

The Impact of Food on Basque Culture-Gâteau Basque

One of the most cherished traditions in my family is my amatxi's (grandmother's) "Gâteau Basque." This cake is a staple of Basque cuisine, can be found at every basque gathering, and the recipe varies from person to person. Every family gathering I witnessed relatives asking my grandmother for the recipe, to which she always replied, "It's a secret." This response is common among other amatxis, who seem hesitant to share their recipes. The day amatxi invited my mother and me into her kitchen to observe her in action, preparing her "Gâteau Basque", was a revelation. She did not follow a written recipe but relied on instinct, adding flour, sugar and eggs by feel and memory rather than measurement. Being taught how she made this family delicacy was an event I never thought would happen.

Making the "Gâteau Basque" was an intimate experience, connecting me with my amatxi and my heritage. Mixing the dough by hand, as my grandmother insisted, was crucial. She believed mixers were too harsh for the delicate, velvety dough. During this tactile process I couldn't help but imagine my amatxi being taught this same process with her mother. This imagery provided me with a visual connection to my ancestors, who had undoubtedly made the same motions in their own kitchens. I can't help but compare my surroundings to what my amatxi described to me; a wood burning stove built of stone and farm fresh eggs. The dough, soft and pliable beneath my fingers, created a link to my cultural past.

My mother only became familiar with Basque culture when she met my father. Despite this, my grandmother and other members of the Basque community have always been welcoming and willing to share their culture with her. Although not Basque, she is largely

responsible for my continued involvement in the Basque community. She spent every weekend driving my brother and I to and from Basque dance practice, making sure we had our costumes, and was there to cheer us on after every performance. She takes part in volunteering for the San Francisco Basque Cultural Center, serving food to hundreds of members of the Basque community. For my mother, learning to make "Gâteau Basque" was more than just mastering a recipe; it was an initiation into a rich and welcoming community. The act of baking with my grandmother and receiving the recipe allowed her to feel connected to a culture she was not born into but embraced wholeheartedly. This inclusivity is a pillar of Basque culture, where food is not just sustenance for our bodies but a vessel for cultural exchange, generational bonds and feelings of belonging.

As we gathered around the table to enjoy the fruits of our labor, the "Gâteau Basque" became a symbol of unity. Through the simple act of baking, we celebrated not only our heritage but also the universal language of food that brings us all together at every Basque event. At the San Francisco Basque Picnic, there once was one "Gâteau Basque" on the table, made by my grandmother. Today, you can count on there being two more, with all three generations represented by the cakes, my amatxi's, my mothers and my own.