

TRAVEL

In Portugal, a Land Finely Aged Like Wine

By ELI GOTTLIEB JAN. 16, 2015

The surprising thing about touching down at Lisbon Airport is how fast, heading south in a car, you find yourself transported into deep countryside. I arrived on a mild October morning, was met there by my old friend Martin Earl, and within a few minutes was crossing the Vasco da Gama Bridge, longest in Europe, an affair of towers and cables that stretches like a single bolt of flung steel across more than 10 miles of the Tagus River estuary. Immediately thereafter we swerved off the highway and decelerated into the dreaming, older world of the Alentejo (the word literally means “beyond the Tejo” or Tagus).

For the next five days we’d travel among medieval whitewashed villages, rolling hills, mountain forts and a constellation of sparkingly modern vineyards. Long a vacation destination for travelers on the lookout for European pleasures at typically Portuguese budget prices, the Alentejo is finally taking its bow on the international stage, and is rapidly becoming one of the top wine destinations in the world.

This fact would have both positive and negative consequences, as I’d come to discover. In the meantime, I was there to sample the landscapes and hospitality with my friend Martin, who would also be my guide. By way of background I should explain that Martin and I were part of a group of five guys who’d all met in college, been star-struck by the dream of literature and had remained adream ever since — even while somehow, inexplicably, becoming middle-aged along the way. But differently from the rest of us, Martin, a poet, had “gone native,” settling down with a local Portuguese girl and crossing over into a life lived entirely — and permanently — in another language.

I hadn’t been to Portugal in years, and was eager to understand a little bit more what three decades of voluntary exile does to a person. The challenge, more specifically, was to reconcile the calm, gray-haired fellow currently sitting beside

me in a buzzing Fiat with the former comet of New York night life and dauphin of the poet John Ashbery, a young man possessing the aplomb to once approach a conceited, beautiful woman at a party and ask her, “Excuse me, would you mind giving me your phone number if I promised to write it on this cigarette and smoke it?”

By now, 40 minutes from the airport, we were passing through sun-dappled alleys of plane trees with, beyond them, irregular row upon row of cork oaks. “I sometimes call this area Corktugal to myself,” Martin said with a dry laugh. The beautiful cork oak somewhat resembles a stouter, leafier olive tree, and is hand-harvested of its bark once every 10 years. The forests themselves are both a giant cash cow for the national economy — 60 percent of the global cork trade originates in Portugal — and one of the most concentrated examples of biodiversity on earth.

Meanwhile, the whitewashed villages kept coming, one after the other. We stopped for a coffee in a particularly sleepy, sun-blasted one called Montemor-o-Novo. Amid the mostly deserted low buildings there seemed to be a single cafe. But was it a cafe? The sign above it read, Grupo de Pesca Desportiva à Linha de Montemor-o-Novo. This was a local hand-line fishing club, Martin explained, devoted to the old, pure form of the sport in which the line is held in the hands, dropped to the bottom and jiggled in emulation of live bait. These clubs are usually members-only, but the cheerful potbellied locals seated outside immediately waved us in.

An excited barista explained that they were about to celebrate something extraordinary. The traditional Cante Alentejano, a polyphonic singing unique to the region, had just been designated by Unesco to be listed as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Better yet, one of the singers was right there and about to be feted.

We watched as a waiter presented the singer — a middle-aged man distinguishable from the other patrons only by his dyed blond hair — with a tray bearing a white cube, roughly the size of a small brick. When I asked what this was, one of the old boys, to the merriment of the others, grunted at me like a pig.

“Lard,” Martin said simply. I had lived in Italy for years and in Rome had often seen ribbons of the stuff draped on plates and consumed like a kind of bacon sushi, but this was a block of pure porky fat, unadorned, and I watched amazed as the singer tucked a napkin into his collar and began hacking off pieces and then forking them into his mouth with a great smacking of the lips.

We drank some of the deliciously bitter coffee, and continued on our way. The route lay southeast, in the direction of Spain, and we took secondary roads there the better to savor our surroundings. With the windows open, the little car buzzed like a blender. Roadside eucalyptus trees sent a delicious tang through the air.

Martin and I caught up — the phrase, of course, means something entirely different in the era of connectivity — while the tilled brown fields rose and fell out the windows and occasionally a concrete bus shelter flashed by, edged with the characteristic blue or burnt-sienna trim that provides a charming bit of bright color in the landscape. Often we were stuck behind contraptions that resembled riding lawnmowers fitted with rudimentary car bodies. These slow, sputtering vehicles are known as “mata-velhos” — the word means “old person killers” — because their tiny 50-cubic-centimeter engines don’t require a driver’s license to operate and because they are often driven — and crashed — by the elderly.

“Do you ever forget?” I asked him.

“Forget what?” he said.

“That you’re an American?”

He gave a hesitant smile as we slewed sideways in one of the seemingly endless traffic circles that dot the countryside. “It’s funny, but for the longest time all I wanted to do was pass as a local. I worked on the accent and studied the clothes. That all falls away over the years. Now I couldn’t care less. Yet in a way I think of America more now than I ever have before. I appreciate it and revile it at the same time. Crazy, no? You hungry?”

