



# CHEFS FOR CHANGE

UTE JUNKER VISITS THE COOKING SCHOOL WITH AMBITIONS TO NOURISH THE PLANET.



From bad-tempered tyrants to tweezer-wielding perfectionists, popular culture loves to lampoon chefs. Rarely, however, are cooks cast as crusaders. But the head of the Basque Culinary Centre in San Sebastián, Joxe Mari Aizega, believes chefs are among the world's most effective change agents. "They can change what people want from food; there are many good examples of chefs bringing back ingredients that were forgotten to society," Aizega says.

"Every single one of us interacts with food during the day, every single one of us makes decisions connected with food during the day. That's why chefs are relevant."

Aizega is not just speaking theoretically. As director general of the BCC, changing the world through food is part of his job description. More than just a cooking school, the centre – which boasts a truckload of culinary heavyweights on its board including Juan Mari Arzak, Ferran Adrià, René Redzepi, Massimo Bottura and Heston Blumenthal – pursues an activist agenda that extends way beyond finding better ways to grill meat.

Take the Basque Culinary Prize, launched last July to celebrate chefs who use gastronomy as a tool for social change. The award carries an extraordinary prize pool of €100,000 (\$150,000), which has to be reinvested in relevant projects.

The inaugural winner was María Fernanda Di Giacobbe, a Venezuelan chef who is helping local cacao producers to grow their businesses through improved production processes, fermentation and marketing. She connects small-scale producers with artisanal chocolatiers, and has a strong focus on gender equality and fair-trade practices.

"Di Giacobbe has trained about 8500 women and promoted many small companies created by women. She is a really inspiring example [of a chef for change]," Aizega says.

Her story is proof of the significant impact that food-based projects can have. "In the

last [few] years, more and more countries have realised gastronomy is an area of socio-economic development," Aizega says. "Gastronomy is adding value to food production, through the restaurants sector, through tourism."

Latin America is one region where the BCC is particularly active. "They have great biodiversity, the potential to add value to products, to make their quality products better known in the world and to attract tourism," Aizega says. "Peru is a good example of how you can create a country brand through food and through cooking."

Peruvian chefs such as Gastón Acurio and Virgilio Martínez have built global reputations not just for their respective outlets but for their country's culinary heritage.

"I see that Australia has also invested in attracting attention to its gastronomy," Aizega says. "Now countries such as Mexico, Columbia and Argentina are making greater efforts to bring their gastronomy into view."

One of the most remarkable things about the BCC is how broad its agenda is.

From professional training to product development, health-related research to developing new food concepts, this not-for-profit organisation is willing to tackle anything.

Ironically, when the centre was launched in 2011, it had a much simpler brief: to improve the training of apprentice chefs. The original impetus came from a group of respected Basque chefs. "They were saying, 'We need a new education for the future'," Aizega says.

They contacted Mondragón University in San Sebastián, where Aizega was a vice-president, to explore the potential of collaboration. "We discovered huge potential for new ideas, new products, new services."

The BCC's educational offerings range from short courses designed for ongoing professional development to an undergraduate degree that turns old-school chef training on its head. More than 500 students are currently enrolled full-time.



## STAY AND PLAY

Brisbane's luxury boutique Emporium Hotel turns 10 this year. To celebrate, it's offering a Diamond Package that not only includes a weekend full of indulgences, but also bespoke jewellery pieces by designer Margot McKinney, valued at \$7500. The package includes a two-night stay in a Deluxe Corner Suite, signature cocktails and cheese plate on arrival, degustation dinner with wine matches at Tartufo restaurant, travel bag, his and hers PJs, Perrier Jouët Belle Époque tasting set, in-suite breakfast daily, late check-out and valet parking, \$10,000 a couple. For bookings, 1300 833 611.

MAIN, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The iconic Basque Culinary Centre in San Sebastián, Spain; 500 future chefs are currently enrolled in a variety of classes; an experimental dish by students features Idiazábal cheese, sprouts and flowers; the resort town is known for its beaches and cuisine.

In a world that seems ever more obsessed with food, one of the aims of the course is to make students aware of their many options.

"We want to show them the many different disciplines that intersect with cooking – applied science, physics, chemistry, biology – and the many different worlds they can access," Aizega says. "We have graduates cooking, managing restaurants, working as sommeliers, but also working in research centres and TV production companies."

The BCC probably could only have sprung up in the fertile soil of the Basque country. The city of San Sebastián is known for its extraordinary concentration of Michelin-starred restaurants, and respect for food is deeply ingrained in its culture.

This is a place where fishmongers arrange their wares in elaborate displays, where the favoured venue for male bonding is cooking clubs from which women are excluded, and where pintxos – the local equivalent of tapas – has been elevated to an art form.

Aizega says much of the BCC's work is driven by its board members. It was Basque chef Andoni Luis Aduriz – whose Mugaritz restaurant has two Michelin stars and sits at number nine in the World's 50 Best Restaurants list – who suggested the centre's research program explore sensory perception.

"We are doing some experiments on how narrative conditions your senses and Andoni's feedback talking about his experiences has been valuable," says Aizega. "What you say when you serve food, the context you give to a dish using language, changes your perceptions of what you are eating."

Aizega is at his most passionate when speaking about the BCC's efforts to help communities realise the value that exists in their local produce. "We have big companies giving us cheap, anonymous food, but at the same time we have a growing community that is looking for authentic food," he says.

"There is still a huge amount of work to do to promote real, sustainable food." 🍴