

# Wining & Dining in Portugal's Alentejo

## On The Road - Arraiolos to Vila Viçosa - Part 2



*The Tower of Esporão on the Adega Herdade do Esporão Estate*

### THE ALENTEJO WINE REGION

While we dedicated our May newsletter to our cultural explorations in Portugal's sundrenched Alentejo, from our bases at Portuguese government's lovely Pousadas, for this month's bulletin, we will focus on our discoveries in Alentejo's winemaking and dining scene.

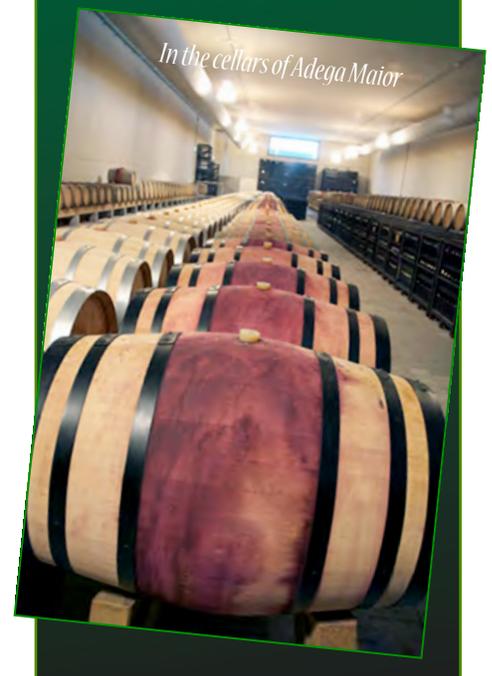
One out of every two bottles of wine sold in Portugal now comes from the Alentejo. They are smooth, full bodied, generously fruity, accessible and very affordable. Although white wine is produced, the Alentejo reds are leading the way, forging the region's reputation for outstanding wines and putting it firmly on the world map. Along with a dozen traditional indigenous grape varieties, wine here today is being made with such international varieties as Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah (Shiraz), Chardonnay and the popular Tempranillo grape, known locally as *Aragonez*.

The Alentejo wine region is divided into eight D.O.C. sub-regions, six of which we traversed on our recent adventure in Portugal.

### *Adegas of the Alentejo*

*Once regarded as simply a poor agricultural backwater, the Alentejo has recently come into its own as an internationally acclaimed wine-producing region.*

*While much of Alentejo's vast surface is still given over to cereal production (Alentejo is often referred to as Portugal's "bread basket"), the poor soils of the region are reserved for olive trees, cork oak trees and more and more these day, vineyards.*



*In the cellars of Adega Maior*

**EXPLORING THE ALENTEJO**

For your exploration of the northernmost region of the Alentejo, the Portalegre sub-zone, and the vineyards found in the foothills of the Serra da Mamede mountain range, we suggest using as a base the **Pousada de Crato** or **Pousada de Marvão**.

The **Pousada Rainha Isabel** in hilltop Estremoz, surrounded by vineyards, works well for the Borba sub-zone. The **Pousada de Alvito** sits in the middle of the Vidigueira sub-zone while the walled city of Evora's lovely **Pousada de Lóios** makes for a great "headquarters" to explore the wine making areas of Evora, Redondo and Reguengos.

And last, but not least, the best of charming rural accommodations, memorable gourmet cuisine and fantastic wines can be found all wrapped up in one neat package at the **Herdade da Malhadinha Nova** estate in the Baix Alentejo, south of Beja. This exquisite estate raises its own purebred cattle, acorn eating black pigs and sheep.

This gorgeous 450-hectare estate in Albernoa, south of the wheat belt of Beja, is considered by many to be Alentejo's leading wine estate, or at least one of its most exciting new properties. We believe that it is a perfect wine tourist's retreat, a true haven for sybarites. It is a creation of wine merchants of the Algarve, the ambitious and dedicated Soares family, who bought a dilapidated farmhouse and painstakingly restored it and its vineyards to perfection and made the property into a hidden getaway for wine lovers.

