

# AMUSE-BOUCHE CASCAIS



**Editor**

Richard C. Morais

**Art/Tech Director**

Robert C. Radley

**Correspondents**

Kathy Cripps, Robert Cripps, Mary Gottschalk, Lorna Hard, Holly Kaiser, Deborah Monroe, Vasco H. Morais, Jill Wechsler Nelson, Jeff Rosalsky, Gail Shuttleworth, Eileen Smith, Scott Smith, Sandy Weis

**Participants**

Cascais Visitors & Convention Bureau, Grande Real Villa Itália, Palácio Estoril Hotel, FoodLab, Fortaleza do Guincho, Casca Wines, Quinta do Pisão, Casa do Preto, Museu Condes de Castro Guimarães, Mercado do Vila, Fundação Dom Luis I

**Table of Contents**

**A Meal Fit for A King**

Culinary adventures in the exiled King of Italy’s home .....2

**Parsing Pastéis de Nata**

Learning how to make the fabled Portuguese dessert ..... 6

**Bounty of the Hills**

Foraging wild and edible flora in the Sintra foothills..... 8

**Secrets of the Sea**

A 14-course taste of maritime haute cuisine..... 10

**The Vines are Drunk**

A tour of Portugal, glass by glass.....14

**Letter from the Editor: Culinary Cascais**



**Cascais, Portugal**, is where I was born and where I spent the happiest summers of my childhood, catching octopus and roasting *cabrito* with my father and brothers. These childhood memories are so important to me, I slipped a few into my food novel, [The Hundred Foot Journey](#). So, when Bernardo Corrêa de Barros, president of the [Cascais Visitors & Convention Bureau](#), gently pushed me and my little [Milford Writing institute](#) to create a food-and-writing retreat in my *commune d’origine*, I jumped at the opportunity.

In April 2026, 15 gourmets and aspiring food writers from around the world joined me to explore today’s food scene in Cascais and Estoril. We grabbed our reporter’s notebooks

and marched into culinary battle, foraging wild asparagus, rolling pastry, quaffing rare wines, and making our way through an unseemly number of platters on which sat lush slabs of roast suckling pig and deconstructed discs of octopus.

Our collective experiences are found in the pages of this digital zine, *Amuse-Bouche Cascais*, and we hope our musings will inspire you to embark on your own culinary adventures on Portugal’s Riviera. You won’t be sorry. As one of our sophisticated travelers noted, the area’s culinary experiences “far exceeded my expectations. There is nothing I would have skipped, except maybe one or two of the *extra* glasses of wine....”

Of course, the week overdelivered because of the many talented people working on this event. Too many to list in their entirety here, I must nonetheless give a special shoutout to Rita Bernardo at the Cascais Visitors & Convention Bureau; and to Professor Salvato Teles de Menezes and Pedro Vinagre Pereira at the Fundação Dom Luis I, who so graciously invited me to be the municipality’s “international writer in residence.”

Lastly, if what you read in this zine appeals to you, and you would perhaps like to join me in the future on one of my culture-and-food adventures, please drop me a line at [richard@richardcmorais.com](mailto:richard@richardcmorais.com). I’d love to hear from you. ■

**Richard C. Morais**



The King's tasters at table

# A Meal Fit for A King

## The Hotel Grande Real Villa Itália and its culinary contributions to Cascais

**A**s the sundown hour approached, we stood on the Atlantic-facing terrace of the [Grande Real Villa Itália](#), once the former King of Italy's home in exile (see box) and now a five-star hotel on the Portuguese Riviera. We were chatting away, clutching the Bellinis that were the late king's party drink and seemed to perfectly match the color palette of his elegant residence.

Tankers blocked from entering the Strait of Hormuz were lined up and at anchor off the rugged Cascais coast, as white-jacketed waiters suddenly stepped from the terrace's glass doors, presenting us with ragged-cut prosciutto slivers firmly rimmed by creamy fat and laid out in concentric geometric circles on a heavy silver platter.

There was something in that opening salvo that made us stop talking and look down at the proffered plate. The Prosecco and white-peach puree, swirling about our tongue, became the velvet-sweet backdrop to the salty prosciutto, which was slightly warm from Portugal's late afternoon sun and delivering an almost feral tang to the mouth.

