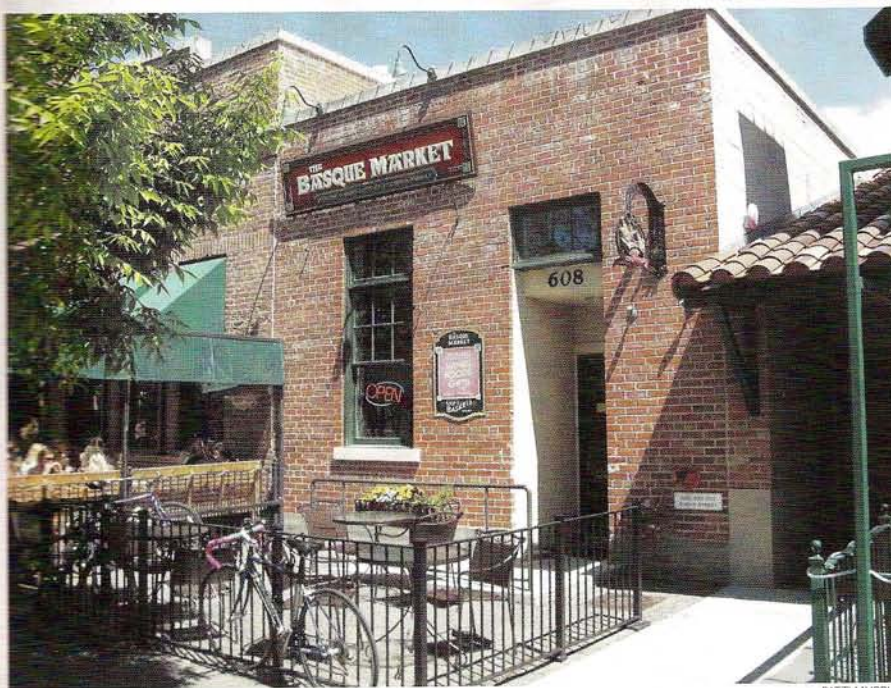




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PATTI MURPHY

EAT, DRINK, BE BASQUE!

STORY BY PATTI MURPHY

Boise's Basque community welcomes visitors with three restaurants serving authentic Basque dishes and a Basque market where you can purchase lunches, tapas, and prepared items to take home.

INSIDE THE BUSTLING Bar Gernika in downtown Boise, Idaho, the aromas of spicy lamb grinder sandwiches and croquetas waft delightfully as conversations buzz in the background and food sizzles on the grill. At the bar, owner Jeff May draws a draft beer and pours a glass of Basque red wine for diners who sit outside on the cozy sidewalk patio, people-watching and enjoying the sunny Boise weather.

Named after the famous city in the Basque Country, Gernika has been feeding Boiseans fresh, authentic Basque pub food on this corner for about 20 years. For a while, Gernika was the only Basque restaurant in the City of Trees, but today the small brick pub shares that distinction with three others—Leku Ona, the Basque Market, and Epi's—each one specializing in its own style of Basque cuisine.

No visit to Boise would be complete without an exploration of the city's Basque culture. Southwest Idaho is home to the largest per capita population of Basques outside of the Basque Country and their influence in the City of Trees is apparent in more ways than just their food. In downtown Boise, an entire city block is dedicated to Basque culture and is home to two Basque restaurants; a Basque hotel; a Basque market; an historic former Basque boarding house, the Fronton, where Basque paddleball and handball are played; the nation's only Basque museum; and a Basque Center.

Boise also is home to the internationally known Basque festival, Jaialdi (Hi-all-dee), the popular Oinkari Basque Dancers, Basque bands and musicians, one of the country's few Basque choirs, and prominent Basque leaders including the Boise mayor, the Idaho Secretary of State, the Ada County Clerk, and others.

So, who are the Basques and how did they become such a force in Idaho?

Basques come from an area nestled amid the Pyrenees, on both sides of the French-Spanish border and abutting the Bay of Biscay. The region is home to thousands of lush working farms and an unlimited ocean harvest, resulting in fresh, healthy foods and interesting but simple recipes.

