



## **The Social Bonds of Cooking:** Gastronomic Societies in the Basque Country

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the Basque Country cooking and eating together in gastronomic societies (in Basque: *txokos*, in Spanish: *sociedades gastronómicas*) are highly popular activities. They represent a form of social bonding that has, maybe surprisingly, not been given much sociological attention. This article tries to remedy this situation. It recalls and describes the history, development and geographical distribution of the *txoko*; it looks into its formal organization, its unique social and culinary environment and its social functions. It concludes by suggesting that the *txoko* is a phenomenon that may best be studied and discussed in the context of plebeian cultures and related moral economies.

### **KEY WORDS**

Basque culture / gastronomic societies / sociology of food / *txokos* / plebeian culture / moral economy

## **Introduction**

Observers of the conflict in the Basque Country have often argued that Basque society is so deeply divided and so tending towards social and political fragmentation, that reconciliation between different antagonistic groups becomes almost impossible to imagine. Particularly when it comes to the politics of self-determination there seem to exist irreconcilable political splits, which even a successful peace process might not be able to overcome. Worse, as some observers have argued, entire aspects of the Basque tradition and the nationalist arsenal are invented that continue to support the conflict ideologically

(Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Juaristi, 1987). However, in the Basque Country there always existed and continue to exist peculiar institutions that provide a cultural counterweight against the tendencies of division and fragmentation that have emerged along the fault lines of class and national belonging. Partly in response to the deep mistrust of Basque citizens towards established political institutions, particularly after not having had, as de Tocqueville might have put it, 'a lucky start' in either the 19th or 20th century, these institutions have taken on a form that is not openly political but still has a political impact in the sense that they have helped hold Basque society together by providing some sense of loyalty and civil 'commensality' (Hirschman, 1977). One of these unique cultural institutions is the Basque gastronomic or cooking society. It is institutions such as this that need to be studied more if we want to understand the peculiarities of Basque culture. Pursuing this task, it is simply not enough to reveal just the existence of such institutions; what we also need is a new way of looking at them, a change of perspective away from the spectacular media headlines that more than once have portrayed the entire Basque population and culture as rogue, ruthless and without any morals and respect for life. It is here that a new cultural sociology might come in as a new descriptive project that also has normative implications.

It is estimated that in the Basque Autonomous Community (BAC)<sup>1</sup> there are at present 1300 gastronomic or cooking societies (in Spanish: *sociedades gastronómicas*, or in Basque: *txoko*, a diminutive of *zoko* which means 'corner' or 'secret place'). Many more cooking societies can be found outside the BAC, not only in Navarre which has strong historical ties with the Basque Country, but also in other Spanish cities and regions where a significant number of Basques live and socialize (Anton Idroquilis, 1994). In a feature devoted to this phenomenon, the Basque newspaper *Deia* reported that, out of a population in the BAC of 2,000,000, about 50,000 Basques were cooking society members. The same paper reported that in one particular Bizkaian seaside town alone, Lekeitio, around 80 percent of the male population regularly attend a cooking society. In addition, the cooking society has also become a symbol of the Basque diaspora and *txokos* can be found in almost every major capital or city in the world that has a significant number of Basques – from Buenos Aires to New York City and London.

As I will try to show in this article, the cooking society is representative of what E.P. Thompson and (more implicitly) Albert O. Hirschman have called 'plebeian culture' and moral economy – entities which, I believe, cultural sociology should take a much stronger interest in, particularly when it comes to ways in which they can help us make sense of complex issues to do with relations between the public and private realms. 'Plebeian culture' refers here first and foremost to a societal constellation where inequality exists – but only to a certain extent. A sense of traditional egalitarianism usually prevails in these constellations. Applying the logic of modern class analysis to such constellations would indeed not be very fruitful; in fact, it would actually amount to some form of 'conceptual imperialism'. Plebeian constellations and related moral economies can best

be studied in times of transition, in cases where modernization has remained unfinished or incomplete, where we can encounter a reluctance toward being, in the words of the famous French poet Arthur Rimbaud, ‘absolutely modern’, mainly because of a sense that there are important things which would be lost in such a transition. However, in the context of Basque gastronomic societies I will argue that the institutions in question have, in the end, not only made the modernization process (and that means first and foremost here, an urban way of life) somewhat acceptable to the Basque people, but have also provided the very ingredients – loyalty and solidarity, in the Durkheimian sense of the word – without which no modern society can exist, particularly not when it is also marked by serious political conflicts and tensions. In this context, Thompson’s work is mainly referred to because it gives us useful means of conceptualizing the macro-level of such processes (plebeian culture’s relations to modernization processes), while reference to Hirschman’s work allows us to look at more micro-level issues, particularly the institutional and moral dimensions of cooking societies, the latter involving the cultivation of feelings of loyalty to one’s fellow society members through the means of commensality and conviviality.

In what follows I will first of all take a closer look at the historical origins, the geographical development and distribution of the *txoko*. Second, I will discuss the formal structure, the social context and function of the gastronomic society. Third, I argue that the *txoko* must be seen as an institution that could only develop in a region that has a peculiar natural and cultural environment, which in turn allows a gastronomic tradition to develop and flourish. Finally, I endeavour to locate and discuss the social phenomenon of the *txoko* within the broader conceptual framework of plebeian culture, moral economy and commensality.

## **Origins, Historical Development and Geographical Distribution of the *Txoko***

The origins of the gastronomic society lie in San Sebastian, a middle-sized city tucked away in a sheltered bay on the Cantabrian coastline, only a few miles away from the Spanish-French border. Thanks to its central location it developed into the administrative centre and became the capital of the Basque province of Gipuzkoa. Due to its prime location and improved communications – trains, electricity, the telegraph and later the telephone had all arrived in a short period of time – the city over the course of the 19th century witnessed an influx of visitors and soon showed signs of developing a tourist industry. This process was accompanied by a change in the composition of San Sebastian’s working population.

San Sebastian’s main chronicler, Felix Luengo (2001), has pointed towards the sorts of social changes briefly referred to above, and their expressions in cultural terms. The artisan sector had become the main sector of San Sebastian’s working population, and it would also become the main protagonist in terms of organizing popular activities and events such as the carnival-like event of the *tamborrada* (Luengo, 2001: 50). For most of the 19th century, class and occu-

pational divisions in San Sebastian had expressed themselves in vertical and horizontal spatial segregation: the aristocratic elite occupied the high buildings in the centre and, in part, in the old town, while rich seasonal visitors and tourists owned the chalets along the beach at the curve of the *bahia* (bay) (Luengo, 2001: 57ff). In contrast, the less well-off lived in much smaller buildings away from the centre. However, by the second decade of the 20th century, the changing class structure led to new arrangements of urban space. Artisans and fishermen, both now constituting the 'plebeian' majority of the working population, had moved into the old town, close to the harbour facilities.<sup>2</sup> San Sebastian had from the second half of the 19th century onwards also developed a significant tourist industry. This now went beyond a few chalets for the rich, and increasingly involved the erection of tourist-related infrastructure, such as the construction of casinos and hotels and the opening of cafés.