We turned off for lunch in a smallish town called Redondo. A local woman, when asked directions to a good restaurant, first pointed agreeably up the road and then without changing expression began screaming, according to Martin, that we were international drug smugglers and should be shot. “Ignore her,” he said immediately, “and don’t make eye contact. She’s the village crazy.” The woman’s screaming lessened in volume as she turned away and entered her building and returned when she leaned out the second-story window still screaming and ordered us, apparently, to admire her cat.

We found a promising-looking place called Porfírio's, with Mediterranean tavern décor of whitewashed walls and beamed ceilings. A tray of the tasty pay-as-you-go appetizers or entradas typical in Portugal was soon placed on our table: herbed and vinegared olives, breads, sausages and two kinds of fresh cheese. The lunch itself opened with an exquisite dogfish soup — the dogfish is a kind of shark,

white-fleshed and sweet — followed by a first course of something called arroz de - pato, or duck rice. A staple of the Portuguese menu, this dish characteristically distills the simplicity of its ingredients into something that explodes on the tongue like a bomb.

Portuguese cooking works through a process of concentration of essential tastes bolstered by fresh ingredients rather than as, in more wealthy cultures, a multiple layering of flavor profiles. Arroz de pato is a classic example of this magnification-through-reduction. The lid of baked egg atop the rice was dotted with broiled bits of incredibly savory bacon and chouriço, a sausage similar to chorizo, both of them sourced from local pigs. Plunging your fork through the lid released a jet of flavorful steam, and below the rice, a vein of moist, darkly delicious duck.

But a last word about that pig. The animal reigns at the top of the food chain on Alentejo menus, consumed in all its parts down to nearly its eyelashes. The local specialty is porco preto, or black pig, a member of the swine family fed mostly on the acorns that fall from cork trees and presented in sausage, bacon and chops and as an enriching agent in a variety of stews. The animal's intense depth of flavor is due partly to that acorn-heavy diet, and as a bonus, those acorns imbue the flesh with oleic acid, the same heart-friendly ingredient found in olive oil.

The next two days would take on an easy natural rhythm of eating, sightseeing and drinking the cheap, wonderfully well-structured local wines. We stayed in the beautiful mountain towns Monsaraz and Marvão. Each of them was originally built as a fortified redoubt against invasion from nearby Spain and was visible from the valleys below looking like a kind of terra-cotta headpiece set high in the hills. Each was entered through several miles of switchbacks, and inside the thickly fortified walls, each had a similar array of aerobically steep cobbled streets, a castle, a small museum, shops, restaurants and panoramic views.

In the smaller Monsaraz, we stayed at the immaculate Casa Pinto, a three-star hotel whose rooms were all furnished with different reminders of the once-mighty Portuguese colonial empire. My room was called Mombasa and boasted beautiful Moorish-cum-African décor, with wreathing ibex horns, dark-wood ceilings and a lovely, mood-lit stone grotto bathroom.

But it was in the surrounding city, alas, that I first felt the weight of the tourist trade wearing away some of the indigenous sparkle. To put it plainly, the restaurants in these showcase mountain towns tended toward the tired, and the

little ateliers and stores that honeycombed the alleyways seemed filled mainly with kitsch.

The service staff I met there were perfectly polite but gave the impression — understandably, perhaps — of having grown a bit battle-weary from the waves of arriving foreigners. This was particularly striking because Alentejans have a reputation in their own country for warmth and sociability. (As for tourist fatigue, I would hear a similar sentiment from Lisbon friends at the very end of the trip. Their city, which had historically been a bit of a windbreak from the tourist cyclones blowing through the rest of Europe, was now overrun, they said, and about to suffer the same fate as Prague.)

After two days of sojourning at altitude we returned to the plains and began following signs for “rota dos vinhos,” or the “wine route.” These soon brought us to the Adega Mayor winery, a hypermodern collection of cubes and cantilevers set out in the hills and designed by the famous Portuguese architect Álvaro Siza. We toured the ingeniously constructed building and sampled some of the exquisite wines.

But it would be at lunch the next day that Portugal would finally offer up a truly world-class dining and drinking experience, one worth flying seven hours for and then driving a bunch more. It would take place at the Herdade dos Grous, a giant vineyard and estate in a village south of Beja, a town boasting a hotel whose services we didn’t have time to sample and a restaurant whose services we did.

In the high-ceilinged dining room, with views over the quilted green vineyards and a man-made lake, we ordered the chef’s tasting menu accompanied by paired wines. The meal opened with a luxe version of typical entradas, the flavor of each small meat, cheese and vegetable dish as particularized as the panes of a stained-glass window. A lighter-than-air dogfish soup was followed by a veal medallion set in two Nike swooshes of mustard sauce, served with fingerling potatoes, a topping of radish sprouts and roasted chickpeas.

The paired wines of Herdade dos Grous, on which more in a moment, began with a clean, delicate palate-cleansing white and accompanied the meal along an arc of increasing depth and complexity that ended with the cymbal crash of a 2011 Grous Reserva red. The net effect of this was one of the great culinary transports of my life.

