

On the Road

THE ALLENTEJO

Field-to-fork and vine-to-glass are ways of life in Portugal's fertile heartland. Fuel a tour of the region's hilltop villages and rolling country estates by stopping off for earthy partridge stew, acorn-fed black pork and sunshine-yellow pumpkin bread

Words and photographs
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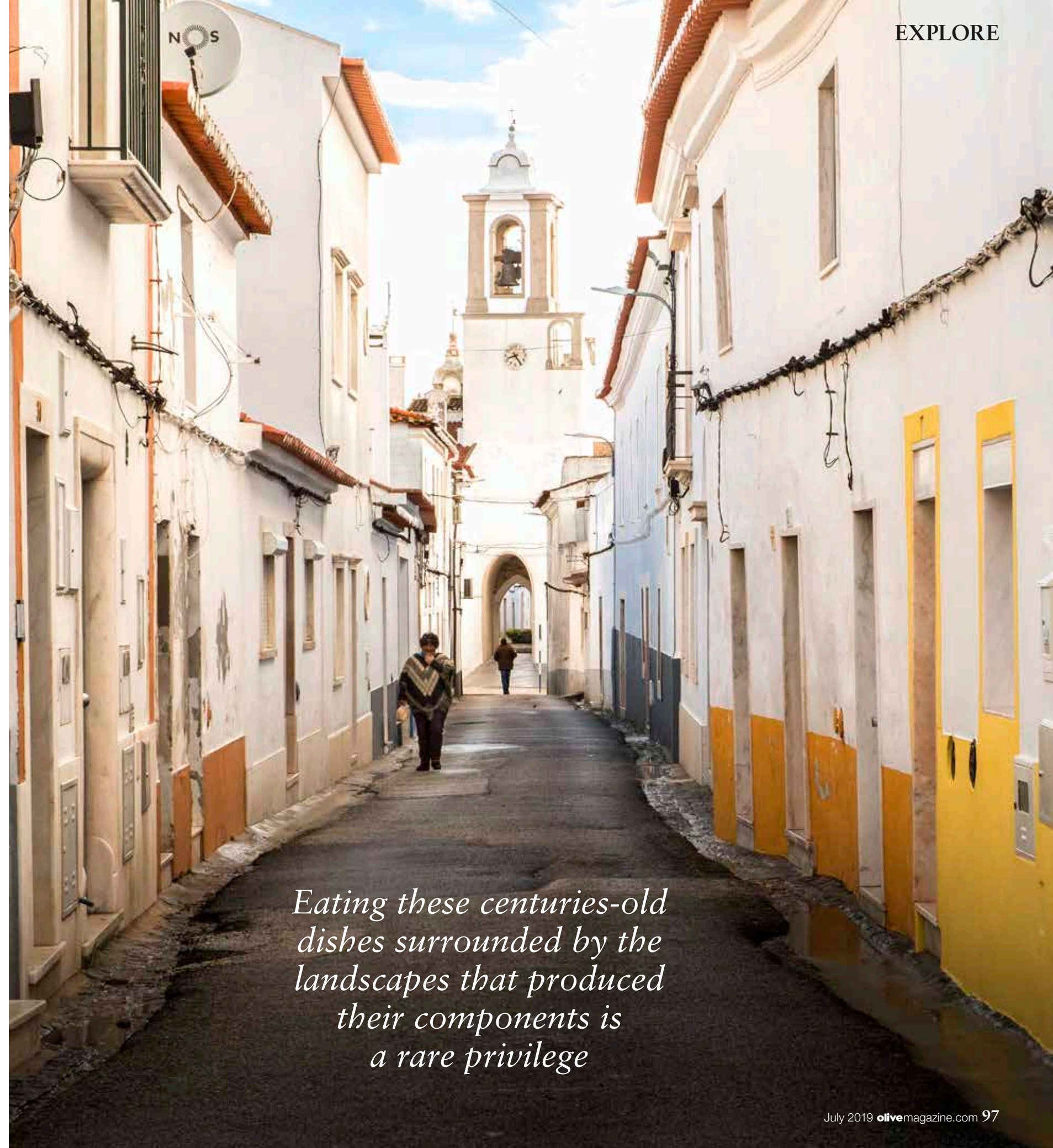
The Portuguese have a saying: "When you eat, you don't get old." Which seems as good a reason as any to demolish the trio of glisteningly tender pork medallions I've just been served, plus the wine-infused sauce and mountain of rice flecked with coriander, crushed almond and raisin they come with.

