

Port of call

Douro Valley, a wine-producing region in Portugal, wins over a non-aficionado



Vintage view Douro Valley became a World Heritage Site in 2001. ISTOCK.COM

It was neither the prospect of spending a day among the vines nor differentiating between table and port wine that got me out of bed early that morning. It was the anxiety of imbibing all the wine I could, without appearing a non-aficionado.

Although the Douro Valley in Portugal is possibly the oldest wine-producing region in the world, a World Heritage Site tag was bestowed on it only in 2001. While the region produces fine table wine, port was created traditionally by fortifying it with grape spirit so that it could withstand the long voyage along the Douro river to its mouth at Porto, where it was loaded onto ships that sailed to England.

Our group of nine, led by Bruno, our tour guide, made the journey in reverse from Porto, across expansive bridges that spanned deep gorges, to arrive at our first estate. Perched atop a hill overlooking terraced fields of grape stood a modest stone structure — a museum for olive oil, with green doors and timber beams under which lay vintage equipment once used for extracting olive oil. At the deck overlooking the property, we were served three types of table wine: Red, white and rosé. And since the region is also known for its olives, there was some light and fragrant extra-virgin olive oil which we had with crusty bread.

At the Pinhão pier, we boarded a motorboat and uncorked our takeaway bottles of wine. During the ride, we spotted the traditional *rabelo* or flat-bottomed wine boat, typified by the single oar-like projection that helped navigate it along the bends in the Douro river.

While I would stand agape the next day, gazing at the famed 20,000-tiled azulejo panels in the São Bento Railway Station in Porto, the modest ones at the Pinhão Railway Station entranced me more. Mounted on the walls alongside the platform, each hand-painted panel in the customary colours of blue, yellow

and white was a tableau depicting the wine trade in Douro. The panels dealt with the different aspects of production and trade: From how the grapes were harvested and carried in baskets to how the *rabelos* navigated the river with their precious cargo.

About 15 km away was the village of Sabrosa, known as the birthplace of 16th-century explorer Ferdinand Magellan. The second-most famous person associated with Sabrosa was the American singer-songwriter-guitarist BB King, who performed a free concert here in 2010 to a packed audience.

Vintage Theory is an elegant family-run estate in Sabrosa. The family tree displayed in the living room seemed as old, and with as many branches as the walnut trees in the yard beyond. With newly acquired nut-cracking skills and great reluctance, we dragged ourselves away from the vista of a sprawling vineyard under a dramatically cloudy sky, to head indoors.

In a pit where grapes were traditionally stomped, a sumptuous four-course lunch awaited us. The pumpkin soup was wholesome, and the salad was fresh — harvested, perhaps, mere hours earlier. The risotto was velvety and the modest serving of cheesecake made for a gratifying finish. From the appreciative sounds around me over the two-hour lunch, I realised that the food must have paired well with the two ports and two table wines of different vintages that we had sampled. Then again, what would I know about wine? Except, as I discovered, some of the group's enthusiasm for all things wine had indeed rubbed off on me. When a white wine called Julinha was served, the words that rose unbidden to mind were “floral”, “aromatic”, “refreshing, with tropical fruit notes”.

Travel log



Getting there

While there are trains that ply between Porto and Douro Valley villages, including Pinhão, a well-organised tour by road from Porto can make navigating the region much easier. A day trip of approximately 10 hours will cost you around €100 per person, including transportation (sometimes even hotel pick-up), lunch and tastings.



Stay

While you may want to stay in Porto and make a day trip to the region, you can also look up farm stays. Casa dos Barros is a hotel situated in the same premises as Vintage Theory in Sabrosa. You can also stay in quintas (estates) that have private rooms with bed and bath facilities.

BLink

Tip

Ensure that the tour is in English, and includes at least two estates along with tastings of table wine, port wine and olive oil.

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At the picturesque village of Amarante, on the banks of the Tâmega, street art maintained a respectable distance from the signs that marked the level of the river in spate over the years. We trooped into Adega Kilowatt, a tavern, and, going by the many rows of cured meat hanging as décor, a charcuterie. Here, the speciality of the Minho region, *vinho verde*, or young wine, was served along with smoked ham and cheese. Bruno, anguished at having forgotten our vegetarianism, made up for it with a plate of luscious ripe melon. When the quizzically named ‘red-green’ wine arrived, the unanimous verdict was that one would either love it or hate it, but could not remain indifferent to it.

We ambled across the old Roman bridge to the 16th-century church of São Gonçalo, named after the priest interred here. Inside, the church was ornate, with a serene cloister and a defunct fountain in the centre of the courtyard. Outside, we chanced upon etchings on the paving underfoot that appeared to be a Modernist take on the church. Our visit, however, was touted as ill-timed, because the bakeries did not stock the regional speciality — a phallus-shaped cake. At an annual festival in June, the tradition is to gift these ‘Bolos de São Gonçalo’ to the object of one’s ardour!

At sunset, we set out for Porto, so charmed by the Douro region and Amarante that we made plans to return someday. The next time, however, we would walk along the river, savour more of the ‘green’ wine, but also stay long enough to learn of the stories surrounding the 13th-century priest and phallic cakes.

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