Both developments – that of the tourist industry and that of plebeian culture – led to the further differentiation of popular space. By 1868 the city council recorded the existence of 58 popular eating and drinking establishments, and the number grew to 106 by 1882. Most of these establishments were *tabernas* (taverns) and *sidrerias* (cider houses; *sagardotegis* in Basque), mainly located in the old part of the town, which by now was mainly populated by artisans and fishermen. However, one of the problems of the taverns and cider houses was their early closing hours, for by law they had to close at half past ten every evening. A temporary solution consisted of turning taverns and cider houses into cafés, which would allow them to stay open until one o'clock in the morning. A better, longer-term solution for owners was to open a new style of mixed-purpose establishment that combined aspects of the tavern, the café, and eating places. For this purpose, another organizational form was invented – the *sociedad popular* (popular society). An early forerunner of this form was the society called *La Fraternal*, which was founded in 1843, with others following soon after. The last three decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a number of newly founded societies: *Pescadores de San Sebastian* (1869), *Union Artesana* (1870), *La Armonia* (1872), *Neptuno* (1878), *Primero de Abril* (1879), *Union Obrera* (1880), *La Humanitaria* (1892) and *Euskalduna* (1893). The membership ranged from 50 to 80 members. The recruitment to these showed a clear social profile in that all popular society members were artisans and fishermen, and all newly founded societies intended to be democratically inclusive in terms of membership.<sup>3</sup>

The new societies provided an infrastructure where one could drink, eat, sing, rehearse and prepare cultural events such as plays, parades and festivities like the *tamborrada*. Usually the society would also have a library and a reading room. Another social function of the societies was to integrate migrants, not only from the rural environment around San Sebastian, but also from other parts of Spain. Later, entire societies would be founded in which the name of the society hinted at the region of origin of its members.

At the beginning of the 20th century, new political movements and parties arrived on the scene and changed the political landscape of the Basque Country.

In the first instance these were political-organizational responses to the rapid modernization and industrialization process. In the Basque Country they found their distinctive expression along two major markers, class and national identity. In San Sebastian the different identities expressed themselves also culturally and in multiple ways; socialists, nationalists, anarchists, republicans and also various unions and Catholic social groups, all established their own recreational societies, thereby contributing to an increased 'democratization of recreation' (Luengo, 2001: 102; see also Aguirre Franco, 1983: 21). Football, mountaineering, cars and car racing, the famous Basque ball game *pelota* and Atlantic rowing *regatas*, were no longer restricted to the few but became spectator sports for mass audiences.

The activities described above led to a further democratization and popularization of the culinary *sociedades*. In most cases, this also involved an increasing number of women. Most of the newly-founded societies responded to their changing constituencies, and the needs and demands of those participating in the increasingly broad spectrum of new leisure activities. In contrast to the membership of the older societies, which had been dominated by artisans and fishermen, the new societies which developed in the first two decades of the 20th century were symbolic of the rise of the middle class in San Sebastian, as they appealed mainly to the new small and middle bourgeoisie.

Between 1925 and 1936, San Sebastian witnessed a further founding boom: 55 new societies were founded, encompassing a wide range of activities such as musical interests, sport, religious activities and cultural pursuits. The most interesting aspect, however, was a new differentiation process, particularly the development of so-called gastronomic societies, that is, societies whose main purpose was for members to cook and to eat. Certainly, a few societies only devoted to cooking had already been founded at the beginning of the 20th century, most prominently *Cañojetan* (1900) and *Euskal Billera* (1901). They were now joined by societies which originally had been more interested in sports but had now decided to turn into cooking societies: *Gimnastica de Ullia* (1917), *Sociedad de Caza y Pesca* (1919) and *Ur-Kirolak* (1922). In the 1920s, new cooking societies developed which had their origins first in republican and then nationalist circles: *Aizepe* (1921), *Gure Txokoa* (1925), *Sociedad Illumpe* and *Donosti Berri* (both 1927) and *C.D. Vasconia* and *Zubi Gain* (both 1928). The coming of the new Spanish Republic<sup>4</sup> was greeted by another wave of new establishments: *Istingarra*, *Itzalpe*, *Aitzaki*, *Gizarta*, *Ardatza* (all founded in 1932), and *Lagun Artea* (1934). The Spanish Civil War and Franco's new regime slowed things down with only one further society founded before 1945. The post-war development and new openings of popular and cooking societies appealed more to aesthetic form and design than to widespread usage (Aguirre Franco, 1983: 23). But whatever its future course and further differentiation, today it is an acknowledged fact that San Sebastian's cooking societies not only had a remarkably successful history but have indeed become the city's distinctive modern trademark. There are currently 120 cooking societies in San Sebastian, and it is estimated that one out of every 3.5 adults is a member of a

*sociedad* (Von Wijck, 2001). The popular society in general, and the cooking society in particular, truly became the intersection points of San Sebastian's civic culture. As an organizational form, the popular society encompasses many activities. It has even become a model for export to other areas, having great appeal in the rest of the Gipuzkoan province.<sup>5</sup>

The history of popular and gastronomic societies is somewhat different in the city of Bilbao and its environs. Resulting both from the long history of trade and commerce with England, and from the enormous affluence of Bilbao, popular establishments in this city first aspired to the ideal of the English gentlemen's club. While it is true that the first wave of popular societies in Bilbao to some extent involved class distinctions, the further development and history of the *sociedades gastronómicas* in the city and its environs demonstrates that equal status of members within the society remained the rule rather than the exception to it, and that the choosing of a particular society to join by a prospective member was not completely determined by class background. However, the general difference between Bilbao and San Sebastian consists of a certain 'elevator effect'. In Bilbao, class distinctions have always been more pronounced than in San Sebastian, which never had a history of heavy industrial development, and the obvious and visible stratified social layers that usually come with it.<sup>6</sup>

The history of popular societies, and in particular cooking societies, in the province of Bizkaia actually begins outside the provincial capital, Bilbao. Their origins can be traced back to mainly labour-related activities and societies in Bizkaian seaside towns and harbours such as Ondarroa, Lekeitio and Bermeo, following San Sebastian's lead and spreading along the Cantabrian coastline towards the west (Alonso Cespedes, 1996: 28). Lekeitio has 17 societies, while Bermeo, a slightly larger town, has more than 30.<sup>7</sup> The oldest purely gastronomic society in Bilbao with 85 founding members, *Gure Txoko*, was only founded in 1954. It was soon followed by a second society, *Txoko Bilboko Umore Ona*.<sup>8</sup> In the second half of the 1960s and early 1970s, a true boom followed, as seen in the appearance of *Achuritarra* (founded in 1965) with 200 members, *Sociedad Recreativa Deusto* (1967) with 150 members and *Abando* (1970) with 100 members. At present, Bilbao has 45 societies in total with an average of 30 to 60 members each (Alonso Cespedes, 1996: 121).<sup>9</sup> As in San Sebastian, most cooking societies can be found in the old part of town, the *Casco Viejo*, and in the neighbourhoods of Uribarri and Santutxu; otherwise *txokos* in Bilbao seem to be equally distributed around the city. This can be seen as a confirmation that despite the existence of a Bilbao business elite, and despite its unique social clubs, popular urban space and related activities are hardly dominated by these.