Idaho's Basque immigration began in the late 1800s when young, single men came over to work as sheepherders. As more Basques arrived, more boarding houses opened, and young Basque women came to cook and help out. Along with them came the traditional Basque recipes that have been handed down through the generations.

Their recipes are fresh and simple and use just a few key seasonings that enhance, not overwhelm, the food. The recipes are not hot and spicy, but subtle. When eating Basque food, you can be as conservative or adventurous as your appetite allows.

A meal at Gernika (208-344-2175; www.bargernika.com) is casual and filling, and might include a solomo sandwich of marinated pork loin and pimientos on a roll, chorizo sausage, lamb stew, or kabobs. A Gernika specialty is the melt-in-your-mouth croquetas, an addictive combination of butter, onion, chicken, flour and milk, rolled into a ball, coated in bread crumbs, and deep fried. On Saturdays, Gernika serves its famous beef tongue, served in tomato and pepper sauce with onion and a touch of garlic. It is so popular that they usually run out within a couple of hours.

Across the street is Leku Ona Basque Restaurant and Hotel (208-345-6665; www.lekuonaid.com). The name means "Good Place" in Basque, and the menu in this family-owned restaurant is extensive. Here you might order Piperrak Betetak, which are stuffed piquillo peppers; Txipiroiak Euren Tintan, stuffed squid served with ink sauce; Txarri Txuletak, pork

chops; or Arkume Hanka, hearty-sized lamb shanks. After dinner, retire to the downstairs bar to enjoy espresso, Pagoa (authentic Basque beer), or Basque cocktails. The local Basque band, Amuma Says No, plays regularly to a wall-to-wall crowd.

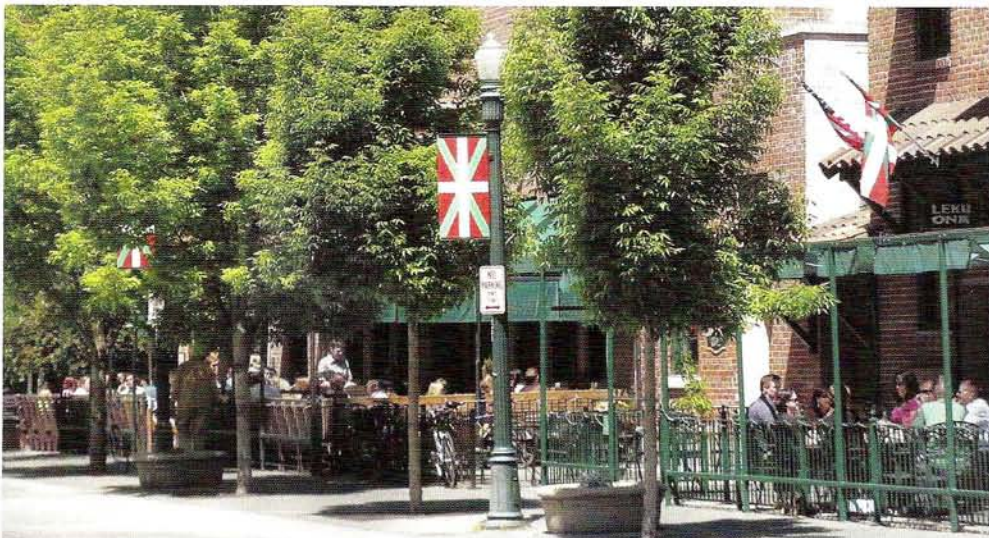
One door down from Leku Ona is the Basque Market (208-433-1208, www.thebasquemarket.com), a small but jam-packed specialty shop filled with a huge selection of Spanish wines, kitchen utensils, cookbooks, and a

deli case of cheeses, sausages, soups, croquetas, squid in ink, rice pudding, and other prepared items to take home. They are famous for their paella, a beautiful dish of chicken, chorizo, clams, mussels, shrimp, prosciutto, rice, and vegetables all simmered together. Lunches feature a variety of sandwiches, such as chorizo and Manchego Spanish cheese, smoked solomo, Jamón serrano (salt-cured ham) and Idiazabal sheep cheese, Basque tuna salad, or meatball with Manchego cheese.