This was a palace-and-palate two-step, and it suggested to us the hotel's Chef Luis Sousa knew what he was doing. We were in for a royal treat.

**When the Milford** Writing Institute's group of 15 aspiring food writers arrived in Cascais on that April night, the Grande Real Villa Itália's management welcomed us by recreating one of Umberto II's favorite meals, culled from

**Cascais: Kings & Fishermen.** Italy's King Victor Emanuel II collaborated with the dictator Benito Mussolini, which is why his son Umberto II was nicknamed the "May King." He was on the throne for just over a month when the Italian Republic rewrote its constitution, abruptly ending its monarchy in 1946. Thereafter, Umberto II retreated to Cascais to live out his life in exile. Not such an odd choice. In 1870, Portugal's King Luis I turned a 15th Century Cascais fortress into one of his summer residences, prompting the day's high society to build fashionable villas and palaces along the coast, and in the mid- to latter- part of the 20th Century, it is this aristocratic housing stock that attracted the European kings recently sent into exile. No fewer than seven kings and their royal families settled in Cascais and neighboring Estoril during this period, including Spain's Juan Carlos, Romania's King Carol II, and even, briefly, King Edward VIII of Great Britain.

a wedding party account and the chef's imagination.

So, after our formal terrace welcome, we were ushered into a special-events kitchen to watch Chef Luis Sousa recreate our 1st course of risotto with prawns.



Chef Luis Sousa

Chef Sousa, shy with a modest smile, expertly worked the deep-dish pan on the hotplate. "Chef used carnaroli rice, which he sautéed in olive oil before incrementally adding white wine and

vegetable broth"— as well as black pepper and an artery-clogging block of butter and grated parmesan— "before stirring and occasionally flipping the mixture as the liquid was absorbed." Wrote another: "We couldn't take our eyes off Chef flipping the slow-cooking rice like a pancake, his technique for seeing that the texture was just right."

Finally satisfied, Chef Sousa added liberal amounts of lemon juice and zest, before plating the rice and crowning each dish with two salt-boiled prawns. "Drops of bright red shrimp oil, made from the shells and heads of the shrimp," were dribbled over the prawns, while "a sprinkling of sorrel completed the dish."

The risotto was creamy, rich, and served *al dente*, while the squeaky fresh shrimp were "very sweet, with a satisfying snap and just a touch of brininess." The surprise was the risotto, which was "shining with a lemon zing," and, as a result, remarkably light on the palate.

Kitchen demonstration complete, we were then ushered back to the long table in the hotel's dining room, overlooking the hotel's azure pool. The remaining courses included John Dory (aka St. Peter's fish) served

## A royal favorite: Wild-boar tenderloin



on white asparagus and resting in a brown-butter- and crisped caper-sauce; and a tenderloin of wild boar, awash in a velvety boar-and-Barolo reduction.

The boar was soft and veal-like, not the usual gamey hard chew that requires hours of stewing, and a completely new *cinghiale* experience for many of us.

And so our week of culinary surprises unfolded. We woke up in the hotel's palatial-sized rooms streaming with Mediterranean light—suites suitable for royal courtiers, often overlooking the Atlantic—only to start our day with a kingly breakfast of honeycomb and hazelnuts; sizzled pork sausages and eggs with golden yolks; almond cakes, seed-dotted sourdough breads, and peach- and fig- jams. Come night, we drifted to sleep with gold-foil chocolate noisettes and bottles of mineral water standing at our elbows.

In between, we were treated to a steady parade of Chef Sousa creations. Among our favorites: A creamy and smooth celeriac soup, with “nutty morels floating like fall lily pads on the surface of a pond;” a crispy-skinned cod with “a vibrant medley of red peppers and onions that took me back to my Philadelphia roots and the legendary toppings offered on the best cheesesteaks;” and, finally, the *Leitão*, which is Portuguese for roast suckling pig and a natural crowd pleaser.