Just as in Bizkaia, the province of Alava and its capital, Vitoria, took their lead and inspiration from San Sebastian and Gipuzkoa (Anton Idroquilis, 1994). But in contrast to Bizkaia, cooking societies developed in Vitoria as early as the 1930s: *La Globa* (founded in 1934) was the first and largest cooking society to be established in Vitoria, with 100 members, followed by *El Rincón Amado*

with 30 members. *Zaldibartxo* in the close-by town of Sarria (begun in 1941) was actually founded by Vitoria citizens, while *Olarizu* (1948) is known for a rather religious and aristocratic membership. These were followed by *Zaldiaran* and *San Juan-La Globa*, both founded in 1953. Since 1988, there has existed a federation of popular societies in Vitoria called *Gasteizko Elkarteak*. It started with eight societies and has at present 27 societies as members. The main aim of the organization is to help organize the *Fiesta de San Prudencia*, an event which includes a *tamborrada*. Other activities include cooking competitions, wine competitions and tastings, and the *Campeonato de Mus*, the famous Basque card game. Today there are 126 popular societies in Alava altogether (including cooking and other recreational societies). Half of them are in Vitoria alone. They are mainly located in the old part of the Basque capital (Anton Idroquilis, 1994: 41).

In Navarre, the development of the *sociedades* followed the well-established cultural patterns of Basque settlements: more developed in the north and north-east, and fizzling out or non-existent in the south of the region. Most societies (15) can be found in Pamplona (most prominently among them, *Napardi* and *Txoko Pelotazale*), Tafalla (14), Tudela (seven), Elizondo (five) and Alsasua (four). In contrast to Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia, the term *sociedades* in Navarre refers almost exclusively to cooking societies. The absence of women is also marked in most of Navarre's cooking societies.

## Formal Organization, Social Context and Functions of the Txoko

For a gastronomic society to function properly, basic institutional arrangements are necessary and some established rules have to be followed (Alonso Cespedes, 1996; Anton Idroquilis, 1994; Luengo, 2001). In 1964, the Franco regime relaxed its attitude vis-à-vis civil associations and organizations, and decided to introduce a new law of associations (*ley de asociaciones*) that was followed by a bylaw in 1965,<sup>10</sup> specifying possible applications and interpretations. Under the new rules, each association or society had to state where the place or location of the association was, the reasons for, and purposes of, its existence, the social environment the association or society appealed to, how its administrative organization was ordered, what the rules concerning membership and access were, and what rights and duties the members had. The society also had to declare its non-profit aims, and finally it had to specify the rules concerning a possible dissolution of itself. Furthermore, the society needed to be registered with the official register of associations of the Basque Government, and on demand had to prove that it followed the rules in terms of official book-keeping, documentation, the designated regulations, and so on. The typical structure would involve a general assembly, whose members elected an executive committee consisting usually of six to eight people, depending on the size of the society. The executive committee usually consisted of a president, a vice-president, a treasurer, a secretary, the head of infrastructure and sometimes a speaker (Anton Idroquilis, 1994: 23).

Based on her research of cooking societies in present-day San Sebastian, Anke von Wijck (2001: 19) has found that apart from the original 'founding fathers', recruitment of new members is usually based on the recommendation of two members of a given society. Very often priority is given to the offspring of members. Membership usually requires that members are adults over 21 years old. Von Wijck also points out that there are different forms of membership. Apart from the permanent members one can also encounter honorary and transient members.

However, as both Anton Idroquilis (1994: 22) and Von Wijck (2001: 19) have stressed, membership and membership recruitment still vary between societies, and remain a topic of some debate. Today very few societies have rules with regard to the official prohibition of membership, and the presence of women in the society. However, custom seems to vary from town to town, and from province to province, being stricter for example in Alava and Navarre, and more liberal in Gipuzkoa and some parts of Bizkaia. Thus we find today very few societies who openly limit the membership exclusively to adult males. Most societies allow women to have either completely open access, or to enter at certain hours of the day. Some societies specify that women are not allowed in the kitchen or that they should always be accompanied by male members.<sup>11</sup> Anton Idroquilis (1994: 22) explains the early tradition of excluding women stemmed from the time when San Sebastian's *sidrerias* – the cider houses, the predecessors of the popular societies – were rarely frequented by women. Aguirre Franco (1983) and Von Wijck (2001) relate the absence of women more to an historical division of labour, that is, that fishing and artisanal work were usually done by males and that men needed 'some space of their own'. Luengo (2001) provides a more functional explanation, pointing towards the fact that with increasing differentiation in modern society, particularly in terms of the division of labour and tasks – women can now increasingly be found in jobs that just a few decades ago were male only – Basque society also became more inclusive and welcoming towards women.

During the Franco years, the law of associations still demanded that the associations or societies abstained from politics. Today the contributions that societies and associations make to civil society are widely acknowledged. For example, the Basque Government encourages the founding of recreational and gastronomic societies by providing starting grants and contributing to building or modernizing expenses. It is now common to find society rules and regulations that specify – apart from the formal aspects – what the purpose and the 'rules of engagement' of each society are. Thus, in her study of such matters, Alonso Cespedes (1996) quotes from a sign that she encountered in a *txoko* in Bilbao that reminded its members 'to be generous in spirit, to keep the place clean and in proper order, don't be blasphemous, be humorous, make space and put things back where they belong, be welcoming and open to visitors and members, regard the association as if it were the artery of society, be moderate ...' (Alonso Cespedes, 1996: 85).

Other societies express their *raison d'être* in more humorous fashion. Thus, a painting in a society in Mutriku (Gipuzkoa province) shows a Basque



man with a *chapela vasca*, a Basque beret, emptying a wine glass with the deeply meaningful inscription ‘Si hay, hay. Si nohay, nohay.’ (When there is, there is. When there is nothing, then there is nothing.) Against such minimalism in terms of the rules of engagement Anton Idroquilis (1994: 23) points out that, at least in the Basque province of Alava, it is still common in societies not to talk about politics or religion. Likewise, Von Wijck (2001: 24) notes that the rules of *Euskal Billera*, one of the most renowned societies of San Sebastian, still contain the sentence that ‘this society does not confess to any political ideology’. However, it is fair to say that such reminders are not necessarily a proof that all activities and discussions in a society are politics-free; it is merely a warning to members and guests not to be too dogmatic or to appear to be sermonizing.

The government-imposed legal framework only addresses the minimal formalities and structural requirements of a given society. What is of course absolutely essential for a society to function is a proper infrastructure. A gastronomic society usually provides an infrastructure that resembles that of a restaurant. But unlike a restaurant, it is not open to the general public, but only to the society’s members or their guests.<sup>12</sup> The arrangement between kitchen and eating-place is also different. The kitchen is usually open or half-open and not completely separated or out of sight, as is the case with restaurants. The cooking arrangements are such that they include everything necessary to prepare food for large groups: usually two or three ovens, including open fireplaces or grills, cooking instruments, freezers and fridges. Some societies have more than one kitchen and more than one room for the preparation and consumption of food.

Seating arrangements are such that larger groups sit at one (long, square or round) table, though one can also find smaller tables for smaller get-togethers.<sup>13</sup> A society also provides cleaning facilities, bathrooms and – most important – storage space, so that a stock of supplies which are regularly needed to prepare and to consume food can be stored (including the basics, such as salt, pepper, oil and a well-stocked *bodega* for wine as well). Most societies also have – apart from the wine cellar – full bar facilities, including coffee and espresso machines.

