

BON APPÉTIT

The best of French gastronomy at home and away

Food news | Classic cuisine | Vineyards | Wine



Chocolate hot spot

The Basque city of Bayonne's links with the cocoa bean go back 400 years and are a cause for celebration, says **Alison Weeks**

When considering the cuisine of the Pays Basque, the first things that may come to mind are Bayonne ham, spicy peppers from Espelette and perhaps an almond-based *gâteau basque*. But, surprisingly, the biggest contribution this south-west corner of France made to the country's gastronomy came in the form of a small, dark bean from Central America.

Although the Mayan and Aztec civilisations had been consuming cacao, or cocoa, for thousands of years, it did not reach Europe until the 16th century, when Spanish *conquistadores* returned home bearing the precious beans.

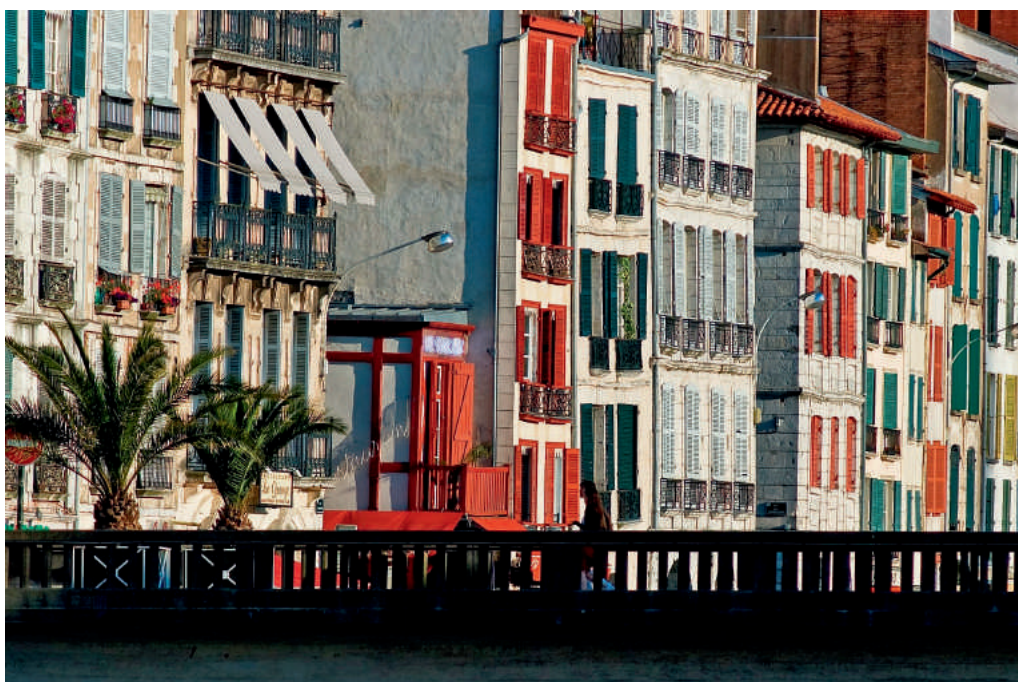
The secrets of chocolate making were brought to France by Sephardic Jews, who were driven out of Spain and Portugal by the Catholic Inquisition in the 17th century. Settling on the outskirts of Bayonne, in the Saint-Esprit quarter, the Jewish community included several artisans, who grinded cacao beans into a fine powder, which was then blended into a rich, frothy drink.

Jewish quarter

This exclusive and expensive drink became hugely popular with the aristocracy after the Spanish-born Anne of Austria, wife of Louis XIII, introduced it at court and Parisian doctors began extolling its supposed health benefits. In Bayonne, chocolate making eventually spread from the Jewish quarter to the city centre, where artisans established a chocolate makers' guild. By the 19th century, Bayonne had earned its place as the chocolate capital of France, with more than 30 workshops, but the golden era was short-lived. By the 1900s, only a handful remained as larger producers began working in Paris.

Nowadays, several celebrated *chocolatiers* work in Bayonne and make up part of a local guild. The *Bayonnais* are proud of this heritage and celebrate every year at the *Journées du Chocolat*, on the weekend following Ascension (held this year on 10 and 11 May).

All along the cobbled Rue Port Neuf, where most of the *chocolatiers* have their shops, crowds gather around the various displays during the festival. Outside Daranatz, a sculptor fashions an intricate design from a solid block of dark chocolate. Across the way, samples of nougat dipped in chocolate fondue are distributed. At Pariès, you can try a *kanouga*, a chocolate caramel flavoured



with coffee, vanilla or hazelnut, which the *New York Times* hailed as the best of its type in the world. This house speciality dates from 1905, when *chocolatier* Jacques Damestoy created it in honour of a visiting Russian dignitary and named it – with a slight alteration – after the city of Kalouga, south-west of Moscow.

One of the more recent *chocolatiers* to set up shop in Bayonne is the Atelier du Chocolat, a family-run business dating from the 1950s. The business, which now has around 40 shops in France, is famous for its *bouquets de chocolats*, shard-like pieces broken from large slabs of chocolate and arranged in cellophane-wrapped bunches. There is a host of flavours available, from cinnamon to the more savoury *piment d'Espelette*, which is more akin to the seasonings that the Mayans would have combined with chocolate. Also on display is a collection of early chocolate-making equipment such as pestles, mortars and copper moulds.