PHOTOS BY PATTI MURPHY



OPPOSITE: The Oinkari Basque Dancers perform on the Basque Block; Basque Market in downtown Boise. THIS PAGE: Bar Gernika; Basque cheeses at the Basque market; outdoor dining on the Basque block.





PHOTOS BY PATTI MURPHY



Large collection of Spanish wines and kitchen items at the Basque Market; Entrance to Leku Ona Basque Restaurant and Hotel.

JAIALDI 2010

If you really want to immerse yourself in authentic Basque culture, plan to visit Boise July 27–August 1 during Jaialdi, the world-famous international Basque Festival and Celebration. Jaialdi (Hi-all-dee) is celebrated once every five years, and what a celebration it is! Planeloads of Basques from around the world and the U.S. descend on the City of Trees to celebrate their heritage and culture and reconnect with family and friends.

During the weekend, Basque men compete in traditional sports, such as wood chopping, extreme weight lifting, hay bale throwing, and wagon lifting. Basque dancers and musicians perform in spectacular cultural events. The Basque Block in downtown Boise is decked out in red, white, and green, the colors of the Basque flag, as thousands of people from all over the world gather for the street party and dance and to enjoy Basque food, drink, and music.

Jaialdi debuted in 1987 as a one-time-only event to celebrate Basque culture. That first year attracted 30,000 enthusiastic visitors from all over the world. In 1990, as part of Idaho's 100th anniversary celebrations, the governor asked the Basque community to organize another Jaialdi, which was so successful that it became a regular event every five years. (www.jaialdi.com)

Perhaps one of the most widely known Basque restaurants in the Boise area is Epi's (208-884-0142), named for Epifania Inchausti, a Basque immigrant who came to Idaho in the 1920s and opened a restaurant and boarding house in Hailey, Idaho, in 1936. Her cooking became famous among the celebrities who visited the Sun Valley ski area, and her recipes live on at the namesake restaurant owned by her granddaughter Christine Ansotegui.

Epi's specialties include lamb shank and stew, beef tongue, cod and halibut, squid in ink, halibut, chicken, and shrimp. As with most Basque dining, meals are at least four courses, beginning with appetizers of choricerro peppers, croquetas or a plate of calamari, followed

by a beautiful house salad; red bean and chorizo soup; the main course, and then finished with desserts such as rice pudding, flan, or Gâteau Basque, a delicious cross between a tart, a pie, and a cake. Of course, Spanish red wine is always a complement to any Basque meal, and lingering is not only encouraged but facilitated by the friendly conversation and personal service of Chris and her staff.

Boise's Basque community is vibrant and begs to be explored. From its food to its wine, music, dance, and stories, the Basque culture offers a fascinating mix of the historic and the contemporary. Perhaps the best way to sum it up is through the Basque saying, "Jan, edan euskalduna izan," which translated means, "Eat, drink, be Basque!" ■

WHERE TO STAY

Want to stay close to the action in downtown Boise?

Hotel 43 is the answer. Named for its presence on the 43rd parallel in Idaho, the 43rd state,

it's also conveniently located adjacent to the Basque Block. From the hotel it's a short stroll to the Basque Museum, Basque Center, Basque Market, Leku Ona, and Gernika. Pick up an Idiazabal and Manchego cheese and olive tapenade sandwich at the market and then settle in to peruse the Basque cookbook thoughtfully placed in your room. The hotel is definitely metro hip, with works of art by local artists adorning the walls, stylish rooms, an onsite martini bar and steakhouse, great views of the capitol building, and even a complimentary shoeshine. (800-243-4622; www.hotel43.com)



PHOTOS COURTESY HOTEL 43

– Emily Kolkemo