

TABLE FOR TWO

ENEKO ATXA

The chef-owner of Azurmendi in Spain's Basque Country, number 19 on The World's 50 Best Restaurants list, is preparing to open Eneko at One Aldwych this summer

Words/Laura Price

WHAT'S AZURMENDI ALL ABOUT?

In Basque homes, it's really important that the kitchen is always at the heart. We wanted Azurmendi to be like our home so we put the kitchen right in the middle of the restaurant and we walk guests through it as part of the experience. I like to be present and in constant contact with customers.

YOU TAKE YOUR PRODUCE VERY SERIOUSLY THERE TOO

For us, cooking doesn't start in the kitchen - it starts with the producers, so the dream would be to show the whole process to our diners. Since that's not possible, we created small allotments where people can learn what our producers do for us. We don't want to be self-sufficient from it though because that would mean we'd stop buying from local producers. Together with Neiker (the Basque Institute for Agricultural Research and Development) we're recovering plants that would otherwise have been extinct - we've recovered 36 species so far, including peppers, golden onions and tomatoes from the Basque country. Our guests eat their snacks in the greenhouse and we even give them a pack of seeds to take home with them.

WITHOUT YOUR FRESH PRODUCE, VEGETABLE GARDEN AND RESEARCH CENTRES, HOW ARE YOU GOING TO REPRODUCE AZURMENDI IN LONDON?

Azurmendi is a very high-end concept but we know we can have other concepts too - ones that are more informal and wider reaching. In London, we want to take the essence of Basque cooking that we have at Azurmendi, but in a much more relaxed, informal, light-hearted and almost rebellious setting. People will be able to enjoy themselves in a simpler way and in a shorter space of time, but it'll still be Basque gastronomy with its own peculiarities and potent and personal flavours. We want to create an unpretentious modern take on rustic Basque cuisine, based on quality ingredients, simplicity and culinary heritage. Every space has its own magic and in each, you can do different things.

WHAT'S ON THE MENU?

An example of a dish could be jugo de alubias (a sort of black bean stew). It's a very traditional dish that we've always done in the Basque



country and we'll adapt it to Londoners' tastes in an informal way while still respecting its roots and essence.

DESCRIBE THE DINING ROOM

Besides it being extraordinary because of where it's located, the family and the people behind One Aldwych are very similar to us in terms of philosophy and ways of working. We're on the same page in that we're both looking for excellence. The space will be very dynamic, with 100 or so covers. At Azurmendi, we have 40 to 50 covers and then we have an events space below the restaurant for up to 600 people and a little bistro for up to 100. With London, we want it to be fun, yet serious at the same time.

WHY DID YOU CHOOSE TO COME TO LONDON?

It's a really important city. It is one of the most interesting in the world and people visit from all over the globe. We feel comfortable here and we've always been treated well here, but it's also a really interesting mirror in which to reflect our cooking. London is a new audience so we're starting from scratch. We're very humble about it. We're listening to customers and trying to get our philosophy through to them and make people happy.

WHAT LONDON RESTAURANTS DO YOU LIKE?

It's hard to name just one because there are so

many I like, such as Dinner by Heston Blumenthal. I also like the Spanish concepts Iberica and Barrafinna.

YOU OPENED AZIAMENDI IN THAILAND IN 2013 BUT, AFTER THREE YEARS, YOU'RE PASSING THE TORCH TO YOUR CHEF DE CUISINE AISHA IBRAHIM. WHAT DID YOU LEARN FROM IT?

The road we took was correct - it was about understanding the audience in Asia, transforming our philosophy to local tastes and learning that in any place in the world, you've got to work, listen to customers and, ultimately, make them happy. We had a very positive response with Aziamendi and people travelled there from all over Asia to get to know our product.

WHY DO YOU THINK SPANISH FOOD IS SO POPULAR RIGHT NOW?

There's an evolving ideology in terms of the search for pleasure. In Spain, we're very privileged, geographically - I live close to both the sea and the mountains. There's a real culture of products and producers, and there's also great knowledge and our ancestors really left us a great culinary inheritance. All this means that when we want to evolve and continue growing, we have the right circumstances to cook in a kitchen that respects its roots and, at the same time, has been able to evolve and adapt to new times.