Afterward, I had the good fortune to talk with Luís Duarte, the man responsible for the extraordinary wines I’d just drunk. Mr. Duarte, who consults

widely throughout the Portuguese wine industry, is the only one of Portugal's vignerons to have been named the winemaker of the year twice and is probably the most recognized voice of Portuguese wine, both at home and abroad. At 48, he speaks heavily accented English at breakneck speed and possesses a face that, in conjunction with his gray hair, gives him a vague resemblance to the former "Mission: Impossible" actor Peter Graves.

"I belong to the first class that studied winemaking in school, professionally," he said. "My particular innovation was that instead of working in the Douro" — Portugal's traditional wine region, farther north — "I decided to head south to the unsung Alentejo. It was my good luck to get in on the ground floor of the worldwide growth of wine and ride that wave."

When asked the difference between Portuguese wine and that of other nations, Mr. Duarte didn't hesitate. "The wines of Chile and Argentina are too sweet," he said. "You think Spain, you think the tempranillo grape. Well, we don't use the same grapes everyone else does. We have 315 different grape varieties, many of them unique to us. We've also taken many French grapes and adopted them for our own use."

With a wave of the hand, he indicated the glasses on our table, still filled with the remnants of his elegant, delicious vintages, including several (of his own label) that have regularly landed in the Wine Enthusiast magazine's Top 100, and said: "You want a velvety and well-balanced wine at a good price? Think Portugal."

After lunch, elevated by the previous two hours of eating and drinking, we strolled a bit in the nearby vineyards. It was late afternoon, the sun low in the sky, and in the lengthening shadows, workers were still on the job industriously trimming the vines. The air was filled with nostalgic aromas of earth and mown grass, and as we walked, I found myself remembering my own near-exile in Italy, a place where I'd spent a total of eight years. Different from the Alentejo, Italy is long accustomed to being a sightseeing shrine of sorts, and its tourist treasures, as extraordinary as they are, often have a kind of annealed feeling to them, as of having been visited so often that they've been buffed smooth by the experience.

But Portugal, and particularly the Alentejo, give an entirely different impression: that of a place — showcase mountain towns apart — still waking up to its own worldly importance, and as a result, still vivid and sparkingly fresh.

We had, meanwhile, been walking in a large circle and were almost returned to the main building when we saw a dog, a golden retriever, amble out to greet us. The

animal was immediately approached by a barnyard cat. Instead of fighting, the two touched noses. “Around here,” Martin said with a wry smile, “everyone’s so happy that even interspecies enemies kiss and make up.” We laughed and turned back toward the car. It had been five days in that peculiar suspension of real life known as the road trip, and it was time to go home.

Several hours later, back in the airport in Lisbon, I hugged my old friend goodbye. I was relieved to have found him at peace in his adopted country. There’s an essential melancholy in exile, a sadness from the severed connections to family, habit and what the poet Paul Celan called the “fatal once-only” of the mother tongue that can weigh on those who’ve made the move.

In Martin’s case, these deficits were offset by a good marriage, his unswerving devotion to his art and a country whose ancient ways allowed him the kind of concentration that speeding New York would have almost certainly denied him. In the process, coincidentally, that country had offered me two things: a reassuring insight into the adaptability of human nature over time, and a tour of the hilly, magical Alentejo, and with it, some of the very best eating and drinking of my life. Eli Gottlieb’s fourth novel, “Best Boy,” will be published in August 2015.

IF YOU GO

WHAT TO DO

Wine tours of the Alentejo can be undertaken by hardy souls with a rental car and a map. For those interested in organized touring, **Wine Routes of the Alentejo** can tailor one to your tastes and budget. Praça Joaquim António de Aguiar, 20, Évora; 35-1-266-746-498; vinhosdoalentejo.pt.

WHERE TO STAY

In Évora, the capital of the Alentejo, hotel offerings are plentiful. One particularly good-value proposition is the **B and B hotel**, which offers immaculate small modern rooms and parking, a five-minute walk from the main square. Rua do Raimundo, 99, Évora; 35-1-266-240-340.

If you are traveling in the Alentejan mountain towns, the boutique guesthouse **Casa Pinto** in Monsaraz provides charming, individually decorated rooms and a hearty breakfast. Praça De Nuno Álvares Pereira, 10, Monsaraz; 35-1-266-557-076; casapinto.es.

WHERE TO EAT

In Évora, **Café Alentejo** offers excellent regional fare at reasonable prices. Not to be missed: its selection of exquisite local red wines. Entrees from about 7 euros (about \$8.15 at \$1.16 to the euro). Rua do Raimundo, 5, Évora; 35-1-266-706-296.

The **Herdade dos Grous** restaurant, along the wine route in the heart of the Alentejo, offers top-flight contemporary Portuguese cuisine, expansive views of vineyards and the possibility of a wine tour before or after the meal. Lodging is also available in the nearby hotel. Albernôa 7800-601, Beja; 35-1-284-96-00-00; herdade-dos-grous.com/en.

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