Frothy creation

If you really want to experience the history of *bayonnais* chocolate, head to Cazenave, one of the city's most celebrated *chocolateries*. This elegant shop and *salon de thé* harks back to a time when chocolate was a preserve of the rich. A wide assortment of chocolate bars and other bonbons is for sale, but most people come here with one thing in mind; the *chocolat moussoux*. This frothy mixture of cacao and milk, flavoured with vanilla or cinnamon, is a delectable creation, unlike ►



ABOVE, FROM TOP: Houses along the riverside in Bayonne; Pascal Moustirats in his *chocolaterie*; A tempting selection in the Atelier du Chocolat; FACING PAGE: The famous *chocolat moussoux* at Cazenave

RECIPES

Poulet à la sauce chocolat

You don't have to wait until dessert for chocolate with this savoury dish. For an extra kick, try adding a little piment d'Espelette.

INGREDIENTS

- 4 chicken breasts
- 4tsp cocoa powder
- 2tsp cinnamon
- 300ml chicken stock
- 2tbsp demerara sugar
- 3tbsp tomato puree
- 1 onion, chopped
- olive oil

SERVES
4

1. Fry the onion in oil until slightly brown. Put into a casserole dish and sprinkle with the cocoa, cinnamon and sugar.
2. Brown the chicken breasts in olive oil in a frying pan and then add to the casserole dish.
3. Mix the tomato purée into the chicken stock and pour over the chicken breasts. Cook in the oven at 170°C for 25 minutes. Serve with rice.

Fondant au chocolat au piment d'Espelette

With a pinch of ground chilli powder from the village of Espelette, south-east of Bayonne, this spicy take on a classic chocolate dessert combines two favourite local ingredients.

INGREDIENTS

- 3 eggs
- 110g caster sugar
- 90g dark chocolate
- 85g butter
- 35g sifted flour
- 2 pinches of ground *piment d'Espelette*

SERVES
6

1. Preheat the oven to 200°C.
2. Butter six ramekins and set aside. Melt the chocolate and butter in a bain-marie or in a bowl over a pan of barely simmering water, then remove from the heat and allow to cool.
3. Whisk the eggs and sugar thoroughly until thick. Slowly mix in the melted chocolate, flour and *piment d'Espelette*.
4. Fill the ramekins three-quarters up and cook for eight to ten minutes or until the tops begin to crust and come away from the sides. Allow to cool briefly before carefully removing on to a plate. Sprinkle with a little extra chilli powder and serve.



any other hot chocolate. Served on a silver tray, in rose-dotted Limoges china, the *mousseux* towers over the cup in a pile of tiny bubbles. Each drink comes with an extra pitcher of rich melted chocolate, as well as thick slices of toast or biscuits, depending on the time of day.

Founded in 1854, Cazenave is the only *chocolaterie* in Bayonne still working with raw cacao beans, which now come from South America by way of Bordeaux. The beans are roasted and crushed at the firm's factory before being mixed in a purpose-built *mousoir* to achieve the perfect amount of frothiness. This is how chocolate was served, until Englishman Joseph Fry developed the solid chocolate bar in 1847.

Jazzy variation

Across the River Nive in an area known as Petite Bayonne, Chocolat Pascal is the latest addition to the *Guilde des Chocolatiers de Bayonne*. Combining his love for chocolate and jazz music, Pascal Moustirats opened his first *chocolaterie* and tearoom in 2008. The concept is simple; people enjoy a hot chocolate or chocolate confection while listening to the dulcet sounds of the jazz masters.

Decorated in bold hues of orange and brown, with a vast collection of vinyl records on display, Chocolat Pascal may appear more modern than its competitors, but looks can be deceptive. Pascal, who studied in Paris with Robert Linxe, the *bayonnais* creator of the global success Maison du Chocolat, believes that when it comes to chocolate, tradition is vital.

When the time came to start his own business, Pascal felt a calling to do so in his native Bayonne. "There was no question," he exclaims, leaning over the bright orange counter, "for me, this is the only place to make chocolate." 🍫

ABOVE: A sculptor works on his chocolate creation in Rue Port Neuf

FRANCOFILE

CHOCOLATERIES

Atelier du Chocolat de Bayonne

37 Rue Port Neuf
33 Boulevard Alsace-Lorraine
64100 Bayonne
Tel: (Fr) 5 59 25 72 95/ 5 59 50 10 10
www.atelierdutchocolat.fr

Chocolat Cazenave

19 Rue Port Neuf, 64100 Bayonne
Tel: (Fr) 5 59 59 03 16
www.chocolats-cazenave.fr

Chocolaterie Daranatz

15 Rue Port Neuf, 64100 Bayonne
Tel: (Fr) 5 59 59 03 55
www.daranatz.fr

Pariès Gourmandises Basques

14 Rue Port Neuf, 64100 Bayonne
Tel: (Fr) 5 59 59 06 29
www.paries.fr

Pascal: Chocolatier Salon de Thé

32 Quai Galuperie, 64100 Bayonne
Tel: (Fr) 5 59 52 96 49
www.bayonne-tourisme.com

TOURIST INFORMATION

Bayonne tourist office

Tel: (Fr) 8 20 42 64 64
www.bayonne-tourisme.com



PHOTOGRAPHS: ALISON WEEKS