migrate 4,000 miles to the Sargasso Sea north of the Antilles, where they spawn. On hatching, the larvae float at the top of the Gulf Stream and are carried back to their home shores. The journey to Europe takes three years and mortality is staggering, as everything from other fish to baleen whales consume the larvae. "Every time I see a whale," Canales grouses, "I wonder how many angulas it has eaten."

The lucky few that reach European shores metamorphose into angulas—transparent miniature eels—once they encounter even a trace of fresh water. When they enter the streams, they begin to develop a backbone and dark pigmentation. Aficionados hotly debate when they taste best. Some prefer the fattier, softer white angulas plucked from salt water, while others swear by those that have developed a gray stripe and a toothier texture. Both stages are transient, lasting only about two weeks. No wonder angulas were fetching $600 per pound last December. Prices are expected to be higher this year.

Basques often joke that angulas will be their first purchase when they win the lottery. In the meantime they settle for fake eels made of fish-meal pasta, extruded with a gray stripe and dots for "eyes." Misleadingly called "gulas," they are popular with young Basque children, including Canales' two daughters, and they are a staple of *pintxos*, the small plates served in Basque bars. I had tried some the previous night on Bilbao's Plaza Nueva, and the earth had not moved. I was eager, to say the least, to taste the real thing.

CANALES AND I LOOK considerably less like buffoons after we shed our fishing clothes and head into the kitchen at Etxanobe, his rooftop restaurant in Bilbao's arts center. He is going to show me his two versions of angulas, including the traditional preparation in a glazed earthenware casserole, or *cazuela*. He places the vessel over a high flame and covers the bottom with olive oil. As it begins to smoke, he adds a peeled clove of garlic and crumbled flakes of hot *guindilla* pepper. He turns off the heat and adds a fistful of angulas, shaking the cazuela to sauté them. Simulating what a waiter would do, he continues stirring the angulas with a wooden fork as he whisks the rustic casserole into the elegant dining room perched high above the Rio Nervión. He motions for me to sit, and we share an appetizer-sized portion. Angulas, in fact, are usually served as small plates, though some diners splurge $140 and more on a main dish of 100 grams at Christmas.

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We eat with wooden forks so a metallic tang does not mask the subtle flavors. The angulas are slightly sweet, modestly salty, and strangely satisfying in the mouth, a feeling that comes from concentrated umami—the primal flavor common to aged cheeses and many seaweed products. Do they compare to sex? Not exactly, but then I am not Basque. They definitely outrank soccer.

Canales created an angula salad that he prefers to the cazuela. We return to the kitchen where he seasons a stainless steel bowl by rubbing it with guindilla pepper, then adds lemon juice and intensely fruity olive oil from Priego de Córdoba. He stirs the dressing, adds the angulas, and tosses. He piles them on a plate previously rubbed with raw garlic, grinds a little white pepper on top, and finishes with dabs of parsley-infused olive oil.

"It is nothing, but it is delicious," he says, picking up an eel with his fingers

In chilly Gorliz, José Luis "Txetxu" Oliver pursues his elusive catch.