The cooking itself is usually done on a voluntary basis and is almost always based on experience. Those members who have a history of culinary excellence do the cooking. The cook’s expertise is often based on prior experience such as having cooked on a ship, at ceremonies or fiestas, at a farmstead (*baserri*), and so on. The only acknowledgement of the cook’s efforts may be a common toast or a word of thanks from other members and their guests.

After the meal is finished, usually at a time when the *digestivo* is being served, a bill is prepared and the members who enjoyed the meal have to pay *pro rata*. Since the basic infrastructure for consumption has been provided by the society, and since all the work (buying, preparing, cooking) has been done on an unpaid, voluntary basis the bill is usually far below the price for an average restaurant meal, and is in fact probably even cheaper than a home-cooked meal. It is also worthwhile mentioning that most of the buying is done through well-established contacts: members of the society know local producers and buy

directly from them, thus avoiding the market. Very often members of the society happen to be fishermen, or work in a *baserri* or know somebody who does, and thus sometimes get the basic ingredients such as fish and meat for free, or at a much lower price than normal. Depending on individual expenses and buying procedures, sometimes the bill is split, so that buyer-members can be reimbursed. The usual procedure, however, is that one pays *pro rata* and that the money thus collected goes – together with a detailed bill – into an envelope and is then posted through the internal mail system or is put into a cashbox, the *cajetín*, later to be collected by the financial secretary of the society. To get the sums right and to avoid errors is most important. As a matter of fact, the entire system only works on the basis of trust and honesty.<sup>14</sup>

A society is based upon a certain legal framework and requires a physical location. However, the *txoko* only comes to life because it is an institutional expression of a much larger social phenomenon, the *cuadrilla* (Arpal, 1985; Ramirez Goikoetxea, 1985). The *cuadrilla* is the result of a complex shift from a rural environment to urban structures. In order to understand the interaction between *txoko* and *cuadrilla* a detailed explanation of the phenomenon of the *cuadrilla* is called for. One has first of all to understand the role that the street (*kalea*) plays in Basque culture. One has to distinguish between a rural and an urban form of social life in the Basque Country (Arpal, 1985: 132). In the countryside, we find the *etxea* (rural house or farmstead), which is agricultural and private in character; its social type is the *baserritarra*, the man or woman who lives the rural life. In this cultural context, rural life usually denotes being somehow ‘closer to nature’ and living in a natural environment that remains ‘unspoiled’ and thus virtuous. In contrast, urban life in the city or town is symbolized through the *kalea*, the street, which is by definition open to the public. Its main expression is the *kaletarra*, the man or woman who lives in the street. Life in an urban environment denotes ‘civilization’. It is seen to be ‘artificial’, ‘un-natural’ and involving less than ideal aspects of city life such as alienation, indifference, social distance and anonymity.

Until the 19th century, the Basque Country only had some very limited urban development, and the typical town only had three streets: the one above (*la de arriba*), the middle street (*la de enmedio*) and the lower street (*la de abajo*), and the houses along those streets (Arpal, 1985: 132). Only three urban agglomerations, Bilbao, Vitoria and San Sebastian, developed into urban centres; but even in these cases the old quarters only had half a dozen streets, so that very often even the main square, the *plaza*, was outside the *casco viejo* (old town). Beyond the old town, other urban settlements (*ensanches*) only developed later. Very often, wealthier farmsteads included, apart from the free-standing main *baserri* in the countryside known as the *casa solar*, also a *casa en la calle*, a house in the town, so that in a sense the countryside often extended into town. The image of a farmstead’s second house in the town can be regarded as an expression of an ongoing conflict whereby some of the boundaries between countryside, village/town and urban or semi-urban environment were blurred or still not clearly distinguished. Only with the turn of the 20th

century did the situation change. But even today, in a time when urban centres and urban life have come to dominate modern Basque society, one can still encounter many symbolic representations of rural life in most Basque towns and cities. Analysts have pointed towards a complex situation where 'symbolic transfers' from a rural to an urban environment are still common (Arpal, 1985: 135). Its symbol is the 'urban villager' who has emerged as a new social type and who combines elements of both *baserritara* and *kaletarra*.

The urban villager's main social reference point is the *cuadrilla*, a social formation that is defined by certain common characteristics that the individuals who make up the group share: the same generational cohort, being of the same sex, or having played together in the same street or *barrio* (quarter) where one grew up. Crucial are those shared experiences or rites of passage that usually mark an individual for life, but which also help to form a collective memory that all of the group can refer to: prep-school, school, military service, important political events and so on. It should be noted, however, that the function of the *cuadrilla* has evolved and changed over time. During the Franco years, and even during the transition to the new democratic polity, the *cuadrilla* provided a certain sort of stabilizing social infrastructure, a response on the behalf of civil society to an unstable political environment. As Pérez-Agote (1986) has pointed out, the *cuadrilla* established a kind of parallel world in which one could encounter aspects of life which both the Franco regime, and the particularly turbulent political transition in the Basque Country which followed Franco, could not provide. Such elements of existence included trust, friendship, social contact, and equality in communication, and they provided a sense of stability in everyday life that was otherwise lacking (Pérez-Agote, 1986: 105). However, the unique public response and the privatization of public life as in the case of the *cuadrilla* have also created a strange vacuum with respect to private life in the sense that the group's demand on an individual can also take its toll – that of not having enough private time (Pérez-Agote, 1986: 128). Since Pérez-Agote made his comments in the mid-1980s, political tensions have somewhat eased.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, it must be stressed that not all of the political problems that caused such a unique constellation between the public and private sphere in the first place have disappeared, and until today one can discern a deep distrust in the Basque Country vis-à-vis 'official' political institutions and arrangements.

The sociologist Jesus Arpal (1985: 136) has provided us with a brief phenomenology of the life of a typical *cuadrilla* as it occurs today. The group, usually consisting of five to ten people, gets together to spend time and go to places – just as the collective ritual described below demands. The group meets regularly for the *chicquiteo* or *poteo*, consisting of a round through the different bars of a specific zone or *barrio*, which is in most cities located in the *casco viejo*. This occurs in most cases almost daily, usually either before lunch or before dinner. It also happens on other occasions, following the calendar of festivities, or on birthdays and anniversaries. In many cases, the *poteo* has become part of a daily routine and seems to an outsider to be almost compulsive. In some cases the movement and appearances of some *cuadrillas* have become such an established pattern that

the bartender does not need to hear the order any more. Thus, just as the *cuadrilla* leaves its mark on the vicinity, so too does the vicinity influence some of the group's habits.<sup>16</sup> However, one of the most interesting aspects of the *cuadrilla* phenomenon is that it does not impose unanimity; it is a collective phenomenon that leaves time and space for individual expression and creativity. As with any group, over time various roles evolve within the group, and leaders emerge who are more popular and acknowledged than others. In some cities and towns, they even have nick-names so popular that in some places they are only known by that name. In order to gain the respect of one's friends, it is crucial to be seen to remain 'authentic' and true to one's 'real' self. Thus, some members are known only by their unique appearance, character or apparently 'authentic' attitude or history.

