



# Basque Tapestry

BY ELLIE MCKINNON

**R**emember," shouts a sign hanging from an ancient wall in San Sebastian, "you are not in Spain. You are not in France, this is Pais Vasco." Seven provinces — four in Spain, three in France, covering 7,000 square kilometers in the Pyrenees Mountains — comprise Pais Vasco or the Basque Country. It is warm, and balcony doors are flung open. Euskera, the ancient language of the Basques, and Castellano, the official language of Spain, mingle in the air and trickle down from open windows. A breeze lifts small banners marking the homes of Basques who have a family member incarcerated as a political prisoner in a Spanish jail. The activities of some taken prisoner during the Generalissimo Francisco Franco regime have not yet been forgiven. Other prisoners have ties to the ultra-left wing ETA, whose terrorist activities have resulted in numerous violent confrontations within Spain.

The political issues are complex and the political agendas diverse. Some want the region to become independent; others argue that little would be gained through autonomy. Potentially,

this issue could be decided by a vote of the people.

Halfway across the world, Idaho's Legislature voiced its opinion in support of the right of self-determination for the people of the Basque Provinces. If a vote of self-determination will ever occur is uncertain. But on the thriving Iberian Peninsula that has experienced phenomenal social, political and economic changes since Franco's death in 1975, anything seems possible.

The European Union has opened borders, changed the currency and reshaped cultural boundaries. Within Pais Vasco, Basque identity is thriving. High-kicking Basque dancers dance to the drumming of the Basque tabor and the whistling melodies of the txistu. In this region where — during Franco's dictatorship — people were forcefully denied any sort of ethnic cultural expression, including the use of their own language, Euskera is heard on the streets and children may attend schools where all instruction is in the Basque language.

When the sun sets over the bay in San Sebastian, the streets come alive. Fishermen line up on the Nuevo Paseo casting huge poles, each with six baited hooks, into the bay below. Neighbors amble along the wide boulevard, stopping to greet friends and sip beverages at a sidewalk cafe or enjoy a street-musician's performance. People crowd into the bars to sample pinchos, extravagant Basque appetizers, while tantalizing aromas spill from the windows.

On a particular corner in Boise, similar aromas emanate from Boise's Gernika, a Basque pub and eatery. The restaurant bears the name of Boise's sister city in the Basque country.

A street sign carrying the name and city seal of Boise hangs over a street in the quiet town of Gernika. But it has not always been so quiet.

The depth and richness of the Basque Country, and Boise's Basque community, is shown in its people and culture. Left, Basque dancers in France. Above, from left, a Boise Basque street festival, a government building and street musicians in San Sebastian.



Nazi bombers used unsuspecting Gernika for target practice, with Franco's permission, during the early stages of World War II. That scene of carnage and horror in the Saturday marketplace is permanently captured in Picasso's *Gernika*.

Near the market in Gernika stands the Junta, the house of government. There a fence surrounds the stump of an old oak under whose boughs the decision-makers of another era once met peaceably to make alliances.

A new alliance now exists between Gernika and Boise. The charter that unites the cities claims that Boise is the region's eighth province, linked by Basque culture, heritage and family. It claims that the citizens of both cities share appreciation for the spirit of the individual, the essential nature of freedom and the importance of community.

Many of the progenitors of Boise's current Basque community came to America in search of opportunity; many intended eventually to return to their homeland. In the American West, they found work as shepherds in the foothills and mountains. Characteristic Basque hardiness and determination helped many endure the arduous, lonely labor and overcome the language barrier. Some did return to their homeland, but more stayed and formed a new Basque-American identity.

Today, on Boise's Basque block, the red, green and white colors of the Basque Country beckon. The museum displays both the disappearing rural family farms of the Pyrenees and the Basque-American culture of the West. Boise's Oinkari Basque Dancers mirror the dance troupes of the Spanish and French Basque provinces. Children of Boise's Basque-Americans learn Euskera in a Basque preschool. Members of Boise's Biotzetik Basque Choir sing lilting folk melodies in that ancient language. Here two cultures meet and mingle, each enriching the other.

And now as I sing those melodies with the choir, I hear echoes of Euskera and Castellano spoken on the streets of distant towns and cities. When I float Idaho's rivers and hike in Boise's foothills, I recall contrasting landscapes of colorful fishing boats in languid ports and lovely paths in the intensely green Pyrenees Mountains. As I swim in Idaho's mountain-fed reservoirs and feel the sunlight taste the surface, I remember the silken touch of the salty waters and the shimmering sunlight on the Bay of Biscay.

*McKinnon, a member of Boise State's Division of Extended Studies staff, was the recipient of a Faculty/Professional Staff International Development Award for study in San Sebastian, Spain, this past summer.*

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