I'm at Sabores de Monsaraz, a no-frills restaurant in the whitewashed hilltop village of Monsaraz in the Alentejo, Portugal's sun-baked but fertile heartland (saboresdemonsaraz.com). Pork is king here: you eat every part, cooked every which way. Especially if the meat in question (as in this case) is porco preto, from black pigs fed on the acorns of the oaks that cloak the plains below the village.

Earlier, slivers of paprika-orange chouriço arrived, along with delicate fresh goat's cheese, watercress, olives and sourdough. And local vinho of course. The meal is a snapshot of the Alentejo's centuries-old »

OPPOSITE: THE NARROW LANES OF BORBA

PHOTOGRAPH: MARTIN ZNICK/REDA&CO/GETTY IMAGES



Eating these centuries-old dishes surrounded by the landscapes that produced their components is a rare privilege



way of eating, and served in quantities once needed to sustain those labouring in the fields. The fact that few of us now have that sort of appetite doesn't seem to trouble Dona Isabel and her hair-netted sister, who have been stoically running Sabores for the past 14 years.

Down on the plain below, at **São Lourenço do Barrocal**, traditional farming traditions also live on but are now combined with five-star hospitality (*barrocal.pt*). The estate has been owned by the same family for 200 years but was seized following the 1974 revolution. Happily the family managed to buy it back, and hired a Portuguese architect to turn cowsheds and old farmworkers' quarters into simple but stylish hotel accommodation with brick floors and locally woven fabrics. The property's wide central cobbled 'street', over which carts and cattle once clattered, now resounds to the rumble of luggage buggies and, at night, the song of frogs and crickets.

In the hotel's rustic restaurant, I sample *escabeche de perdiz*, estate-shot partridge married with wine, oil and vinegar, made to a scribbled family recipe that's displayed, along with other relics, on the wall above the fireplace. Thanks to its homegrown marinade, the partridge (so often dry) is surprisingly luscious. I wash it down with a glass of Barrocal's oak-aged 2013 reserve, one of its organic wines produced from native grapes.



Like the game, most of the kitchen's produce hails from Barrocal's rock-studded 780 hectares, from veal and olive oil to vegetables grown in its red-brick-walled garden. In spring, the estate's cow-grazed meadows produce wild asparagus, which the following evening I watch Barrocal's chef cooking with the farm's eggs. He serves it with a salad of just-picked broad beans, blending their chopped pods with more eggs and another Alentejo staple: *migas* (breadcrumbs). Elegant and delicious, it is a vivid example of traditional farm labouring food reimaged for modern sensibilities.

Heading south, through wildly beautiful landscapes studded with cork oaks and rosette-like rock roses, I pass the vast Alqueva reservoir to reach the cubist buildings of another small family-run wine estate, **Quetzal**, owned by the Dutch de Bruins family (*quintadoquetzal.com*). Here, a state-of-the-art winery combines viticulture with food and modern art; works from the de Bruins' collection are exhibited below the estate's restaurant, and a vibrant tile-based painting of the South American quetzal bird dominates one wall.

Lunch is equally eye-opening, kicking off with green bean tempura (Portuguese explorers were key players in the development of tempura in Japan) before moving on to *bacalhau* (dried and salted cod). Often it's thrown into stews or flaked and mixed with breadcrumbs, but here it's clothed in a crust made from coriander.



The place to stock up on fresh coriander and other Alentejan staples is castle-crowned Estremoz, due north. The region is rich in marble, so the town's pavements are clad in the glistening white stone. On Saturday mornings its main square hosts a market where you'll find the likes of farmhouse sheep's cheeses, fiery *chouriços* and olives as shiny as bullets. But it's the rosy-cheeked sellers (often the items' producers) that make the market so special.

Across the square is one of the Alentejo's most entertaining gastronomic destinations, **Mercearia Gadanha**, the laid-back deli-restaurant of Brazilian-born Michele Marques (*merceariagadanha.pt*). You can buy wines and cakes to take away, or sit and eat in a room at the back. Michele hands me a glass of 2017 *Primeiro Nome*, a white wine produced by Estremoz's up-and-coming winemaker Miguel Louro, from native Portuguese grapes (*@miguel.lourowines*). "He has just had two whites and two reds, but he's one to watch," she says.

I try *pica-pau*, served in a cast-iron dish, and scattered with a confetti of pink pickles. 'Pica-pau' means woodpecker, a reference to its traditional role as a dish that's picked at over a beer with friends. It's normally made with pork leftovers, spruced up with pickles, but here the meat is veal and has a wine-rich sauce. "Not being Portuguese, I can experiment," says Michele, whose training included a stint at Lisbon's Michelin-starred *Feitoria*.