Returning now to the key issue of the nature of cooking societies, *txokos* are manifestations of well-established social contacts, mainly (but not only) of the *cuadrilla* type.<sup>17</sup> The *txoko* and the social relations that it represents, are a means to reconstitute the reciprocity of relations that have their origins in more traditional forms of life; yet they are essentially new in that they represent a modern form of social relations in a growing and increasingly influential urban environment. Originally a peculiar invention of San Sebastian's unique class constellation at the beginning of the 20th century, the popular societies in general, and the gastronomic societies in particular, have over the course of a century, become less class-based and are now more inclusive and more explicable as inter-class phenomena than ever before (Arpal, 1985; Luengo, 2001).

## Between Homogenization and Differentiation

Now that the history and micro-level operations of the cooking societies have been examined, I will look at some broader issues, namely the ways in which cooking, eating and drinking together in the *txoko* are linked to some of the region's physical, cultural and historical features. It is impossible to discuss social aspects of the *txoko* such as conviviality and commensality, without combining the question of 'what do the members actually eat and what do they drink when they are together?' with the historical-geographical question of 'why particularly in the Basque Country?' In relation to eating and drinking together, there is no other human activity in which function and content are so closely associated with, and dependent on, each other. Form is indeed condensed content and in order to appreciate fully the formal aspects of eating together in the cooking society, it is necessary to refer at least briefly also to the history of alimentation, nutrition and cooking – in short, the content – which in turn is often linked to unique historical-geographical patterns in the Basque Country.

In general terms and historically speaking, Basque cooking has always followed the old division between the Atlantic North and the Mediterranean South (Iturbe and Letamendia, 2000: 12). In the Atlantic zone, developed forms of agriculture were always limited, mainly because of its rugged terrain and

humid climate. Fishing is omnipresent, and the supply of meat and fat usually comes from farm animals such as chickens, goats, lambs and cows. In terms of alcoholic drinks, apple cider and some white wine (*txakoli* from microclimates and *terroirs* such as in Getaria, Gipuzkoa) are the norm. In contrast, the southern zone has a rather dry climate, and a less rugged, more extensive, better farmable terrain that allows for the development of sophisticated forms of agriculture, such as asparagus, spinach, artichokes, and cereals. Inland, large-scale farming and a cattle industry developed. In terms of nutritional models and cuisine, the fat is not animal-derived but comes mainly from olives. Also in contrast to the Atlantic zone, in the south sophisticated wine making developed, especially in parts of Alava and Navarre. The different geographical patterns explain the availability and the particular choice of food in the *txokos* of each zone or region. Thus, we can encounter an omnipresence of fish and seafood in the Atlantic zone's *txokos* while meat and vegetables are more likely to appear on the menu in the southern zone such as Alava and Navarre. Equally, the choice of wine is often particular to each zone or region; white wine from Getaria or white wine from Galicia are more likely to be consumed in *txokos* in coastal communities, while the top-rank red Riojas or the best Navarre wines are more likely to be consumed where they have been produced.<sup>18</sup>

Over time three main influences have changed food consumption patterns in the Basque Country and it is necessary to mention them here since they explain to a large extent what is, as an end product, celebrated and consumed in the *txoko*. Firstly, there was a radical change in terms of alimentation through the discovery of America and the introduction of American produce such as corn, potato, pepper, tomato, beans, sugar and chocolate to the northern and southern zones. The introduction of corn, beans and the potato were especially influential on nutritional patterns (Busca Isusi, 1987: 13–17; Haranburu Altuna, 2000: 161; Iturbe and Letamendia, 2000: 50) and are now part of the staple diet.

The second most important influence was that of the Catholic Church. It established a religious calendar, which served as a guide prescribing what to avoid or what to eat at which particular time (Haranburu Altuna, 2000: 118–65 and 201–2; Iturbe and Letamendia, 2000: 53). Religious abstinence demanded not eating meat, meat soup, eggs, milk products or animal fat. Days of abstention were Wednesdays and Fridays and additionally other selected days during the year. Thus, for the remaining days of the year fish provided the alternative. Today, Basque society and culture are much more secularized. However, secularization does not mean that old consumption habits stemming from a Catholic background have completely disappeared. It is still the tradition in many household kitchens and *txokos* to provide fish or seafood around Christmas and the New Year, while some days of the *fiesta* demand meat days and related dishes. The calendar of festivity days is full of days for saints, which demand a certain form of cooking. Additionally there are birthdays, weddings, retirement, stag nights and funerals, events which themselves usually determine the choice of what to eat and drink. However, the Catholic Church emphasized

and actively promoted communitarian habits of eating not only in the case of such special events; eating together was also a measure against the threat of Protestant individualism. Eventually, eating together, religious belief and social life turned into a custom, as can be seen in that institutional microcosm that is the *txoko*.

The third influential impact on eating habits and food consumption came with the modernization of Basque society at the turn of the century. Particularly important were the development of a modern infrastructure (installation and improvement of rail and road networks) and the development of the means of communication (telegraph, telephone, and later radio and film). Such improvements helped a modern tourist industry to emerge. Taken together with industrialization, they resulted in the creation of an urban, industrialized environment and culture. An immediate result of such changes was a new landscape of political cultures. While the liberals favoured the newly emerging rationalized form of urban culture, particularly in Bilbao and San Sebastian, the traditional rural way of life saw itself besieged by modernization and rationalization processes (Iturbe and Letamendia, 2000: 59). The conflict between the two opposing forces finally gave way to a new, third force – Basque nationalism. Basque nationalism had a particular impact on the cuisine and food patterns because it combined aspects of both conservatism and modernization. As Basque nationalism aimed at the reconstruction of what it means to be ‘Basque’, it paid considerable attention to such symbolic capital as food and eating together (Iturbe and Letamendia, 2000: 62).

The traditional style of rural food preparation and consumption, the urban standardization of cooking in such places as hotels and restaurants, together with the nationalist attempt at reconstructing culinary symbolic capital, all contributed to producing a new common cuisine to which the new label *cocina vasca* [Basque Cuisine] truly applied and of which *txoko* cooking has become an institutional expression. As one observer commented, what is so remarkable about this new constellation was the coming together of two processes, that of a homogenization and that of a differentiation process (Haranburu Altuna, 2000: 299). The homogenization process is clearly visible in the ‘Mediterraneanization’ of alimentation in the Basque Country, where the ‘olive-based’ alimentation of the Ebro valley reached the Cantabrian coast and is now omnipresent in the Atlantic provinces of Gipuzkoa and Bizkaia. At the same time modern transportation and food preservation made it possible for the fresh fruit and fish of the Atlantic to reach Navarre and Alava – to such an extent that they are now considered to be part of the staple diet. However, such homogenization has not led to total monotony or dominance; there always existed and continues to exist a variety and diversity in the regions – to such an extent that some have called for the change of the label *cocina vasca* to *cocinas vascas* in the plural to reflect regional differentiation (Haranburu Altuna, 2000: 301).

