

BASQUES OF THE AMERICAN WEST

The April issue of *Smithsonian* magazine highlights Basque food in the United States. A hearty, classic cuisine, Basque food has a special place in towns like Bakersfield, Calif., where the Basques were shepherders. The Basque people, originally from northeastern Spain and southwestern France, came to the western U.S. in the mid-1800s.

The traditional Basque territory includes the Pyrenees Mountains between France and Spain and extends into the Cordillera Cantabrica, the mountain range that parallels Spain's northern coast. The Basques, a cultural minority in their homeland, continue to seek independence for their territory in Spain. Their resilient culture thrives, however, despite past Spanish efforts to destroy it.

The Basques are perhaps the oldest civilization on the European continent. When the Romans invaded the Iberian Peninsula in the first century B.C., Basques had likely been in the Pyrenees for thousands of years.

According to Elizabeth Shostak (<http://www.everyculture.com/multi/A-Br/Basque-Americans.html>), the Basques were very successful at defending themselves against invaders, and unlike other groups on the Iberian Peninsula, were never conquered by the Moors. Maintaining independence for some 1,200 years, the Basques finally succumbed to Spanish occupation in 1512. Spain incorporated most of the Basque territory, giving them only the northern section to France, known today as Basque Country.

Basques likely had been in American waters well before Columbus' voyage of 1492. Known for their fishing and sailing expertise, Basques were probably the first Europeans to hunt for whales off North America's northeastern coast. The Basques did not begin to immigrate to the United States in any great numbers until the late 1800s.

When the political situations in France and Spain deteriorated in the late 18th century and invading armies entered Basque Country in France, many Basques left the territory for Spanish colonies in the Americas. In South America, many worked for the Spanish government and others were simply political exiles.

Argentina, in particular, received many Basque immigrants in the 1820s, Shostak wrote. The Argentine government gladly gave the Basque immigrants unused rangeland. There, on the South American *pampas*, many became shepherders, gaining skills that would later serve them well in North America.

When gold was found in California in

1848, those Basques already living in South America were perfectly poised to move on to the United States for work. With little success in gold mining, however, most Basque immigrants turned to raising livestock, sheep in particular.

By the 1870s, according to William A. Douglass (<http://zimmer.csufresno.edu/~johnca/humanities/Sheep.htm>), Basque shepherders were moving from California eastward into the high desert areas. Douglass says the Basque shepherders occupied a large region of the Intermountain West bordered by the Cascade Mountains on the west, the Rockies on the east, the Basin and Range on the south and the Columbia Plateau on the north.

The Basques were very hard workers, willing to toil long lonely hours in the desert for financial stability. Most had the goal of someday returning to the Basque Country of Spain or France.

As small Basque communities sprang up in many areas between Southern California and Boise, Idaho, Basque entrepreneurs built hotels to serve their fellow countrymen. These hotels brought Basque immigrants together, serving as boardinghouses, eateries, informal banks and social centers where the difficult Basque language was spoken and understood.

The food from those old Basque hotels survives today. In Bakersfield, Calif., alone, half dozen restaurants serve only Basque cuisine—hearty multi-course meals served family style on huge platters on long communal tables, according to *Smithsonian*.

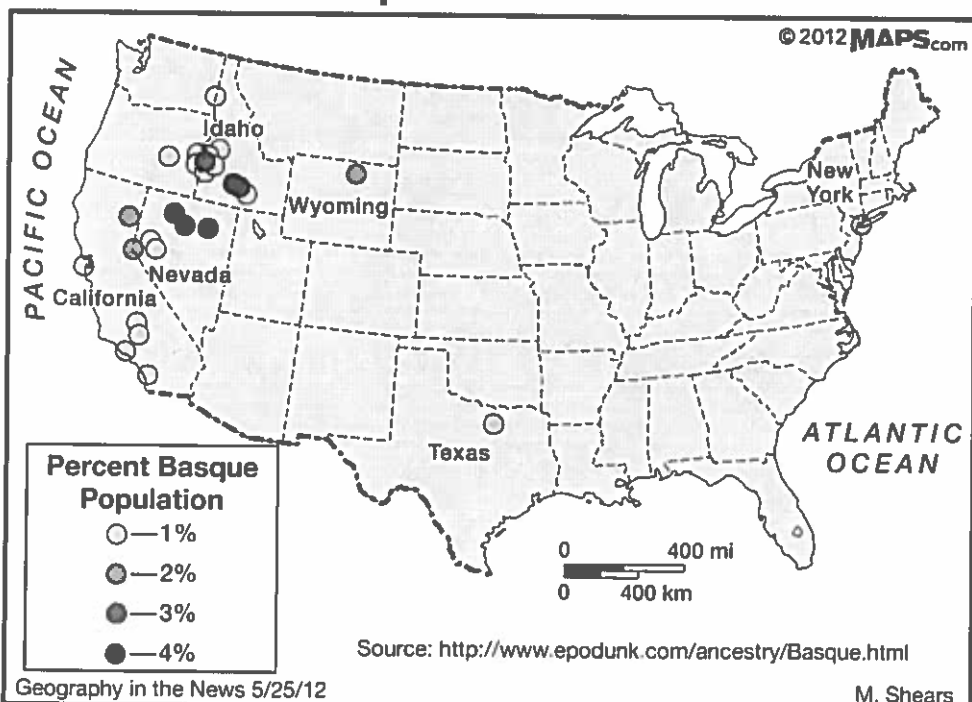
Dishes such as tripe (intestines) and pig's feet, stewed rabbit or lamb, pickled tongue, steak with mushrooms and garlic, and cabbage soup are commonplace. Ordering one Basque main dish ensures that a diner will receive numerous other side dishes, such as cottage cheese with mayonnaise or boiled vegetables with white sauce.

According to *Smithsonian*, the world's foodies are currently obsessed with the Basque Country foods of Spain and France. Travelers wishing to experience the wide range of Basque foods are drawn to that region, which partly owing to its culinary arts, has become one of the most prosperous in Europe.

In our own American West, however, we have the opportunity to witness the imprint of Basques on the regions' cuisine in many small towns where the heritage persists.

And that is *Geography in the News*™. May 25, 2012. #1147.

Basque Communities



Sources: CITN #830, "Basques: A Move Toward Peace, Apr. 28, 2006; Gold, Jonathan, "The Basque Revolution," *Smithsonian*, Apr. 2012, pgs. 18 and 19; <http://www.everyculture.com/multi/A-Br/Basque-Americans.html>; and <http://zimmer.csufresno.edu/~johnca/humanities/Sheep.htm>



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