It boasts 18 hectares of vineyards, a state-of-the-art, gravity flow winery producing internationally acclaimed (and Parker praised) wines, a certified pureblood cattle ranch along with famed Portuguese black pigs (who graze exclusively on acorns from the estate's cork oak forest), olive and orange groves, riding stables, an ultra chic, 10-room country manor house hotel with spa, inviting infinity pool and a gourmet restaurant.

Guests can take week long cooking classes or a yoga class, take a photography course, grab a mountain bike or ATV, take a jeep tour of the rolling property or even help with the harvest or participate in some invigorating grape stomping. Come here to enjoy fine wines, to relax, watch the stars and be pampered in an utterly bucolic setting!



*The exquisite Malhadinha Nova estate in Baix Alentejo*

**The following adegas (wineries) should be put at the top of any wine explorer's "must see" list:**

## THE OTHER "MUST SEE" WINERIES OF THE ALENTEJO

**Herdade do Esporão** - This magnificent estate, located outside of Reguengos de Monsaraz, covers over 1,800 hectares, with 600 hectares dedicated to vineyards and 82 to olive groves. It is the largest vineyard in the Alentejo, producing some of the country's top wines, many single varietal, and outstanding olive oil. Winemaking at Esporão dates back more than 2000 years, to the days of the



Roman occupation. The boundaries of the estate were set in 1267 and have varied little since. American wine lovers should be familiar with its very popular **Alandra** and **Monte Velho** labels, which have become two of our favorite "house pours".

The winery recently inaugurated its new visitors' center, wine bar and gourmet restaurant, **A Galeria do Esporão**, where we enjoyed a delicious lunch, their famed Esporão Roast, prepared by their acclaimed chef, Miguel Vaz Oliveria, and sampled a gamut of their world class olive oils. Visitors can tour its 500-year old medieval defensive **Tower of Esporão**, the symbol of the estate and one of the most important medieval towers built in eastern Portugal. They can also enjoy a wine course with its resident sommelier and take a jeep or Segway tour of the vineyards.

*The Portuguese wine magazine, **A Essência do Vinho**, recently awarded Esporão "Producer of the Year 2011".*

The group also owns **Quinta dos Marças** in the Douro. This older estate, covering an area of 156 hectares along the right bank of the River Douro, is

located between Peso da Régua and Pinhão in Covelinhas, directly across the river from the village of Flogosa and our favorite restaurant in the Douro, the famed **Restaurant DOC** ([ruipaula.com/web/](http://ruipaula.com/web/)).

**J. Portugal Ramos** - Found in the Borba sub-region, is the personal creation of João Portugal Ramos, one of the country's best and most charismatic Oenologists. He began his career as a consultant winemaker, moving about from wine zone to wine zone, then in 1990 he planted his first personal vineyard just below the citadel town of Estremoz. Here workers stomp the grapes by foot in lagares or marble troughs, as they are treaded in the most traditional port production in the Douro.

American wine lovers may be familiar with the winery's flagship wine, the great Marques de Borba red Reserva, available through Signature Imports. The winery also produces an excellent extra virgin olive oil, Oliveira Ramos Premiu.

**Adega Mayor** - This acclaimed "design" winery, very much an Alentejo, sits at Campo Maior, in the Portalegre sub-zone, owned by the Nabeiro group of Delta Coffee, they chose the lauded Pritzker prize winning architect, Álvaro Siza Vieira, to create an almost silent and starkly minimalist, blindingly white geometric structure to house its wine production. This forward-thinking adega produces superb wines, and we highly recommend its elegant Garrafeira do Comendador Tinto, a blend of Alicante-Bouchet, Trincadeira and Aragonéz.



## ALENTEJO DINING - ITS "HIDDEN GEMS"

The Alentejo is blessed with some delightful, family-run restaurants serving honest, rustic and hearty, very traditional cuisine. One of our most pleasing discoveries was the charming and immaculate, deceptively simple, whitewashed roadside tavern, **O Chana do Bernardino**, in **Aldeia da Serra d'Ossa**, near Redondo. It is a welcoming, family-run establishment, very well regarded by gastronomic critics and chefs alike.