With regard to the development of alimentation and cooking over the last 20 years, modernization and differentiation processes have culminated in what has been called the new Basque cuisine – *la nueva cocina vasca*. Against

what could be called a certain saturation and stagnation process – food preparation and presentation had remained unchanged and there was hardly anything new, adventurous or surprising about the standard menu – this new movement called for a general overhaul. The new movement demanded a return to the culinary ‘basics’; at the same time it demanded also that the produce be fresh. The avant-garde of this culinary revolution consisted mainly of innovative restaurant chefs and cooking society experts (and very often these roles can overlap in the Basque Country).<sup>19</sup> The history of the new Basque cuisine has been truly revolutionary and has been so successful that today most of the more sophisticated Basque restaurants and *txokos* have incorporated its demands. Throughout the year there are now numerous competitions in the Basque Country in which *txoko* cooks – mainly during the fiestas but by no means limited to them – contribute to the development of Basque cooking in the direction of further innovation and sophistication. They are helped by thousands of *txoko* members and guests who all think that they would not enjoy the *cocina vasca* if cooking and eating were isolated or solitary.

### **Plebeian Culture, Moral Economy and Commensality**

In his writings on late 18th-century England, E.P. Thompson (1980, 1991) suggested that plebeian culture and moral economy are intrinsically linked. ‘Plebeian culture’ was an auxiliary term that Thompson used to describe a situation where class was not what classic Marxist theory assumed it to be. Rather than forming nascent prototypes of the industrial working class, Thompson preferred to see classes in terms of ‘fields of gravity’, that is, as heterogeneous constellations consisting of many dimensions and layers and in which traditional popular customs played a major role. It was these common customs that also helped to keep a moral economy alive – an economy which could take on various and different meanings for the plebeian crowds such as common rights, norms or obligations, day-to-day habits, customs and practices but which, taken together, in many ways constituted a force that was alien and opposed to elite classes.

Any closer look into the stratification structure of the Basque Country will reveal that, apart from the metropolitan region of Bilbao, its industrial environs and a few industrial towns and industrial development zones such as Durango, Eibar, Elgoibar, Ermua and Hernani, clear-cut, visible class structures can hardly be encountered. In many ways the Basque Country seems to be a prime illustration of Thompson’s main notion of plebeian culture. Indeed, the work of social historians and historical anthropologists that I have repeatedly referred to in this essay, such as Luengo (2001), Homobono (1987, 1989, 1990, 1997) and Arpal (1985), confirms the existence of such a plebeian cultural macro-constellation.

While historians and social scientists have hinted at macro-constellations such as plebeian cultures, the political economist Albert O. Hirschman has looked at so-called micro-constellations by which he mainly meant institutional dimensions. In *Passions and the Interests* (1977) he first hinted at the possibility that in modern times passions and interests are much more intrinsically linked than has often been assumed. Concepts derived from his approach to moral economy, particularly the idea of ‘commensality’ (Hirschman, 1998: 11–32), allow the researcher to take a closer look at the micro-level and the peculiar links that exist between the public and the private sphere and between customs and morals (Hess, 1999).

In his seminal book *Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action* (1982), Hirschman addressed the problem of periodic shifts that have occurred in modern civil society. In this work he analysed both the retreat into privacy and the inclination towards public action in ‘wave-like’ appearances. The main motive behind both private retreat and public action was then a sense of disappointment. At this time Hirschman did not discuss social practices in which public concern mingles with private activities and thereby helps to maintain a civic equilibrium in civil society. To go a step further, merging the two spheres, the private and the public, was regarded as a potential threat to civil society. However, in the essay about commensality that Hirschman wrote much later and in which he revisits some of his previous arguments, he asks us to think about occasions where the merging of the two spheres can actually have positive results. Hirschman now points out that ‘economists [and other social scientists] have often looked at the consumption of food as a purely private and self-centred activity’ (Hirschman, 1998: 28).

Hirschman (1998: 29) continues his argument by stressing that social scientists usually forget about other dimensions:

While they are consuming food and drink, people gathering for the *Mahlzeit* [meal] engage in conversation and discussion, exchange information and points of view, tell stories, perform religious services, and so on. From the purely biological point of view, there is no doubt that eating has a straightforward relationship to individual welfare. But once they are done in *common*, eating and drinking normally go hand in hand with a remarkably diverse set of public or collective activities. (Emphasis and translation added.)

Hirschman further stresses that the function of the common meal of commensality can, and does indeed, vary. He reminds us in particular of Heinrich Mann’s novel *Der Untertan* [The Subject] in which the main character, Diederich Hessling, is drawn into a form of beer drinking and pretzel eating commensality that can only be described as reactionary in the light of its later outcome, National Socialism. Against such negative examples and experiences, Hirschman reveals now the great potential of commensality, that is, not means-oriented but ends-oriented interaction. It is exactly at this juncture that the Basque cooking society comes in. It seems to me that in the case of the *txoko* we are dealing with a positive example of how commensality – at least when



organized collectively and when sensibly institutionalized – can have a positive function in providing loyalty through commensality and contributing to the maintenance of a civic equilibrium in society. In other words, when such commensality emerges, human beings are not just treated as means towards certain ends but as ends in themselves.

Providing the micro-institutional framework for such ends-centred interaction, the *txoko* contributes to the maintenance of the social equilibrium. *Txokos* are an institutionalized measure and increasingly an inter-class phenomenon against the divisions of modern society, or, in other words, an attempt at life-world integration (Arpal, 1985; Habermas, 1962; Luengo, 2001). Located somewhere between tradition and modernity, they are attempts to provide answers to purely instrumental and systemic rationalization or system integration. However, in contrast to the roles of public institutions and the public sphere that Habermas emphasizes and promotes, *txokos* are neither purely public nor purely private institutions; rather they occupy a unique space somewhere in the middle of the continuum between the public and the private sphere. It is this very middle position which contributes to the *txokos'* success and popularity.

Yet one must also note that the *txoko* has not only 'progressive' social functions; it also reproduces existing age and sex/gender constellations, and often treats societal aspects as if they were community aspects (Arpal, 1985: 140). In this context, some commentators have interpreted the *txoko* as a communal institution that functions as a compensation device by exercising a 'cooling' effect on an over-heated personality type and lessening tensions in a collective group therapy, almost resembling a psycho-dramatic setting. This interpretation suggests that the *txoko* provides a communal escape route from the grindings of societal life, implicitly suggesting a shift towards a communal 'exit' strategy and thus somehow limiting the positive impact on society as a whole (Aguirre Franco, 1983; Von Wijck, 2001).

However, it would be wrong to perceive the nature of the *txoko* solely in light of such extreme formulations. As an institution it is as good (or as bad) as the society and the members who constitute it. The fact remains that eating at the *txoko*, particularly during the fiestas, interrupts daily life and routine, and is clearly an expression of what Simmel has termed 'conviviality' (Homobono, 1987). The *txoko* as an institution is also a symbolic reproduction of Basque society and identity and particularly supportive in terms of accommodating the transition from rural to urban life and thus providing an example of a historic reformulation of the community-society divide (Arpal, 1985). As a potential reproduction cell for nationalist discourse, *cuadrilla* and *txoko* together can also be seen as nationalist models of sociability and commensality which are not bound by rigid class structures but rather bridge across class distinctions and positions (Luengo, 2001; Pérez-Agote, 1984).

