**Luis Irizar Cooking School**

**Interviewed and written by Itaru Ishii**

San Sebastian city is the best gourmet city in the world. It has just only 180,00 population, but two Michelin three star restaurants. The number of Michelin per population is much more than that of Tokyo. Mr. Luis Irizar is the person who makes San Sebastian the No.1 gourmet city. I asked his life and idea about the education.

**Itaru** Luis, you were born in La Havana. Is this La Havana in Cuba?

**Luis** Yes. My parents were born here in San Sebastian. My father ran his construction company and the family went to America. Then they moved to Cuba.

**Itaru** When you were 4 years old, you backed to San Sebastian. Was it before the Cuban Revolution?

**Luis** Yes, it was long before the Revolution. Fidel Castro’s Revolution was in 1952. Our family left Cuba in 1934. But there were many attempts of coup, so we backed to Spain. After we returned to Spain, however, we had The World War II. We were in such a confusion even in Cuba or in Spain.

**Itaru** You started working for Hotel Maria Christina, which is still here in San Sebastian, when you became 16 years old. Why did you decided to work for a hotel?

**Luis** It was influence of my mother’s family. My mother’s family was running a accommodation place for players of Pilota, a traditional Basque sport.

**Itaru** There are many kinds of jobs in hotels. Why you chose cooking?

**Luis** I was good with my fingers and I liked to make something like art works. At the beginning I worked for a bakery to make pastries. But I had to leave home very early morning even it was dark outside, because bakery’s morning is very early. My parents disagreed that I went there too early, so I change it to cooking.

**Itaru** You started the first school, when you were 37 years old. Why did your interest move from cooking to school?

**Luis** The main reason was my experience in London Hilton. My boss asked me to teach young people. I found that I liked teaching.

**Itaru** The school you set up was a cooking school with Hotel Euromar in a town named Zarauz, Spain, wasn’t it?

**Luis** The school was not a cooking school, but a hotel school. The students learned all jobs in the hotel, not only cooking.

**Itaru** You taught directly to the students for 4 years until 1970. Mr. Pedro Subijana, who is so famous now as the Michelin 3-star chef, was your student, isn’t he?

**Luis** Yes. Pedro was not the only good one. I had many good students. The most famous chef in Spain, Karlos Arguiñano, who has his TV program, was also my student. Jose Ramon Elizondo was also my student. His Bar “Alona Berri” was the best pinchos place in the world, but he retired to close the bar two years ago.

**Itaru** After that, you had a movement called “Nueva Cocina Vasca”. When I visited San Sebastian last January to make interview with Mr. Pedro Subijana, the chef of a Michelin 3-start restaurant “Akelarre”, he gave me a photo to show the eleven people of the movement “Nueva Cocina Vasca”. Luis, you are also in the photo, aren’t you?

When I made interview with Mr. Juan Mari Arzak, the chef of Arzak, which is also a Michelin 3-star restaurant, he told me the following story. Juan Mari and Pedro attended an event held in Spain by a magazine “Gourmet Club”, Paul Bocuse was also there, who was the founder of a new wave of French cooking “nouvelle cuisine”. Juan Mari and Pedro were surprised at the new idea of the cooking and they went to Paul Bocuse’s restaurant as trainee next year. Was it the beginning of “Nueva Cocina Vasca”?

**Luis** Yes. But it is a kind of personal experience of Juan Mari and Pedro. The movement started when they returned to San Sebastian and we, the eleven chefs, started “the special day”. Every Saturday each chef in the eleven offered a menu with new ideas in turn. The dinner was free and we invited only 60 guests from press and the best guests for each restaurant. After the dinner, we discussed a lot. “Nueva Cocina Vasca” was born in the process. It means (i) to restore the old dishes, (ii) to correct the traditional dishes to the right way, and (iii) evolution in cooking.

**Itaru** Luis, after that, you were the chef and the general manager of Hotel Alcala, Madrid, and the owner chef of Restaurante Ilizar. In 1992 you started this school, right?

**Luis** Yes. It was when I was 63 years old.

**Itaru** For me, it sounds too enough. Why did you set up this school again?

**Luis** This kind of school is necessary to keep and develop the level of Basque cooking. But the true reason is that just I like teaching.

**Itaru** What is necessary for the students to be good chef?

**Luis** First, Passion. Because the work in cooking is so hard. You need to like this job, otherwise you can not work hard. You can not keep working only for money or fame. Second, memory, cleaness, and the sense of taste.

**Itaru** Can students learn such things in school?

**Luis** Yes to some extent. But the childhood is very important. For example, a person who has grown up in port has better sense in fish than a person in a town. Its environment is important.

**Itaru’s comment after interview**

Luis was a person who had a working experience in abroad and the oldest among the eleven chefs. But he was not arrogant at all. He sometimes answered to question raised by Juan Mari Arzak on the telephone.

After the interview, Luis kindly took me to a wine and meat tasting gathering among the local food related people. The members are from thirtyish to around eighty. Luis, 82 years old, was so nice to everybody younger and paid respect to the members beyond the generation. He gives anything without hesitation. I found that such his personality made the open atmosphere in Basque Cooking society. Also I realized that the environment for children has a big impact on their future, so that it is important to let them have a proper environment.