The owner, Bernardino, will take your order, and in Portuguese or Spanish, will most likely ask you how you came to find his little inn. Outstanding dishes here include a rich tomato soup and local roast lamb casserole, the typical Alentejan *ensopado de borrego*.

Equally delightful was our lunch stop at the Sever river's edge in Portagem, further north in the Alt Alentejo, just below the magnificent medieval fortified hill town of Marvão, at **Restaurante Sever**, where guests (locals, foreigners and Spaniards crossing the border in search of a great meal) receive a warm welcome, accomplished cuisine at gentle prices, a fine wine list and complimentary after dinner homemade digestifs. Recommended dishes include: *bacalao* (cod) *a la brasa*, grilled lamb and wild boar, roasted venison with chestnuts and their homemade desserts.

In Evora we chose the idiosyncratic, chef-owned, 14-seat **Tasquinha do Oliveira**, where the owner, Manuel, waits the tables, while his wife Carolina works her magic in the diminutive kitchen. We sampled a groaning board of hors d'oeuvres, here in Portugal called *petiscos*, such as cod fritters, the owner's claim to fame, followed by a memorable rendition of the local "surf and turf", *porco à*

*alentejana*, pork loin with clams. It was a unique, albeit pricey experience, since in Portugal the



multiple pre-main course appetizers presented on the table are not "on the house", but instead come with a price tag that grows as you dip into sample each little dish. But these *petiscos* are one of Portugal's great culinary pleasures.

The jewel of contemporary dining in the Alentejo is the restaurant **Gourmet da Malhadinha** of the pampering **Herdade da Malhadinha Nova** estate. This elegant design space is integrated into the winery itself, and its two chic and sleekly designed dining rooms have floor to ceiling picture windows



looking out over the vineyards. The restaurant offers superb market-driven cuisine, made with local produce and estate grown meats, under the supervision of Michelin-starred chef **Joachim Koerper**.

Here we enjoyed a fabulous tasting menu of traditional dishes, including the chef's unique version of *Cozido* (a hearty chickpea based stew), each course paired with the estate's exemplary wines.

## HANDICRAFT SHOPPING IN THE ALENTEJO

Alentejo's artisans produce a remarkable range of crafts, and each village has its own speciality.

Those lodged near Evora have the opportunity to shop for an exquisite, **hand-embroidered rug** or *tapete* from the many artisan shops, such as Tapetes Hortense, in the whitewashed village of **Arraiolos**.



This ancient needlepoint rug-making tradition dates from the 13th century, brought to town by the Moors when expelled from Lisbon in the 15th century by King Manuel I. It is believed that the Moors stopped and settled for a time in Arraiolos on their way to Southern Spain and taught their rug making craft to the village women.

These beautiful, and quite valuable carpets, with their intricate, ancient Persian patterns, labor intensive at 15 hours/square meter, are masterpieces of Portuguese craftsmanship. They have decorated palaces and manor houses in Portugal for centuries, and guests will find them proudly displayed in the cloister of the **Pousada Nossa Senhora da Assunção** outside of town.

Pottery and ceramics collectors will find their *nirvana* in the village of **Redondo** at the Pirraça Gallery, in the town of **Crato**, where they specialize in rustic earthenware jars and jugs, and especially in the pottery center par excellence of **São Pedro do Corval**, which abounds in ceramics workshops, *olarias*, lining the main street through the village, each shop displaying their colorful array of folk art

wares. Luis Janeiro is a personal favorite.



With limited time for shopping, collectors can sample all the region's wares, especially the coveted *bonecos* or brightly painted female reaper figurines,



when potters converge at the huge Saturday market in Estremoz's central square, the **Rossio**.

In addition to the *tapete*, pottery and ceramics, fine hand-woven woolen blankets, *mantas alentejanas*, a century-old craft, sadly in decline, is still alive and well at the artisan shop, **Mizette** in the hilltop village of **Monsaraz**. These blankets can also be found in the **A Vida Portuguesa** shops in Lisbon and Porto.

Contact [Iberian Traveler](http://IberianTraveler.com) to have us create a truly memorable culture, wine and gastronomy package in Alentejo, one of Portugal's most unspoiled and completely authentic regions.