Whatever the details and the individual and collective enjoyments in the *sociedades* are, it is obvious that this institution has indeed become a backbone of modern Basque society.<sup>20</sup> Against the disastrous experiences with certain forms

of collectivity in both the former Soviet Union and Nazi Germany (particularly when we think about totalitarianism as social and political regimes that tried to get rid of the private-public distinction), here, in the example of the Basque cooking societies, we find a form in which the public and the private actually enrich each other. It seems indeed wrong to me to degrade them as part of an 'invented tradition' (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983) or to regard them as potential 'terrorist recruitment cells' as is sometimes implicitly suggested by commentators such as Juaristi (1987). The opposite is true: the *sociedades gastronómicas* are relatively modern institutions, which actually allow the Basque Country to overcome some of the tensions that arise when an old civilization meets the modern conditions of the twenty-first century. The relationship between the private and the public is a delicate one, and has not always worked out well in modern times. The *txoko*, which uniquely connects both spheres, appears to be indeed the Basques' most genuine and beneficial contribution to the question of how a plebeian culture with a long history can survive under modern conditions.

## Conclusion

In the opening lines of this article I stated that the Basque Country is generally treated as a country or region that suffers from serious political rifts. Researchers have focused mainly on what divides this society and what separates different sections of the Basque population. Accordingly, social scientists have mainly focused on such issues as terrorism and nationalism. In this article, I have argued for a change of perspective. While it is true that the Basque Country suffers from political divisions, it is equally true that there are also elements and institutions that have a socially binding effect. The gastronomic society is one of them.<sup>21</sup> A particular feature of the *txoko* is its unique location between the public and the private spheres, and it is very much 'the doing', the performance – cooking, eating and drinking together, in other words, the conviviality and commensality – that makes the institution so popular. While its origins can be traced back to San Sebastian's unique old-town artisan and fishermen environment, it is not limited to that particular milieu and has spread to the rest of the Basque Country and Navarre and even beyond the Basque heartland to become part of the Basque diaspora. Why is that so? As I argue in the article, Basque society has entered a somewhat reluctant modernization process in which plebeian elements remain strong and an older moral economy is struggling to survive and to make it into the new century. This process can also be understood as a long and complex transition from rural or small-town, community-based forms of social organization to urban forms of social life in which close associations (as for example in *cuadrillas*, and then enforced and institutionalized in the cooking societies themselves) remain important features in an urban or semi-urban environment.

Last but not least, if it is true that, as Luengo has suggested, investigating the levels of sociability is almost like using a thermostat to analyse change in

society, the *txoko* phenomenon and particularly its recent expansion in terms of numbers can also be interpreted as Basque society becoming more inclusive – and thus also more democratic. In enriching the public sphere – yet not in an anonymous, impersonal or entirely privatized way – it has not only helped to reconstruct the social tissue of an otherwise deeply politically divided community but can also be regarded, at least in the eyes of one commentator, as having provided a real alternative to the homogenization process of modern capitalist society.

I have argued that it is very much the performance, ‘the doing’, which is at the heart of the *txokos*’ activities. However, their emergence and prominent status was also helped by the unique development of culinary Basque culture, that is, the omnipresence of and uncomplicated access to fresh produce from *both* the Atlantic and the rural zones, the maintenance *and* secularization of the Christian calendar with its traditions, and the unique response of Basques towards the rapid modernization process such as the nationalist movement in all its complicated aspects. All of these factors hint at a unique historical, social and cultural constellation about which it is hard to generalize. However, analysing exceptional circumstances and unique responses to modernization are something that cultural sociology would be well advised to do, particularly since it is only by looking at singular and exceptional constellations that studying ‘normal’ or ‘regular’ transitions to modernity (whatever that may be) become viable options.

## Notes

- 1 Since the 1979 Statute of Gernika the BAC consists of the three provinces Gipuzkoa, Bizkaia and Alava. However, when Basques refer to the historical Basque Country (in Basque *Euskal Herria*, or simply *Euskadi*) they refer to a much larger entity comprising seven provinces: Gipuzkoa, Bizkaia, Alava plus Navarre on the Spanish side (also known as Hegoalde) and the three provinces on the French side, Lapurdi, Zuberoa and Lower Navarre (also known as Iparralde).
- 2 Luengo provides the following statistics for San Sebastian’s class structure: in 1911 artisans made up 28.27 percent, new working class 18.95 percent, employees and administration 10.32 percent, proprietors, industrialists and free professions 7.01 percent and fishermen, rural employees, clerics and military 19.43 percent (Luengo, 2001). The unique constellation in which the ‘classic’ industrial working class is underrepresented but various subaltern classes together form something like a working plebs, justifies the use of the Thompsonian term ‘plebeian’ class structure. For a detailed discussion of such class relations see E.P. Thompson (1980 and 1991).
- 3 Both Luengo (2001) and Aguirre Franco (1983) stress that the popular societies were usually restrictive only in terms of the overall size of membership but that any discrimination in terms of class was unheard of. The exclusionary practices in terms of sex, which prevailed in the early history of the popular societies but which has become less restrictive over time, are dealt with later in the discussion of the social function of the *sociedades*. However, it should be

mentioned here that *Union Artesana*, one of the oldest societies, remains until today exclusively and explicitly male.

- 4 The second Spanish Republic (1931–39) was founded a year after the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera had come to an end (1930). It ended tragically with the victory of Franco in 1939 after almost four years of civil war (1936–39).
- 5 The phenomenon first spread to those Gipuzkoan towns that were just a short ride away from San Sebastian. The 1920s and early 1930s saw the opening of cooking societies in Tolosa (*Gure Kaiola*, 1927 and *Gure Txokoa*, 1931), in Zumarraga (*Beloqui*, 1929) and in Zarautz (*Gure Kabiya*, 1931).
- 6 The history of the Basque labour movement, Basque socialism and the Basque bourgeoisie and capitalist class clearly has its origins in Bilbao and its environs – not in San Sebastian. For a history of class and class struggle in the Basque Country see Beltza (1976a, 1976b) and Nuñez (1977). For a detailed study of the history of Bilbao's business elite see Blas (1997).
- 7 In his ethnographic study of the Bizkaian harbour town Bermeo, the social anthropologist and historian Homobono dates the first *txoko* back to the mid-1960s. (Having said that, eating in larger groups particularly among fishing crews was common before then, although in a more informal way.) Since then there has been an astonishing development. The 1970s proved to be particularly successful in terms of expansion: 36 *txokos* were founded in that period. Today Bermeo has the second highest number of *txokos* in Bizkaia (after Bilbao). Homobono points out that by 1985 there were some 1700 members, equalling 37 percent of Bermeo's male adult population. Most of the members (75%) were related to the fishing sector (Homobono, 1987: 350).
- 8 Which one of the two really came first is not so clear. Alonso Cespedes (1996: 31) points out that the *Txoko Bilboko* came first, since it started in 1948 but only registered officially in 1961.
- 9 Against the overall trend of including women, in Bilbao *txokos* seem to remain almost exclusively male. Alonso Cespedes reports that out of 45 *txokos* that she visited only two officially welcomed women as members. This seems to be confirmed by a report that was filed by the Diputación Foral de Vizcaya which investigated how many women participated in voluntary associations; it found that only 0.7 percent of all respondents said that they participated in a gastronomic society (Alonso Cespedes, 1996: 121).
- 10 Partly modified, these laws and bylaws remain valid to this day.
- 11 Reliable data are hard to come by. Anton Idroquilis (1994: 32) estimates for Alava and its capital Vitoria that today about 50 percent of all societies allow women to use the society without any restrictions.
- 12 The most important member of the *sociedad* is the one who holds the general key. It is he who has to make sure that any member may, at his will, enter any time he wishes. Membership in cooking societies is inevitably limited and its numbers controlled by the members. More often than not, numbers are limited due to the very restrictions of the locality itself. Membership fees are not exceptionally high, and the monthly contribution usually does not exceed 1 percent of the overall income of one earner. It is important to stress that members can bring as many friends as they like and as often as they like. On occasions there may be waiting lists for new members, particularly in those societies that have a good name or record. The very fact that only members and their guests can enter the society distinguishes it from other public gathering places and establishments

