Bertsolari Poetry Event

Bertslordi poetry is a traditional, oral, improvised popular poetry form with a structured rhythm and meter, recited/sung in Euskara (Basque), the only non-indo-European language in western Europe. (In Eastern Europe Estonian, Finnish, and Hungarian are also non-Indo-European languages.) One of the oldest linguistic communities in Europe, it is one of the four minority languages in Spain along with Catalan, Galician, and Valencian. The Basque Country (Euskadi), straddles the Pyrenees Mountains on both sides and consists of seven provinces: four on the Spanish side — Bizkaia, Gipuzkoa, Araba, and Nafarroa, and three on the French side — Lapuido, Benafaroa, and Zuberoa. The bertslordi tradition is practiced by bertsolariak (versifiers) in Basque Country, as well as in the Western United States in places where there are communities of Basque-speakers, such as Nevada, Wyoming, and San Francisco. The People’s Poetry Gathering 2006 welcomes bertsolariak Martin Goicoechea, Jesús Goñí, Jean Curutchet, and Gratien Alfaro from the west coast for their first performances in New York City.

It is fitting to present Basque poetry at this Poetry Gathering dedicated to the world’s endangered and contested languages because language is integral to Basque identity. There is not a word in the Basque language for a “Basque.” Basques refer to themselves as Euskaldunak, “speakers if Euskara” (some prefer the spelling “Euskeria”), and they refer to their homeland as Euskal Herria, “Land of Basque Speakers” so “it is language that defines a Basque.”

And interestingly enough, the Basque language has been retained more in the United States than in other parts of the western hemisphere where Spanish is the dominant language. However since 1972 the percentage of Basque speakers all over has been increasing. There has been an increasing trend for bilingual schooling and in the provinces of Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa there will soon be a Basque-speaking majority.

The Bertslorditz Tradition

Many cultures have forms of poetic duels or traditions of improvised poetry. The Iberian Peninsula, in particular, is rich in these forms, being the home or originator of various traditions, among them the echarse pullas (“hurling insults” or “exchanging barbs”) of Spanish plays in the 1500s to the reguieita of Galicia, the trovo or Murcia, and the ubiquitous la decima espinela which was created by Vicente Espinel in 1591 and has taken root throughout Latin America. Bertslorditz from the Basque Country is also an oral, improvised form. The exact dates of origin are not known but by the 19th century it was popular in the Gipuzkoa region where bertsoak would recite in the public plazas.

The bertsoak (verses) can take different forms. The most common five types are: Hamarreko Handia (10 lines with odd lines having 10 syllables and even lines with 8 syllables; Hamarreko Txikia, (10 lines — odd lines 8 syllables and even 6); Zortziko Handia (8 lines — odd lines 10 syllables, even 8); Zortziko Txikia (8 lines — odd lines 7 syllables and even 6); and Bederatzi Puntukoak (14 lines of which 9 lines rhyme). The verses are sung to different Basque melodies. The song to which a bertso (verse) is sung becomes important because the bertso is created “to fit into the notes of the melody.” Therefore the bertslordi can instinctually fill a line with the correct amount of syllables without consciously having to count each syllable used.

A verse by Jean Curutchet from 1988:

Ez dezaket sekula mespeza Amerika I can never
arras ongi bizi naiz scorn America;
i ni honera jin eta I have had a very good life
baina sekulan ha’e ever since I came here.

hau es dezaket uak However, there is
Eskaal Herria nitzat betiko something that
izan baita will be mine forever.

It is common for the bertso to relate a story and sometimes they will relate current news and events similar to the genres of the Mexican corrido and the Puerto Rican plena (called the “sung newspaper”) — in rural areas the bertslordi has been viewed as the voice of the people. The following verse by Jesús Arriada relates a topical political issue of 1988:

Neure kalsian orain niu ere In my own way now
mintzatzen noa hastera I will begin addressing
pentsatutzen du the issues,
ta Reagan jaunak and Mr. Reagan thinks
he will listen
beste dana entzutesa to everything else,
Amerika aundiak hor du the great nation of
America
nik uste benetan aukera I think truly has a choice,
baina lehenbiziko gauza but he first thing that
axtematen dausut I will remind you of is
zuk baduzu arma sobera that you have too
much armament.

Traditionally bertslordi (who tended to be male, though that is changing today) would meet and recite bertsoak in the cider houses, but today one is likely to hear bertsoak sung at public performances and festivals. In 1988, in Nevada, the first Bertslordi Txapelketa (Improvised Poetry Contest) took place in the United States and its participants included the bertslordi performing at this year’s Poetry Gathering.
The Basque Community in New York City

The Poetry Gathering’s Basque program, one of the first times that bertolaritza has been presented in New York City, is also apt since historically the Basque community has had a home here. A Basque community settled into the Lower East Side in the early 20th century. During the late 1800s and early 1900s there often were Basque seamen from Bizkaia and Gipuzkoa working at the New York port. Many were seamen, as historically Basques were known for their seafaring skills. The majority, at that time, worked in marine trades such as the in the Merchant Marines or on the docks. The South Street Seaport was nearby, and “for the Basques from their fishing villages of the Bizkaian coast, life on the New York waterfront encompassed familiar sight, sounds, and smells.”

The original Basque neighborhood was Water and Cherry Streets (which are now the Alfred E. Smith housing projects), Catherine St., Madison St., and St. James Place, near South Street Seaport. From interviews from early residents in the area it is estimated that by 1920 there might have been as many as eight to ten thousand Basques residing in NYC, with most concentrated in a thirty-square block area around Cherry St.

