

Keys to 2023's San Sebastian's Festival

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Running Sept. 22-30, Spain's 71st San Sebastian Film Festival is tracking to welcome an even larger industry presence than 2022, currently up 10% in attendance, its status as the biggest movie event in the Spanish-speaking world remaining undiminished.

Here are 10 key takes on potential highlights and trends which look likely to shape this year's edition:

New Talent

Boasting a prestigious New Directors' section and an Ikusmira Berriak development lab for emerging cineasts, San Sebastian has always been strong on new talent. In 2023, however, it is even stronger still. 10 of its 16 main competition entries are first (three) or second features (seven). "Having so many new directors is part coincidence," says San Sebastian director José Luis Rebordinos. But the presence of so many emerging directors may reflect new industry dynamics and recent years of fuller employment. "My impression is that some young directors now move fast, make shorts and co-write screenplays before making first features and this experience means these films are more rounded and mature," he adds, citing competition contender Isabella Eklöf, who co-wrote Ali Abbasi's Oscar-nominated *Border*.

Women Make Their Mark

Seven of the first or second-time fiction feature directors in San Sebastian competition this year are women, and more than half of their films strongly women-centric, whether capturing the memories of a Black woman in rural Mississippi (Raven Jackson's *All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt*), toxic masculinity in the Outback (Kitty Green's *Royal Hotel*) or women's reproductive rights in past rural Galicia (Jaione Camborda's *The Rye Horn*). They also rate as three of the buzziest competition titles.

Industry Big Guns Hit the Fest

Last year, CAA Media Finance teamed with San Sebastian to organize the festival's first Creative Investors' Conference, to debate latest market trends. They should know:

Speakers took in CAA's own Roeg Sutherland, now *Goodfellas*' Vincent Maraval and Cinetic Media's John Sloss. All three will return this year. Running Sept. 26-28, further CIC attendees include Netflix's Teresa Moeno, Amblin Partners' Jeb Brody and Anonymous Content's David Davoli, plus key figures from Latin America such as K&S's Matías Mosteirín and Infinity Hill's Axel Kuschevatzky. Panel subjects range widely. The real rub, playing out in many, is a state of the union take, with a pull-back on streamers' content investment, on the challenges and opportunities in the U.S and global film industry, from a market and producers' perspective.

Will There Be Any Stars?

Yes, but not Javier Bardem. A San Sebastian Donostia Award winner this year, Bardem will pick up his prize in person at 2024's fest, the postponement due to "limits imposed" by the SAG-AFTRA strike, San Sebastian announced Sept. 8. Jessica Chastain will, however, present Michel Franco's "Memory." Gabriel Byrne and Aidan Gillen (both "Dance First") are expected, as Mads Mikkelsen ("The Promised Land") and Griffin Dunne and James Norton ("Ex-Husbands"). Also coming are multiple A-list auteurs, led by main jury president Claire Denis.

Buzz Titles

There's great word of mouth on the Greenland-set *Kalak*, from Denmark's Isabella Eklöf, turning on pederasty, and *Puan*, a university faculty satire, by Benjamin Naishat, who stormed San Sebastian with *Rojo*, and María Alché (*A Family Submerged*). In New Directors, titles building fan clubs take in Xiao Yao You's section opener *Carefree Days*, a portrait of modern urban China; Javier Macipe's *The Blue Star*, inspired by 1990s Spanish rock icon Mauricio Aznar; and singular family comedy *Mother, Couch*, another debut, from Sweden's Niclas Larrson, with one of the biggest star lineups of any movie at San Sebastian.

San Sebastian's Biggest New Cinematic Highlight? Los Javis' Series *La Mesías*

Time hopping from the '80s to around 1997 to 2013, shot in 16mm and digital, structured with the unpredictability of memory, *La Mesías* delivers a big canvas yet intimate and lacerating vision of religious fanaticism and childhood trauma which marks a huge step-up across the board for Los Javis, say those who have seen it. With Berto Romero, likely to surprise with *The Other Side*, a comedic horror thriller with social issue undertow, TV series look set to

make at least some of the significant running at this year's San Sebastian.

Tooning Up

Hayao Miyazaki's *The Boy and the Heron* opens San Sebastian; Isabel Herguera's *Sultana's Dream*, an India-set three-part take on gender politics down the decades, plays competition; dazzling at 2022's Annecy when in post, a third animated feature, *They Shot the Piano Player*, from Oscar-nominated Fernando Trueba and Javier Mariscal (*Chico & Rita*), features as a special screening. The toon trifecta is again part coincidence, stresses Rebordinos, noting that San Sebastian has screened animated features before, such as Juan José Campanella's fest opener *Underdogs*. Animation's build is seen on San Sebastian's doorstep in the Basque Country, whose "fledgling animation industry is an opportunity" for the region, says Rebordinos.

Genre Build

Meanwhile, also based in the Basque Country, Galder Gaztelu-Urrutia has shot sci fi horror allegory *The Platform 2*, whose 2019 original ranks as Netflix's second most-watched non-English movie ever. Ever increasingly a favorite among younger directors and one form of independent production which can punch healthy market re-

turns, genre and genre blending is also on the rise, as this year's San Sebastian's Co-Production Forum attests. Its genre titles often retains Spain and Latin America's traditional arthouse social edge. One Forum project, *The Days Off*, for instance, "blends genres such as horror, comedy and coming-of-age as it explores an economic crisis from the eyes of a kid," says producer Paula Zyngierman.

Latin American Central

Not all is change, one of modern San Sebastian's foundation stones holds strong: its Latin American axis. Vaunted Argentine auteurs Martin Rejtman (*The Practice*), Benjamin Naishat and María Hache (*Puan*) and Lucía Puenzo (*Los Impactados*) world premiere their latest completed films at San Sebastian. At the Europe-Latin America Co-Production Forum, Federico Veiroj, Theo Court, Alicia Scherson and Daniel Hendler effectively world premiere latest projects. Horizontes Latinos packs 12 Latin America titles. No other major film festival can match this presence.

The Best of Spain, Down the Generations

Victor Erice, whose 1973 San Sebastian Golden Shell winner, *The Spirit of the Beehive*, helped lay another founding stone of the modern San Sebastian will introduce *Close Your Eyes*, acclaimed by those who caught it in Cannes, and accept a Donostia Prize. This year's fest will, indeed, welcome many of Spain's greatest filmmakers such as members of a post-Franco generation who opened Spain up to various forms of U.S. cinema, whether its golden age of comedy (Fernando Trueba, at San Sebastian with *They Shot the Piano Player*), U.S.-style indie cinema (Isabel Coixet, in competition with *Un Amor*) and genre (J.A. Bayona, at San Sebastian with *Society of the Snow*.) Carla Simón, whose *Summer 1993* brought down the flag on a newest generation of filmmakers – grounding dramas in a large sense of place, but raising universal issues – will receive Spain's National Cinema Prize. One of San Sebastian's biggest strengths has been its Spanish cinema spread. 2023 will be no exception.



Kalak.

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