.”

Restaurant Arzak serves angulas several ways. They often prepare the traditional cazuela, and they make a salad dressed with a vinaigrette of peanut oil, sherry vinegar, and black truffle juice and sprinkled with chives. Like Canales, the Arzaks mainly use angulas that have been quickly parboiled before being sold at market.

But the Arzaks also flash-grill raw eels in a mesh frying pan over an open charcoal fire, a technique they learned from chef Victor Arguinoniz of Asador Etxebarri in the mountains between Bilbao and San Sebastian. “They have

more flavor if they are cooked without boiling them first,” Juan Mari says, shrugging. A tangle of grilled angulas sits atop a plain buckwheat cracker sprinkled with tangy *Codium* seaweed powder and paired with a miniature salad of barely sprouted greens and edible blossoms. “The toast is very important,” Juan Mari says. “I do not like my angulas with flavors obscured.”

The dish is served on a slab of wet black slate. When Juan Mari delivers it to my



DAVID LYON

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*Angulas were fetching \$600 per pound last December, and prices are expected to be higher this year.*

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table, I feel like an instant movie star as fellow diners turn to watch. I taste, close my eyes, and taste some more. The snap of the cracker contrasts with the al dente texture of the angulas. The seaweed powder enhances the umami sensation, and the touch of hardwood smoke gives it all an orgasmic complexity.

Maybe Canales is right after all. I am feeling more Basque by the moment. ☐

*Etxanobe, 34.944.421.071. [www.en.etxanobe.com](http://www.en.etxanobe.com); Restaurant Arzak, 34.943.278.465, [www.arzak.info](http://www.arzak.info)*