My base for this leg of the journey is the fresco-walled **Casa do Terreiro do Poço** in another marble town, Borba, that's also famous for its wines and antiques (*wonderful.land/terreiro*). Owner João Cavaleiro Ferreira imports antiques, so bedrooms are peppered with his finds. For foodies, though, the draw is the breakfast, whose crowning glories are the locally made custard tarts and João's wife Rita's homemade marmelada, the quince jam that gave English its word 'marmalade'.

For more sweet stuff, I head to nearby medieval-walled Évora. The historic city was variously inhabited by the Romans, the Moors and the royal House of Avis (who established their court here in the late 14th century). But it was the town's convents that accidentally established Alentejo's pastry-making traditions, still going strong today. Nuns' habits needed starching, and starching required egg whites. That left a lot of yolks, so nuns combined them with sugar, a luxury others couldn't afford, to create an array of sunshine-yellow delicacies.

The most famous of these is *pão de rala*, a bread with a gooey pumpkin, almond and egg yolk centre that Dona Ercília has been making (along with Nun's Kisses and curd cheese tarts) at the azulejo-walled **Pastelaria Conventual Pão de Rala** since she was a toddler helping her mum (Rua de Cicioso 47). For desserts, as opposed to pastries, I head »

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: GOAT'S CHEESE AND WATERCRESS SALAD AT SABORES DE MONSARAZ; DONA ERCILIA WITH HER NUN'S KISSES; THE TILED RESTAURANT OF QUETZAL ESTATE; PODDING BROAD BEANS AT BARROCAL; CHOURIÇO VENDORS AT ESTREMOZ MARKET; BREAKFAST AT SÃO LOURENÇO DO BARROCAL



to **Tasquinha do Oliveira**, a homely, six-table restaurant run by husband and wife team Manuel and Carolina Oliveira (Rua Cândido dos Reis 45). Peek behind the bar to choose from Carolina's cinnamon-sprinkled puddings, from egg-yolk-and-sugar encharcada do Convento Santa Clara to cooked rice pudding, or farófias, a local take on floating islands. My favourite is the marginally less sweet sericaia, a custard soufflé whose recipe was imported from India and which is served with a preserved plum grown in nearby Elvas.

For more savoury sustenance head to even tinier **Botequim da Mouraria**, a few blocks away in Évora's old Moorish quarter. It's not really a restaurant but a wooden counter from which owner Domingos Canelas regales you with local wines and petiscos (Portugal's tapas equivalent) while wife Florbela toils in the pint-sized kitchen behind (Rua da Mouraria 16A). Get there before it opens to be sure of a stool – there are only nine, and you can't book. Seasonal must-tries include springtime scrambled eggs with asparagus, but at any time of year the veal steaks and the presunto (cured ham), shaved from a leg behind the counter, are sensational.

For tradition-steeped food in a more formal setting, tardis-like **Fialho**, tucked up a side street, is

the place (restaurantefialho.pt). You arrive to tables already decked with petiscos, and pick the ones you fancy (winners are the cured ham and just-out-of-the-oven chicken pie). The restaurant is famed for a partridge stew called perdiz à convento da Cartuxa but I'm swayed by baby broad beans with fried ham.

Eating these centuries-old dishes surrounded by the landscapes that produced their components is a rare privilege, and one worth seeking out. But it would be wrong to sum up the Alentejo as a region where kitchens take their cue only from the past. At the hip **L'And Vineyards** hotel, west of Évora, 29-year-old José Tapadejo took over as executive chef in January and is already wowing hotel guests with his original interpretations of Alentejan classics, as well as his use of fermented and foraged ingredients (l-and.com). Yes, black pork is there, but it gets a contemporary gastronomic twist by being partnered with wafers made from the acorns the pigs eat. And instead of cod, José brings me a local river fish, pike perch, atop a cushion of migas infused with minty pennyroyal, and spoons on a saffron froth as delicate as the clouds scudding across the skies above the vines.

As I leave I catch sight of my reflection in a mirror. The jury's still out on whether the region's food is an anti-ageing miracle cure. But delicious? No question.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: QUETZAL ESTATE'S VINEYARDS; CUSTARD TARTS STRAIGHT FROM THE OVEN IN BORBA; TASQUINHA DO OLIVEIRA'S MANUEL OLIVEIRA SHOWING OFF HIS WIFE'S FARÓFIAS PUDDING

HOW TO DO IT

Return flights to Lisbon from various UK airports start from £50 (easyjet.com). Doubles at São Lourenço do Barrocal cost from 230 euros, b&b (barrocal.pt). For more info see visitalentejo.pt. Follow Clare on Instagram [@larderloutUK](https://www.instagram.com/larderloutUK).