Octogenarians socialize over a game of cards; pre-teens learn complicated dance steps; children gather to learn the ancient language of their ancestors through songs; a bride and groom kiss at their wedding reception; an internationally known dance troupe polishes its routines and somber friends and family gather to memorialize a departed loved one. All of this—and much more—is a regular part of the routine under the roof of Boise’s Basque Center, the focal point of the Basque community since it opened its doors in 1950.

The Center was born of the Basques’ need for social interaction, of their desire for a place to share, to celebrate, to simply “be Basque.” For decades, the boarding houses served as surrogate homes for new immigrants and shepherders. By the mid-1940s, most of the permanent Basque families had left the boarding houses to establish residences throughout the Treasure Valley but still longed to stay connected to fellow Basques. They rented halls from fraternal organizations to hold their weekend dances, but...
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that didn’t fill the need for a central meeting place. In 1949, 500 charter members founded Euzkaldunak (those who speak the Basque language), a social club limited to people of Basque extraction and their families. That year, club members found an ideal location where they could build a center to meet and socialize—the corner of Sixth and Grove, on the Uberuaga boarding house garden plot in the heart of the downtown Basque neighborhood. The determined group sold $200,000 worth of bonds in the community to purchase the lot and build the long-awaited Basque Center, one of the early efforts by a Basque community in the U.S. to build a place to carry on its cultural traditions. The first phase, finished in 1950, featured a basement meeting room, a bar and an upstairs card room. Two years later, they added the main dance hall, a basement dining hall and kitchen. The Center was funded and built from the ground up—no bank loans were needed—because of a very strong volunteer community that still thrives in the current Boise Basque culture. The Center’s construction drew some opposition, mostly from boarding house owners nervous about losing clientele who would no longer attend their dances and other events.

Today, most of the Basque Center, including the bar, is open to the public, but parts of it remain a members-only social club. Euzkaldunak is one of the largest Basque social organizations in the U.S., with a membership of approximately 1,000 in 2014. Only about 40 of the original charter members are still living. Its Spanish Mission style, the Basque Center is a familiar architectural landmark in Boise. Its original cinder block exterior was upgraded in the 1970s to look like a Basque Country farmhouse (baserri) complete with white stucco exterior and red Spanish tile roof. This familiar look provides a sense of home and inclusion for the Basque community, especially for those who remember their days in the Basque Country.

The Center fosters the preservation of Basque traditions, a space for those who long for the heritage that makes the Basque culture so distinct. It is common to walk into the Basque Center and see half a dozen first- and second-generation older gentlemen taking a break from their Mus card game (played in the upstairs “members only” card room) to grab a coffee or a glass of red wine. Whether they go there daily or weekly, simply being at the Basque Center has become a ritual integral to their daily lives. As a social hub, it is common for local Basques to meet at the Center after work, after church or before dinner. And passersby often peek into the bar just to see who is there, or to join their friends to enjoy one of the least expensive libations in Boise.

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Like so many families, the three women have experienced life-changing events in the Center. Jill and her mother, Juliana, held their wedding receptions there. The community celebrated Lydia’s 90th birthday at the Center with a Roaring ’20s party in 2010 and honored her life at a November 2013 funeral dinner. In between were dances and dance lessons, dinners, card games, Christmas parties, Shepherders’ Balls and many other events. It is a place filled with memories, explained Jill. “The wood floor ... just to see the emptiness and imagine how many events have taken place there, to imagine it full, to think of all the ghosts in that main hall ...,” she said. “We all married Basques,” noted Juliana. “It is easy for us to make the Center an important part of our lives. It seems like we do everything here because we are
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The Mortzillak Dinner every November is another tradition on the Center’s calendar. Mortzillas are Basque blood sausages, and their savory cooking smells are probably more famous than the sausages themselves. When the sausages cooked, the aroma clung, absorbing into clothing, jackets, purses and about everything else in the room. “You could smell it all over town; it was a good smell to me,” Lydia joked. The familiar scent lingers in the large dance hall, where mortzillas, along with wine, has soaked into the pores of the oak floors.

The Sheepherders’ Ball, held every December near Christmas, is one of Boise's well-known Basque traditions, dating back to 1929. After spending months tending sheep during the boarding house era, men came down from the mountains dressed in their “ball” attire—jeans and casual shirts, usually white, for men and cotton dresses for women. Lydia recalled that in the early years one enterprising gentleman sold Levis from the back of his wagon near the entrance to the ball. Admission into the Sheepherders’ Ball has always been a tough ticket; in the early days only Basques could get through the Center’s doors. “At the time it was very exclusive,” explained Lydia. Approximately 600 attended each year from the 1930s to the ’70s. In
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The Basque Center has a cultural calendar of events that occur on a weekly, monthly or annual basis. Dinners for Center members were among the first traditional events. They have been held every month since the beginning. Different charter members of the Center hosted the dinners in the early years, explained Lydia, whose father herded sheep in the Mountain Home area. She was part of the first kitchen crew long before the members hired a chef. Lydia and other women helped shop for, prepare, cook and serve the monthly dinners. She attended almost every dinner at the Center until her passing.
1974, the event was opened to the public and 1,000 showed up at the Western Idaho Fairgrounds site. The event moved back to the Basque Center in 1985.

The Center also hosts a Children’s Christmas Party in early December. Parents drop off gifts for their children and have Santa Claus (O lentzero) deliver the presents during the party. Along with hosting large events, the Center provides local Basques a place to practice one of the art forms that makes their culture so unique—dance. For the past 50 years, the Center has been home to the weekly practices of the Oinkari Basque Dancers, as well as the Boiseko Gazteak, a children’s dance troupe, and the Txantxangorriak music school that teaches children above the age of 8 and adults to play traditional Basque instruments such as the txirriña (accordion) and the pandera (tambourine). The Oinkari’s history is as much a part of the Basque Center as the oak floors of the dance hall. A group of Boise Basque teenagers went to the Basque Country for a summer in 1960. They learned many traditional Basque dance techniques and came back to Boise to begin a new troupe that became the Oinkari dancers. Juliana Aldape was part of the “new kids” who replaced the first group of dancers as they grew older. Years later, she recalled a group of students from the Basque Country who visited Boise. They didn’t know the traditional dances, so the local Basques taught them. “They learned how to Basque dance here—they learned about their own culture, their own Basqueness more here in Boise than in the Basque Country,” Juliana said:

Anyone familiar with the Center knows there will be one of two people behind the bar to greet people—Flora Chucurra Aldazabal or Julian “Juli” Lete. Flora has worked at the Basque Center since 1983, and is as close to a bartender Flora Chucurra Aldazabal lubricates the cultural bonding with a tangy red wine, 2013.
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he answered. Juli explained that the older generation has the most pride in the Basque Center. He says these are the people who built the “home” that the Basque Center has become. It remains a place where the Basque community continues its traditions and preserves its heritage. Within its walls are more stories to be told and memories to be made.

Can new generations of Boise Basques maintain the old-world traditions of an institution that is nearing its 65th birthday? Jill Aldape thinks so. “I don’t see any waver in interest. In time, given how many directions people are pulled today, there might be more who just touch on aspects of the Center rather than a tight-knit group that does everything. But there is enough momentum within the membership and community at large. I don’t really see it being threatened.” Her late grandmother, Lydia, may have the best explanation of why the Basque Center will continue to thrive: “We are around other folks who share an interest. It will survive because we are in it together.”

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