Placed before us was a curiously sharp-edged oblong of meat under a soft top. *Leitão* is a classic local dish, normally a tender pork haunch served under crisp crackling, but in this case layers of fat, traditionally fully rendered, stood between the pig's flesh. That made Chef Sousa's *Leitão* look more like a multi-layered meat pastry than anything traditionalists would recognize.

Some of our more delicate diners scraped away the fat before they ate the deliciously lush- and well-basted-meat, while the rest of us went all in. “This ‘*pastel do porco*’” wrote one such fan, “was a *Mille-feuille*, with layers of rich and creamy lard between layers of chewy pork meat, served in a small pool of savory reduction, as if caramel had been drizzled on this delightful pastel. A side of potato piglet-tails added to the crunch.”

**A highlight towards** the end of our week's stay arrived when Chef Sousa took us to Cascais's [Mercado da Vila](#), an open market where everything from purple irises to grey beef tongues can be bought. One writer expected to be overwhelmed by pungent piscatorial smells laced by the “lemony and astringent disinfecting products” traditionally used in fish markets.

“Instead, I was met with the subtle aromas of a sushi bar: salty, yes, but overpowered by the beautiful visual displays before us. Atlantic fishes were lined up in blocks like in a Mondrian painting; whites, reds, and blacks, all interspersed with more exotic offerings. Scallops, cleaned on the half shell; trays of *perceves*, known to us as gooseneck barnacles; and shrimp so fresh they were still alive and annoyed at being lifted from their cool bed of crushed ice.”

Fish, with curious expressions, stared back at us, as Chef Sousa examined their eyes to ensure they were clear and wide, the gills red and perky, meeting his standards for quality and freshness.

The stalls were replete with cultural differences. In suburban grocery stores back in the U.S., the white monkfish loins are often shrink-wrapped, found near the tuna and

salmon, and touted as “poor man's lobster.” In Cascais, the monkfish was sold whole, displayed on its back, its slit belly facing up.

Was the viscera poisonous? The roe sold separately?

“The fishmonger Carla Henriques said, ‘No, it comes that way from the fishing boats, always been this way.’ Then she showed us how the slit made



for a very convenient handle for the fishmonger to grasp, a way to avoid the fish's sharp teeth.”

Chef Sousa's final gift to us was a kitchen tip: while the choice part of the monkfish—the tail, where the two loins sit—is normally the only part sold and eaten, at home Chef Sousa drops monkfish livers into the local fish stew known as *caldeirada*, and that secret ingredient, he insists, turbocharges his version of the classic Portuguese dish.

More than a few of us filed away that insider tidbit, one day to be used in our own kitchen efforts back home. ■



# Parsing Pastéis de Nata

## The unreasonably demands of simplicity

“We don’t break the gluten,” said Chef Michael Rocha, pulling the metal vat of dough from the mixer, before slapping great lumps of the mix onto the unvarnished marble table top, and demonstrating the rolling method that helps give the pastry its flaky crust.

We were in the kitchen at the five-star [Palácio Estoril Hotel](#), learning from the highly respected pastry chef exactly how *Pastéis de nata* are made, and now we were going to try our own hand at making Portugal’s world-famous dessert. We weren’t so sure once we witnessed chef’s skill: the concentrated effort, the artistry, the technical knowledge and sheer stamina involved in making the deceptively simple crust-and-custard cups.

After the dough was rolled out, “a thin layer of fat is spread evenly over the pastry. Chef counseled that the pastry will be flakier if made with half-butter, half-margarine. After spreading

the butter mixture and folding the dough in thirds, the dough is again rolled thin and buttered. Repeat. The dough, once deemed ready, is then hand-rolled into a cylinder shape, before sliced into small- to medium-sized rolls, depending on the size of the pastry cup to be filled. The dough, using two different possible thumb techniques, is pressed flat and up the sides of the metal pastry cup and finished with a slight ridge at the top.”

Even the chef’s way of dashing flour across the dough prompted discussion amongst our group. “Flick the wrist and fingers,” wrote an attendee, “to get just a thin scatter of flour on the dough.” Another writer—perhaps picking up on the adjacent Casino Estoril, which helped inspire Palácio hotel resident Ian Flemming to invent James Bond and write *Casino Royale*—instructed us “to throw the flour like your rolling dice at a casino.”