The Centro Vasco-Americano was incorporated in 1913 and its first home, in 1928, was at 48 Cherry St. The original charter for the organization called it Central-Vasco Americano, and that was soon changed to Centro Vasco-Americano (in 1980 the name was again changed to Euzko Etxea meaning “Basque Homeland”). In the 1940s the Centro Vasco moved to 95 Madison St. and later to a few other lower Manhattan locations before settling in Brooklyn. It was the first Basque center in the U.S. Along Cherry Street there were numerous boarding houses, and places like Casa Vizcaína became internationally known for housing Basques en route to the American West from the Basque country and South America. It was operated by Valentin and Benita Orbe Aguirre who also owned the Santa Lucia Hotel (which opened in 1910), the Valentin Travel Agency (also 1910), and the Jai-Alai Restaurant (1922) in Greenwich Village. Not only did New York City have its own Basque community but it became an important stop for the immigrant travels further west, “Virtually every Old World Basque who was traveling to the West Coast ate a good meal and spent a comfortable night in Aguirre’s hotel. All arrangements were made for the train trip to the West, with instructions pinned on the man’s txapela (beret) or lapel.”

Basque Dinner

Though language is an important symbol of identity, food is almost as important in defining Basque culture. The rural and sea traditions are represented in the various dishes that make up the cuisine. The People’s Poetry Gathering will conclude with a Bertstolari Poetry Dinner in which traditional Basque food will be served along with bertso verses. The meal will start with a variety of pintxos (pronounced PEEN-chohs), the Basque word for “tapas.” It is said that the word pintxos is from the Spanish, “pinchar” meaning “to prick” because pintxos are usually served using toothpicks. They differ from tapas (developed in Andalusia) in that while tapas can be small helpings of larger dish, pintxos are their own distinct dishes.

Our Bertstolari Dinner will include anchovies; stuffed mussels; Basque peppers (in Spanish called piquillos which is the diminutive for “pico,” the word for “peak;” this describes the shape of this pepper grown exclusively in Nafaroa) stuffed with codfish (the preferred Basque fish); Spanish omelet with spicy sauce, txipirones (squid) served...
in its ink, a typical Basque dish); and Basque cheeses *idiazabal* (a nutty-tasting smoked cheese made from unpasteurized sheep’s milk from northwest Nafarroa; it is from a town of the same name and was traditionally made by Basque shepherds high in the Pyrenees during the summer and fall months) and *roncal* (from the valley of the same name in Nafarroa), rounded out by a dinner of paella with *txistura* (Basque sausage traditionally made with pork, fat, garlic, and salt all marinated in paprika).

**Cider**

In the northern regions of Spain in Asturias and Euskadi (Basque Country), cider is the alcoholic beverage of choice, as well as historically the national drink of Euskadi. Outside of the U.S., cider usually means a fermented drink (fermented means that yeast convert the sugars to alcohol) and unlike our ciders, traditional Spanish ciders are very still and dry with a delicate aroma. In Europe the first recorded references to cider are by the Romans. Julius Caesar’s soldiers were introduced to it by the Celts, who fermented the juice of wild crab apples growing in the British Isles. Later, in Spain, when the Moors ruled much of the peninsula, they developed apples with high tannins that create a rich cider.18 Purposeful cultivation of apples were present in the northern region of Spain “where apple orchards mingle with orange groves, the coastal regions of Asturias and the Euskadi represent perhaps the oldest apple-growing lands in Europe.”19 Cider-making became so important that in 1556 in Tolosa, it became closely regulated by the *fueros* (local laws), and the sale of it was highly controlled.20

The rituals that surround cider drinking in the Basque country are famous — as a cider house worker makes a hole for a spigot in a giant cask (*kupela*) of cider, someone yells, “mojón,” and everyone rushes to the cask to catch some of the newly-fermented cider from the *txotx* (“thin stream” pronounced “tchotch”) into their glasses. This performance lasts from January until April when the cider is bottled. There is also the *sagardo* ritual, called “throwing the cider,” — after opening a bottle of cider, it must be poured in arc from over one’s head into the glass which is held about waist-high. This helps to aerate the dry cider and open the flavor. You then have to drink the whole glass while it has a “carbonated” quality, and throw the dregs on the floor, or the troughs provided by many cider houses.

A couple of generations ago, *bertsolari* poets would meet in the *sagardotegias* or ciderhouses (in Spanish, *sidrería*) in Basque country and share *bertsos* over glasses of *sagardoa* (*sidra* in Spanish) hard or alcoholic cider. These *sidrerías* were considered the “schools and academies of *bertsolaritza*.21 So in the spirit of the original venues for *bertsolari* poetry the dinner will serve hard cider produced by Breezy Hill Orchards in Dutchess County which was processed in a similar manner to the way it is done in Basque Country. Traditionally, the cider *kupelak* (casks), were ready to be opened in May, so although we don’t have the great oaken vats available in New York, we will perform the *sagardo* ritual to the rhythms of the *bertsos*.

**Endnotes**

2. The Spanish names for the provinces are Vizcaya (whose capital is Bilbao, the largest city in Basque Country), Guipúzcoa (whose capital is San Sebastián), Alava, and Navarra. The French names are Labourd, Basse Navarre, and Soule.
5. Mark Kurlansky. Pg. 315.
15. Gloria Totoricagüena, pg. 65.
16. Emilia Doyaga. Pg. 76.
19. Ibid.

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**The food for the Basque Poetry Dinner** is provided by Pintxos located at 510 Greenwich St., which is one of only two Basque restaurants in New York. The owner and chef is Javier Ortega, from San Sebastian (a city becoming popular as a gastronomic capital), who started it in 1998. The menu is not exclusively Basque, but the Basque dishes earn the spotlight, like baby squid served over rice in a sauce of its own ink and top-notch *pintxos*. 

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16. Emilia Doyaga. Pg. 76. 
19. Ibid.