From basque-kempted tyrants to lawmakers wielding perfecto, popular culture loves to lampoon chefs. Rarely, however, are cooks cast as crusaders. But the head of the Basque Culinary Centre in San Sebastián, Joxe Mari Aizega, believes chefs are among the world’s most effective change agents.

“They can change what people want from food, there are many good examples of chefs bringing back ingredients that were forgotten to society,” Aizega says.

“Every single one of us interacts with food during the day, every single one of us makes decisions connected with food during the day. That’s why chefs are relevant.”

Aizega is not just speaking theoretically. As director general of the BCC, changing the world through food is part of his job description. More than just a cooking school, the centre—which boasts a truckload of culinary heavyweights on its board—including Juan Mari Arzak, Ferran Adrià, René Redzepi, Masaharu Morimoto and Heston Blumenthal—pursues an ambitious agenda that extends way beyond finding better ways to grill meat.

Take the Basque Culinary Prize, launched last July to celebrate chefs who use gastronomy as a tool for social change. The award carries an extraordinary prize pool of €100,000 ($150,000), which has to be reinvested in relevant projects.

“Gastronomy is adding value to food production, through the restaurants sector, through tourism. Latin America is a region where the BCC is particularly active. They have great biodiversity, the potential to add value to products, to make their quality products better known in the world and to attract tourism,” Aizega says.

“I see that Australia has also invested in attracting attention to its gastronomy,” Aizega says. “Now countries such as Mexico, Columbia and Argentina are making greater efforts to bring their gastronomy into view.”

“Gastronomy is adding value to food production, this not-for-profit organisation is willing to tackle anything.”

Ironically, when the centre was launched in 2011, it had a much simpler brief: to improve culinary education. More than 500 students a year are enrolled in courses that range from short courses designed for new ideas, new products, new services.

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“It’s not just about cooking; it’s about creating new ideas, new products, new services.”

“At number nine in the World’s 50 Best Restaurants list, Aizka is not just speaking theoretically. As director general of the BCC, changing the world through food is part of his job description. More than just a cooking school, the centre—which boasts a truckload of culinary heavyweights on its board—including Juan Mari Arzak, Ferran Adrià, René Redzepi, Masaharu Morimoto and Heston Blumenthal—pursues an ambitious agenda that extends way beyond finding better ways to grill meat.

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“For bookings, 1300 833 611.”

The BCC probably could only have sprung up in the fertile soil of the Basque country. The city of San Sebastián is known for its extraordinary concentration of Michelin-starred restaurants, and respect for food deeply ingrained in its culture. This is a place where fishermen arrange their wares in elaborate displays, where the freshest sense for male bonding is a cooking club from which women are excluded, and where pirates—the local equivalent of hipsters—has been elevated to an art form.

Aizega says much of the BCC’s work is driven by its board members. Five Basque chef-and-Azu- Azur—whose Mistura restaurant has ten Michelin stars and sits at number nine in the World’s 50 Best Restaurants list—who supported the centre’s research program explore sensory perception.

“We are doing some experiments on how narrative conditions your senses and Andoni’s feedback talking about his experiences has been valuable,” says Aizega. “What you say to your customers when you serve them a dish, you give to a dish using language, changes your perceptions of what you are eating.”

“Every single one of us interacts with food during the day, every single one of us makes decisions connected with food during the day. That’s why chefs are relevant.”

Aizega is at his most passionate when speaking about the BCC’s efforts to help communities realize the value that exists in their local produce. “We have big companies giving us grain, anonymous food, but at the same time we have a growing community that is looking for authentic food,” he says. “In a world that seems ever more obsessed with food, one of the aims of the centre is to make students aware of their many options. “We want to show them the many different disciplines that intersect with cooking — applied science, physics, chemistry, biology — and the many different worlds they can access,” Aizega says. “We have grad students cooking, managing restaurants, writing in sommeliers, but also working in research centres and TV production companies.”

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