



It's

common knowledge, at least in Portugal, that Lisboaetas are cosmopolitan, open-minded, but slightly aloof. Denizens of the Algarve are, shall we say, thrifty. But the people of Alentejo? They're nothing but punch-line fodder.

Joke No. 1: Why do Alentejanos hide their money in their garden hoes? Well, since they never work, who would ever think to look there? Joke No. 2: Why do Alentejanos place a chair by the bed? So if they're tired when they wake up, they can plunk down and have a little rest!

Alentejo, the big province east and south of the capital, claims about a third of Portugal's territory but only about 5 percent of its population. There's a reason for this. While coastal Alentejo can be lush, dramatic and extraordinarily beautiful, the arid and rocky reaches of Alto Alentejo, an inland expanse of small villages, vineyards and olive groves east of Lisbon all the way to the Spanish border, is famous for being hot, sleepy and a bit old-fashioned.

Think of it as Portugal's answer to America's Great Plains. If you're the kind of traveler intent on ticking off the alpha-site checklist (Great Wall, Eiffel Tower, Machu Picchu), it might not be your thing. If your idea of fun is, say, self-touring the Texas Panhandle, then Alentejo offers a rewardingly under-digested corner of Portugal.

Before the recession, the real estate boom had just begun to spur a bit of Spanish-style development across the area, notably the construction of the Rio Guadiana dam in the village of Alqueva, creating the biggest artificial lake in Western Europe. A half dozen golf courses are under way with the hopes of attracting millions of tourists. But the lighter side of the boom has been a flowering of out-of-the-way country inns, highly personalized labors of love built by former immigrants from the region.

Casa da Ermida de Santa Catarina, near Campo Maior, sits at the end of a long, bumpy driveway, perched on a hilltop peninsula, jutting out over the radiant blue waters of a sprawling reservoir. The area is surrounded by hills and sparsely planted olive groves and little else. When I arrived, I felt as if I were showing up at a dude ranch, without the dudes. Or even the ranch. The breeze was warm and gentle, the pure product of open country, and the owner Carlos Guedes de Amorim's unobtrusively conceived interiors never let me forget where I was.

Some 100 kilometers south, near Alqueva, Herdade do Sobroso is a plantation-style hotel, vineyard and winery housing the patrician ambitions of its architect-owner, Ginestal Machado. The terrain, newly planted with tens of thousands of cork trees and more than a hundred acres of vines, suggests the Texas foothills, but the quality of the food coming out of the kitchen betrays the fervor of a true culinary evangelist out for converts. Dinner involves lots of game hunted on the enormous property, including javali (wild boar) and coelho (rabbit).

At the Refúgio da Vila hotel, in the town of Portel, I spent time cooking with the chef Ricardo Moutinho, who'd come to Alentejo from Lisbon for its food, which he held to be "more real" than in other regions of the country. We breezed through a lesson on canja de perdiz (wild grouse soup), a staple found on virtually every menu in the region, then proceeded to migas, a dish concocted from two-day-old

bread and whatever else a cook feels like adding (in this case, chorizo and bacon). Moving on to the açorda, a common type of soup made with old bread and salted cod, we began the stock with cilantro, garlic and salt. For lovers of peasant food, Alentejo's cuisine is manna: wild game, pork, muttoney mutton and the ubiquitous bacalhau (codfish), all of it marinated with medieval quantities of garlic.

Alentejo's food may parallel its people — simple, hearty and unfussy. When Moutinho told me about his rigorous culinary training at a school in Lisbon, I assumed his ambitions extended toward three-star Michelin knighthood. But when I asked if this was so, he shrugged: "I just want to be a good cook." When I told Moutinho about some mutton I'd enjoyed at a local restaurant, he got annoyed. "I don't eat there anymore," he said. Beyond the sacramental mix of bay leaf, cilantro, mint and pennyroyal, the rival chef had had the gall to add clove to the mix. Clove! "That's wrong," Moutinho said.

It's precisely this resistance to change that makes the province unique and hard not to like. As the rest of the global-industrial complex morphs into one gigantic Dunkin' Donuts and Sunglass Hut outlet, Alentejo's signature and most charming characteristic is its lack of interest in any such fate. One afternoon, I found myself in a restaurant called Taberna do Adro, in Vila Fernando. I was finishing up a delicious meal of cerdo (pork) marinated in massa de pimentão, a red pepper paste. Fado played on the stereo, decorative ceramics adorned the walls, and only half of the restaurant's 20 seats were filled. The door opened the cool dark of the restaurant to the bright outdoors, and a family entered, the father first, with a low greeting: "Boa tarde" ("good afternoon"). No one answered. The father and 30ish-year-old son both wore jackets, loafers and three-day beards. The mother wore a conservative brown wool dress, the style of which you would only see on a middle-class matron in a formerly poor, Catholic country — Ireland, Spain and Portugal.

The food came, and the family discussed it intently for several moments before drinking. Not in the overenthusiastic way of Food Network loyalists, but like people who have been enjoying meals together for decades. The father called for a toast, glasses were raised, and father, mother and son clinked happily, with bread crumbs on their faces. ■

ESSENTIALS • PORTUGAL

HOTELS *Casa da Ermida de Santa Catarina* Spectacular views, with activities like canoeing, fishing and lake picnics. Herdade da Rocha 7350, Santa Eulália, Elvas; +351-917-214-380; casadaermidadesantacatarina.com; doubles from about €90. *Herdade da Malhadinha Nova Country House and Spa* Nicely done, slightly less unusual setting with yoga, horseback riding, hot-air-balloon trips and even a "shepherd experience." Yes, you learn to become a master of sheep. Alvernoa-Beja 7800-601; +351-284-965-432; malhadinhanova.pt; doubles from €250. *Herdade do Sobroso* Set on a beautiful lake, the inn features great food, with an emphasis on wild game hunted on the premises, paired with homegrown wine. Marmelar-Pedregão 7960, Vidigueira; +351-961-732-958; herdadedosobroso.pt; doubles from €125.

RESTAURANTS *Restaurante Pompílio* Traditional fare like grouse soup,

revolto de espargos (scrambled eggs with asparagus), grelhados de porco preto (grilled local acorn-fattened pork) and costeletas de borrego (lamb chops) is served at this classic family restaurant — with a wide-screen TV showing soccer games, of course. Rua da Elvas 96, São Vicente; +351-268-611-133; €15 to €22 per person. *Taberna do Adro* Superb regional cuisine. Largo João Dias de Deus 1, Vila Fernando, Elvas; +351-268-661-194; about €20 per person (cash only).

COOKING LESSONS *Refúgio da Vila* Learn to cook açordas (soups), heart-stoppingly heavy meat dishes, bacalhau and sericaia — a classic Alentejo dessert of eggs, milk, sugar and cinnamon — with the chef of this Michelin-recommended restaurant. Arrange with Sofia Vieira, the owner and general manager. Largo Dr. Miguel Bombarda 8, Portel; +351-26-661-9010; refugiodavila.com; about €70 per class.