such as the more politically oriented *batzoki* or the *herriko tabernak*, which are open in principle to all those who identify with or give support to a certain political cause. In the case of the *batzoki* this would be people who support the party which has been following a traditional and conservative independence course, the Partido Nacionalista Vasco (PNV-EAJ) founded by Sabino Arana (who was also the first politician to suggest a *batzoki* in every Basque town and *barrio*); in the case of the *herriko tabernak* one would encounter rather those who sympathize with the radical *abertzale* (independence) movement of Herri Batasuna (now Batasuna) or one of its fellow organizations. By no means are these bars totally exclusive and on occasions such as a *fiesta* one can find quite a broad mix of people from all kinds of political or non-political background and affiliation, including blow-ins or people from the neighbourhood who just happen to pop in for 'the one' or the last one, *el ultimo*.

- 13 It should be stressed here that usually not all members are present at the one time. The normal procedure is that members make a reservation in advance, that is, they put down their names and the expected number of eaters in the society's calendar or book-keeping journal. For smaller parties it is often not necessary to make reservations. In order to find out, members just have to check the reservation list. Very often individual members just use the society as a place to relax or to hang out, or to play games, or to have a drink with some other members. Food may or may not accompany such activities.
- 14 The evidence of trust and honesty calls for a more detailed sociological explanation than I will be able to give here. One possible way of understanding the successful functioning of the *txoko* could be that of exchanging gifts and reciprocity patterns as explained in Marcel Mauss' famous study *The Gift* (1990). While on first impression it looks as if some members of cooking societies do more voluntary work than others (and do so sometimes repeatedly) a more equal and reciprocal system might actually be at work here. This becomes particularly clear when one studies cooking societies and their social environment over a longer time period. What the researcher can encounter is that in one way or another those who do more work in the cooking society (as providers of goods or services) eventually will receive a 'gift' in return. This can be in the form of a favour granted, a particular wish fulfilled, or in the form of a symbolic present.
- 15 Political tensions in the Basque Country peaked in the late 1970s when two referenda were held, one on the acceptance of the Spanish constitution and one that led to the creation of the present Basque Autonomous Community. Both led to heavy demands in terms of political activity, often involving entire *cuadrillas*.
- 16 It is a normal occurrence in modern urban life that not all people of the same *cuadrilla* remain in the town where they were born. Yet displacement does not mean the complete dispersion of the group. A core usually stays together and welcomes the 'displaced person' whenever he or she comes back. Usually the group also knows the 'rites of passage', i.e. when somebody says goodbye before committing him- or herself to a new, usually married life. Yet all group members also know that – apart from extreme circumstances – in most cases this is not a goodbye forever and that there will be 'comebacks' and reunions at the next *fiesta* or public celebration. It should be added here that *cuadrillas* can also radically change in terms of membership or even disband entirely. The

former happens when there is a fresh injection of new blood, usually through marriage; occasionally friends introduce other friends who have just moved into town and, over time, these new members are then 'adopted' and incorporated. Alternatively *cuadrillas* can also disband or disappear altogether; this usually happens when the ties that bind have become too loose, be it through massive exit of individual members to another place or simply through the biological process (death). However, most *cuadrillas* last an entire life-cycle, from early adolescence to old age. In small towns it is not unusual to see the surviving remains of a *cuadrilla*, some of them in their 80s, going out for the *poteo*.

- 17 Different stories and explanations emerge once the focus shifts from San Sebastian to the smaller towns and villages along the Cantabrian coast. Thus, Homobono tells us that in the case of Bermeo (Bizkaia), the historical connection between the *tripulación* (fishing crew), the *kofradia* (the fishermen's fraternity), the *cuadrilla* and the *txoko* is much stronger and more continuous than in the case of San Sebastian. (Homobono, 1987: 314). In Bermeo common eating was originally organized by the *kofradia* as a symbolic expression of renewing contracts; its function was to bind together the crew (*tripulación*) that went out to the risky and dangerous sea together. The common banquet for the *tripulación* that had been organized by the *kofradia* became less and less frequent and was abolished around the turn of the century. Also, as the strong *tripulación* ties weakened and gave way to the social life of the *cuadrilla* – a differentiation process in terms of separating work and leisure activities was mainly responsible for that – the ritual was increasingly replaced by two other habits: the common drink in the *loije*, a tavern that was usually close to the landing place or *meulle*, and the common meal of the *cuadrilla* in the *txoko*. However, Homobono also found in his study that although the *txoko* remains an option, particularly during one of the most important local fiestas, eating out, i.e. opting for a restaurant, is becoming more and more popular, particularly among women (Homobono, 1987: 354).
- 18 Having stressed some regional pattern to food and alcohol consumption, this should not lead to the wrong conclusion that these patterns are exclusive. Nobody likes monotony when it comes to food and drink and the same applies to the Basque Country. Furthermore, improved transport, refrigeration and short distances have made it possible for fresh produce, be it from either the southern zone or from the Atlantic zone, to be easily available wherever one cooks.
- 19 The famous 10 commandments of the movement include: 1) a rejection of unnecessary and useless complications and a return to natural produce, 2) a call for the reduction of cooking time, 3) practising the cuisine of the market, 4) reducing the offer of menus on the card and adapting to what the local cuisine can freshly provide, 5) abolishing sauces and other dressings, 6) simplifying the sauces and using sauces only to support the natural taste, 7) a return to regional and autochthonous gastronomy, 8) the incorporation and application of new techniques, 9) the promotion of a cuisine that is healthy, 10) supporting creativity and inventiveness with the aim of creating new dishes (C. Millau, quoted in Haranburu Altuna, 2000: 294).
- 20 This statement does not neglect or contradict the fact that the Basque Country is also riddled by a major political conflict about the pros and cons of the project of self-determination and/or independence which over the last 40 years has

led to many casualties and victims. However, to derive from this fact that the Basque Country has in modern times been anywhere close to open civil war would be misleading and a seriously mistaken and a very one-sided view of the matter. It has been part of the complexities of the conflict that the commensality of the *txoko* and the killing of political opponents co-existed at the same time (although never or extremely rarely at the same place).

- 21 Others are the *baserria* (farmstead) and the *cofradía de mareantes* (the fraternity of fishermen). Both are much older than the *txoko* and have their origins in the middle ages. All three institutions and how they relate to plebeian culture and moral economy are comprehensively dealt with in a book that I am currently working on entitled *Reluctant Modernization: Plebeian Culture and Moral Economy in the Basque Country*.

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