

*“I realized that I could spend
an eternity discovering the Douro’s
delightful stone villages.”*

A picturesque lane in Salzedas, Portugal.

The Douro's Earthy Delights

Editorial and photographs by Terence Baker

At a Portuguese vineyard, the wine was flowing and the dancing boisterous, but before this end-of-harvest party began were many weeks of gathering, sorting, de-stemming and stomping. Based on centuries of experience mixing dance with wine, revelers were sectioned off in a dry, stone-wall *lagar*, the space where workers usually employ their feet to crush grapes and separate skins from flesh.

My host was Dirk van der Niepoort, an owner of the Niepoort winery, a family business since 1842, and the place was the hamlet of Vale de Mendiz, deep in Portugal's beautiful Douro River wine valley. The Niepoorts are Dutch, although by now they're as Portuguese as the Douro's yellow and green hillsides. Earlier, I visited Dirk's main vineyard, Quinta de Nápoles,

overlooking the Douro and a tributary called the Tedo, to eat suckling pig and inspect his new winery and viewing deck.

Dirk is one of a group of local winemakers calling themselves the Douro Boys. Their greatest success is the introduction of fine red wine, which is bringing to northern Portugal a new generation of tourists, visitors searching beyond Lisbon's splendors and the Algarve's beaches. Many arrive on river cruises (Uniworld is one cruise company making the trip), which go inland as far as Spain all the way from the Atlantic Ocean city of Porto, the Douro wine-trade's administrative center.

Some stay at new boutique hotels such as the burnt-caramel-colored Aquapura, near to, but thankfully not staring at, the overdeveloped town of Peso da Régua



and itself surrounded by vines occupying gently undulating hills. A pool, terraces and exquisite guest villas half-circle the main building, which overlooks the Douro from the tiny village of Samodães. The traditional look and feel of the place (a huge wine barrel occupies one villa) belies a sleek, somewhat Far Eastern interior, *(continued on page 26)*

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tranquil spa and excellent restaurant.

But not far away, Portugal maintains its traditional heartbeat. Southeast of Peso da Régua are two notable villages. The first is Tarouca. Its small São João cathedral, dating from 1113 and sitting next to a ruined Cistercian monastery, is nationally famous for an early 16th-century painting of Portugal's then king dressed in pontifical finery. The portrayed face was made rough so as the king couldn't be mistaken for a priest, a very frank statement to the clergy that where regal power lays so does religious. Nobel Laureate José Saramago crossed its tiny, arched Roman bridge with tollhouse in his travel journal, *Journey to Portugal*.

The equally small village of Salzedas also has a ruined monastery. I managed to find the keeper of the key, and we entered


a heavy, creaking wooden door into a musty quadrant of chipped stone, invasive plants and broken paving slabs. It dates to 1168. One ordinary altar room "was owned by an English couple," I was told. As it was so ordinary, I was curious, and on more inquiry, it turned out that the owners' family moved here in 1752. Seemingly, like for many of Douro's wine families, full acceptance comes slowly. Salzedas also has a minute Jewish quarter, a *judiara*, which appears little changed since the medieval era. The juxtaposition between its small, dark alleys and buckling wooden beams and the brilliant November light immediately beyond was startling.

I realized that I could spend an eternity discovering the Douro's delightful stone villages. The rugged province to its north, Trás-os-Montes—literally translated as "across the mountains"—was no less wonderful. Snippets of Celtic culture remain, sometimes most noticeable in its bagpipes, known here as *gaitas*, and its *pauliteiros*, dancing men who smash sticks together and remind me of Morris dancers in England. Those in search of the almost clichéd Iberia of old women dressed fully in black

and old men dragging stubborn mules by dribbling fountains will find it here in such hamlets as Soeima and Gebelim, names that likely have Arabic derivations.

Another exciting find was the small town of Chacim, where a resident told me that in the 9th century its villagers murdered the lord of the manor for his insistence on *jus primae noctis*, or his rights to the town's daughters. "We're independent in Chacim," he thundered.

Alongside the Douro River again, I saw the Linha do Douro, a train that wends its way along the valley to the village of Pocinho, some 15 miles from the Spanish border. It is an engineering marvel, and small steam trains can be seen disappearing into one of the line's 26 tunnels or chugging over one of its 30 bridges.

Then, just near Pinhão, I saw standing on a ridge a gigantic silhouette cutout of the famous Sandeman, the emblem of probably the most famous port. Its vineyard was open for tastings. Time for someone else to do the driving. 

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