After much intense effort, our

hand-made shells were filled with the custard “slurry” of egg yolks, boiled milk, sugar, cinnamon, and touch of lemon peel, before our tray of offerings slid into the 489 Fahrenheit oven for 13 minutes. The pastries emerged sizzling and professional looking. But we were totally broken by the effort.

**Thankfully, a hotel** executive led us back out into the main hall for a restorative tea break in the Palácio’s high-ceilinged salon, its French doors elegantly clapping out onto the garden patio. Empire-style furniture in cardinal red and heron grey, and massive oils of French pastoral scenes, peered imperiously down at the low-slung salon tables. We found them laden with heavy linen and silver, dainty teacups, and three-tiered pastry towers, offering up everything from salmon rolls to scones to chocolate-nut cookies – and, of course, *Pastéis de nata*.

“At the top level of the tower, stood the showpieces of the afternoon: lemon cake, blueberry-and-lavender madeleines, and a raspberry cheesecake *bomba*. The lemon cake was bursting with flavor, topped with basil cream and an accent of fresh lemon.”

So we sipped black tea and attacked our sugar-stacks. Normally quite chatty, we found ourselves spent and flat when the executive gave our class “certificates.” That was not because we were blasé about the experience, quite the opposite, and it took an accomplished dessert-maker in our midst to put into words the awe we all felt.

“The crispy crust and eggy-sweet custard looks so simple to create. That’s far from the truth and I have a whole new appreciation for this pastry and its creator. It is not the precise measurements of the simple ingredients, but the talent and knowledge to adjust the recipe and dough’s laborious handling to the weather conditions of the day. Our arms, backs and minds were worn down like we had labored for days, yet the dozen in our group had completed only one tray. Chef Rocha and his team produce 5,000 large and small *Pastéis de nata* per week.”

Upshot: We fully intended to learn how to make *pastéis*, but we ultimately decided to leave the job to the professionals and just buy the finished product, from then on only with the utmost respect. ■

# Bounty of the Hills

Foraging and eating flora in the surrounding countryside



Foraged spread

“Look! Wild fennel! So delicious and good for coughs and flatulence. Taste the leaves!”

We were in [Quinta do Pisão](#), a nature preserve in the nearby Sintra foothills, listening to [Fernanda Botelho](#), Portugal’s Queen of Foraging.

A floppy straw hat was plopped on her gamine, slightly salted hair, while the periwinkle blue scarf, dangling red-bead earrings, and well-worn Birkenstocks in earthy hues added dashes of color to her outfit. Similarly, on the wooden table next to her stood a basket brimming with brilliantly colored edible flowers, plucked from her garden that very morning; and recycled bottles of homemade elderflower lemonade, slightly sweetened with honey and a touch of cinnamon.

As we sipped our welcoming libation, Fernanda recalled her journey from a child living on the land nearby, to her education in medicinal plants while living in England, and finally to the discovery of her love of foraging and passing that knowledge onto others. “If you have a lawn, you spend a lot of water and time keeping it one shade of green. Planting and maintaining a sustainable garden can provide food, herbs for seasoning, and food for birds and insects.”

Her *cri de cœur* over, she turned and led us down a wooded path, where wildflowers rioted at our feet and majestic trees towered overhead. “All roses can be eaten,” Fernanda continued, “and the better they smell the better they taste!” Her joy was infectious as she periodically stopped to squeal delightedly over a squashed bush or a robustly flowering tree.

Stinging nettles, we learned, were highly nutritious, used to reduce inflammation, support joint health, and even soothe gout. Rich in iron and calcium, nettles were arguably better than spinach for those over a certain age. The nearby *digitalis*, pink and gorgeous and better known as foxglove, was poisonous and to be avoided at all costs.

It was like Fernanda was introducing us to her children. We learned about pine and periwinkle, blackberry bramble and mustard, thistles and wild asparagus. The medicinal properties found in ash-leaves—and the benefits extracted from hawthorn and gorse—were discussed at length. The leaves of borage, looking like a weed you might pull from your garden, had a distinct cucumber taste, while its star-shaped blue flowers were used as salad garnishes.

