

Basque *Bertsolari* Poetry, Food & Cider in the Big Apple

Elena Martínez

Bertsolari Poetry Event

Bertsolari 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.¹ 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 — Lapuideo, Benafarroa, and Zuberoa.² The *bertsolaritza* 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 Goñi, 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 of Euskara" (some prefer the spelling "Euskera"), and they refer to their homeland as *Euskal Herria*, "Land of Basque Speakers" so "it is language that defines a Basque."³ 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.⁴ 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.⁵

The Bertsolaritza 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 *regueifa* 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. *Bertsolaritza* 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 *bertsolari* would recite in the public plazas.⁶

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 Puntukoa* (14 lines of which 9 lines rhyme).⁷ 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."⁸ Therefore the *bertsolari* can instinctually fill a line with the correct amount of syllables without consciously having to count each syllable used.

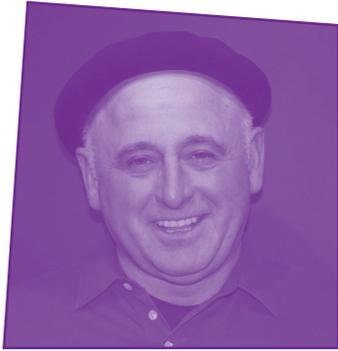
A verse by Jean Curutchet from 1988⁹:

Ez dezaket sekula mespeza Amerika arras ongi bizi naiz ni honera jin eta baina sekulan hal'e	I can never scorn America; I have had a very good life ever since I came here. However, there is something that I will never deny the Basque Country will be mine forever.
hau es dezaket uak Eskual Herria nitzat betiko izanen baita	

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 *bertsolari* has been viewed as the voice of the people. The following verse by Jesús Arriada relates a topical political issue of 1988¹⁰:

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

Traditionally *bertsolariak* (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 *Bertsolari Txapelketa* (Improvised Poetry Contest) took place in the United States and its participants included the *bertsolariak* performing at this year's *Poetry Gathering*.

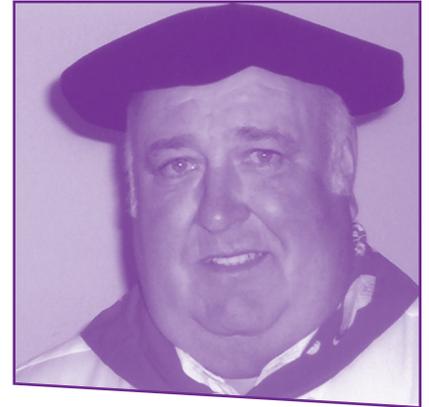


Jean Curutchet



Martin Goicoechea

Jesus Goñi



Gratien Alfaro

The Basque Community in New York City

The *Poetry Gathering's* Basque program, one of the first times that *bertsolaritza* 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.¹¹ Many were seaman, 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."¹²

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.¹³

The Centro Vasco-Americano was incorporated in 1913 and its first home, in 1928, was at 48 Cherry St.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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 Valentín 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."¹⁶

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 *pinxtos* (pronounced PEEN-chohs), the Basque word for "tapas." It is said that the word *pinxtos* is from the Spanish, "pinchar" meaning "to prick" because *pinxtos* are usually served using toothpicks. They differ from *tapas* (developed in Andalusia) in that while *tapas* can be small helpings of larger dish, *pinxtos* are their own distinct dishes.¹⁷

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 Nafaróa) 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 Nafaroa; 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 Nafaroa), rounded out by a dinner of paella with *txistora* (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, *betsolari* 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 *betsolari* 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

1. Linda White, "Orality and Basque Nationalism: Dancing with the Devil or Waltzing into the Future." *Oral Tradition*, 16/1 (2001): 3-28.
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.
3. Mark Kurlansky. *Basque History of the World*. Penguin: New York. 1999. Pg. 19.
4. Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe. *Shooting from the Lip: Bertsolariak Ipar Amerikan: Improvised Basque-Verse Singing*. North American Basque Organization: Reno. 2003. Pg. 49.
5. Mark Kurlansky. Pg. 315.
6. Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, pg. 7.
7. Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, pg. 10.
8. Linda White. "Formulas in the Mind: A Preliminary Examination to Determine if Oral Formulaic Theory May be Applied to the Basque Case," 265-280. In *Voicing the Moment: Improvised Oral Poetry and The Basque Tradition*. Edited by Samuel G. Armistead and Joseba Zulaika. Center for Basque Studies; Reno. 2005. Pg. 269.
9. Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, p.76.
10. Joxe Mallea-Olaetxe, p.81.
11. Gloria Totoricagüena. *The Basques of New York*. Center for Basque Studies, University of Nevada: Reno. 2003. Pg. 47.
12. Gloria Totoricagüena, pg. 83.
13. William Douglass and Jon Bilbao. *Amerikanuak: Basques in the New World*. University of Nevada Press: Reno. 1975. Pg. 341.
14. Emilia Sarriugarte Doyaga. "History of Euzko-Extea of New York." *Journal of Basque Studies*. 1983:71-80). Pg. 75.
15. Gloria Totoricagüena, pg. 65.
16. Emilia Doyaga. Pg. 76.
17. Teresa Barrenechea. *The Basque Table: Passionate Home Cooking from One of Europe's Great Regional Cuisines*. Harvard Common Press: Boston. 1998.
18. Ben Watson. *Cider, Hard and Sweet: History, Traditions, and Making Your Own*. The Countryman Press: Woodstock, VT. Pg. 199.
19. *Ibid.*
20. María José Sevilla. *Life ad Food: Basque Country*. New Amsterdam: Lanham. Pg. 89.
21. Gorka Aulestia. "Bertsolaritza: Island or Archipelago," pg. 183-208. In *Voicing the Moment*. Pg. 191

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*.