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An interview with legendary Spanish chef Juan Mari Arzak

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Juan Mari Arzak smells the wine before he drinks at lunch on South Beach, he is considered one of the fathers of modern Spanish cuisine, is being honored this year by the South Beach Wine & Food Festival at the \$500 per plate tribute dinner. His landmark restaurant, Arzak, in San Sebastian, Spain has been in the family since the late 1800s and has a coveted three Michelin stars. Every year it makes it onto the World's 50 Best Restaurants list. CHARLES TRAINOR JR MIAMI HERALD STAFF

Juan Mari Arzak, the legendary Spanish chef who helped spark a revolution in his homeland in the 1970s — not so much modernizing, but futurizing Basque cuisine and paving the way for later Spanish visionaries such as Ferran Adrià, that mad scientist of foams, airs and deconstructions — greets you in the lobby of the Metropolitan Hotel on Collins Avenue with a kiss on each cheek. And also a warning.

It's after noon, but he has just gotten out of bed. "I'm not very hungry yet. There was a lot of traveling yesterday," says Arzak, who at 72, with his wispy white hair and his gentle demeanor, might seem like any grandfatherly figure on vacation and out of place among the hipsters who are here to blow it out like they're starring in their own MTV videos. But this grandfather can teach the youngsters a thing or two about living it up.

"Maybe just a little jamón," he says when you're seated for coffee. Straightaway, the chef at the hotel's Traymore restaurant, which specializes in seafood, sends out a glistening plate of the finest Pata Negra, which appears nowhere on the menu. Then Arzak gets a hankering for gambas, instructing the waiter to make sure the kitchen doesn't overcook them.

The kitchen does one better, sending out a heap of fat, plain langostinos, just like he likes them. Arzak, whose famed restaurant in posh, seaside San Sebastián has held on to its three Michelin-star rating for a remarkable 26 years, dips a couple of the tails in fresh mayonnaise and sucks out a couple of heads before he realizes something else is missing.

"Let's drink vino tinto," he says, and out comes the red wine.

On Wednesday, Arzak will be honored by Miami Dade College at a dinner where he will receive a Presidential Medal for his lifetime achievements from college president Eduardo Padron. Among earlier recipients have been Barack Obama, Lech Walesa, Yoani Sánchez, Madeline Albright and Mikhail Gorbachev.

You meet Arzak the day before he's honored by the South Beach Wine & Food Festival, at a sold-out, \$500-per-plate tribute dinner cooked by some of his disciples and best friends, among them the famed José Andrés, who hosted the evening and prepared the

first course, a minimalist expression of salad with baby Japanese peaches, burrata, hazelnuts, arugula and a scattering of flower petals.

“Without Arzak, there would be none of us,” Andrés said before the wine fest tribute. “He is without question the father of modern Spanish cuisine.”

Among the other chefs working together for the Feb. 21 dinner in the vast ballroom of the Loews Hotel were Andoni Aduriz, also of San Sebastián, whose restaurant, Mugaritz, is ranked No. 6 on the list of the World’s 50 Best Restaurants; and Alex Atala, whose Deo Optimus Maximus in Sao Paulo is ranked No. 7 on that same list.

“Above all, he is incredibly generous,” said Atala, who made prawns with tapioca and tucupi, a yellow sauce made from wild (and in some states, poisonous) manioc root taken from the Amazon. “He does what very few chefs of his stature will do. He shares all of his innovations and takes care of other young chefs like a father. He wants to see them all triumph. There was a young cook who trained under him for a while and later came to Brazil to talk to me about a job. Juan Mari made very sure I hired him.”

Ranked No. 8 in the world is restaurant Arzak, opened as a tavern by Juan Mari’s grandparents in 1897 and later run by his mother as a more upscale eatery. Juan Mari’s daughter, Elena Arzak, who cooks alongside him and is considered one of the top, if not the top woman chef in the world, is positioned to gradually take over, which will make her the fourth generation to preside over the same kitchen.

“I wish she could have come to Miami with me,” Juan Mari says. “We’re like a duo now. There is not a single dish on the menu that we have not agreed on and developed together. But somebody had to stay home and oversee things. One day she’ll kick me out, and that’s when I’ll retire.”

In the mid-1970s, inspired by the rise of nouvelle cuisine in France, Arzak set off to do something similar with classic Basque cuisine, creating a national movement as he streamlined dishes and created anew, always with the self-imposed rule of honoring tradition even while delivering fantasy on the plate. Take one of his restaurant’s more recent offerings, From the Egg to the Chicken. Dreamed up by father and daughter together, the dish features a poached egg in a shallow pool of chicken jus, with a

sprinkling of chicken crackling. Veiling it is what appears to be tissue paper but is, in fact, dehydrated egg yolk magically turned into a nearly transparent, edible sheet.

“My mother was one of the finest cooks, and I learned everything from her,” Juan Mari says. The dishes we serve at Arzak now may not look a lot like the traditional Basque food that she served, but its essence is the same.

“Above all, what you must put first is the product that you work with. It doesn’t matter how you work with it, how scientific you get. The products themselves must come from kilometer zero, from your own region. It must grow there, ripen there, thrive there. After that, you can get creative.”

Arzak has no use for the term “molecular gastronomy,” which has been bandied about for years now, and which some food critics have already declared passé.

“It’s a nonsense term. All food is molecular,” Arzak says. “Our focus is on investigating new things. Not getting stuck with certain tried-and-true techniques but inventing new ways of seeing ingredients, new ways of elaborating them, like the spherical olive, which is Ferran’s creation. It’s a way of abstracting, even while getting more precise. We all share our ideas with one another because what we are all working for in Spain is for the next real culinary revolution.”

What does he think will define next version of true avant-garde cuisine?

“If I could tell you what that next revolution will be, then we’d be done investigating. But we’re far from it. I may not be alive to see it happen. But I’ll continue contributing my own research until I’m no longer able.”

It’s not uncommon for a famous chef to have a dozen, even two dozen restaurants bearing his name, from New York to Tokyo to Mexico City to Abu Dhabi. Juan Mari and Elena, like so many of the world’s top chefs, have been approached with endless deals to open outposts of their restaurant in every corner of the world.

The Arzaks do consult for the Basque-centric Ametsa, at London’s Halkin Hotel.

“But that is only a consultancy,” Arzak says. “We won’t operate another restaurant of our own. When chefs operate a dozen restaurants, it’s because they want to satisfy a desire to be more than chefs, to be impresarios. Elena and I don’t have that interest. You have to pay attention to the business end of things, but to be an original chef, the most important thing is to never stop seeing like a child. I take my own grandkids to the park. Sometimes they’re climbing on the bars, sometimes they’re crawling under the park benches. It’s all play to them. It’s all play for Elena and me, too, whether we’re in the kitchen or the laboratory upstairs. You have to be curious like a child if your product is going to be worthwhile.”