Young fig leaves could be blanched or infused in olive oil, turning the ointment into a dark green and fragrant food supplement; while slimy mallow, its roots originally used to make marshmallows, is an anti-inflammatory and thickener of stews.

Horsetail, which looked like its name, could scour a pot *and* helps strengthen bones. The sun was getting hot and the herbalist’s litany of Latin plant names a tad overwhelming, but just as we began to wobble, we were ushered past cultivated fields into a covered pavilion.

**A long table** was beautifully set with wildflowers, while a sideboard buckled under food platters liberally sprinkled with foraged flora. It was “eye

candy,” as one writer noted, and the handiwork of Cláudia Matalato and her gifted team at [FoodLab](#), an innovative laboratory of ideas and public services devoted to food culture, operating from the Mercado da Vila in Cascais.

We sipped a local rosé and dug into focaccia loaded with goat cheese, Portuguese prosciutto and fig, all doused with the fig-leaf infused olive oil. Hard cheeses, the gamiest from the Azores, were dotted with olives and wild mint, while white globes of burrata were topped with blackberries and a wild-nettle pesto. The most stunning dishes: A red-onion galette, the color of a fine Bordeaux, sprinkled with pine nuts and bright blue borage flowers; and paper-thin slices of octopus, which were topped by sea fennel, a carrot relative that grows near the coast.

A selection of sweets included a carpaccio of pineapple, marinated

in wild mint and the resinous Mediterranean sap called mastic. A simple sugar-cookie known as “Sand of Cascais” was “reminiscent of Mexican Wedding Cake,” noted one of our writers, but the crowd favorite was the chocolate mousse with its cream-and-crunch contrasts. As one group member jotted down in his notebook: “The mousse dissolved on the tongue like the morning Cascais fog—chocolate and sweet. The chocolate pebbles at the bottom were like beach gravel, roughing up the taste buds, while the delicate sprig of rosemary was a reminder of the wild hills surrounding us, where earth and sea mingle and linger long after the meal is done.” ■



Fernanda Botelho



Chef Gil Fernandes



Limpet



Brown algae

# Secrets of the Sea

## Maritime haute cuisine inside an Atlantic-facing fort

**W**e were dining in a 17th Century cliff-clinging fortress converted into the 27-room, five-star hotel Fortaleza do Guincho, also home to a Michelin-starred restaurant run by Chef Gil Fernandes. At the end of our long table, as the sommelier poured us a Crasto Superior from the Douro, a bow-shaped window perfectly framed the sorbet-colored sun dipping below the Atlantic Ocean that was also pounding the cliffs below us.

We weren't quite sure what was put down before us, but it triggered a wave of poetic images and language, the only way we could remotely capture, in words, the other-worldly tastes that the dish provoked. At the bottom of the bowl called "Octopus Fishing" there appeared to be a disk of

compressed, sliced octopus tentacles, under a spherical net of black "rope."

"The sweet-potato and squid-ink 'net,'" one member jotted down, "held captive a thin stack of five-dollar casino chips made of sliced octopus. The tip of a single, still intact tentacle extended futilely just beyond its Fortaleza prison, unable to escape its moat of seaweed slurry."

We brought our forks down on the crusty rope-cage. "The snapping of the cell bars was like crunching on Rolled Gold Pretzel Sticks of my childhood lunchbox. The octopus itself had a delicate, but firm mouthfeel, after its final hot tubbing. A thick green sauce slickened the plate, like the wave-drenched rocks of our earlier seaweed excursion, while the accompanying tidepool of earthy broth, which might have once been a

refuge for the octopus, now drowned Samurai slayings of wagyu beef and Jesuit purses of spider crab. This was octopus – as Duke of Braganza, the pretender King."

Flights of fancy were of course the point of the evening, and so we gamely tried to match Chef Fernandes' startling culinary innovations with our own exuberant scribbles. We even, on occasion, tried to crack a few kitchen mysteries, asking the chef, for example, how he possibly made that octopus disc. "He gave us a long description of cooking and rolling and chilling and magic powders - all for a single element of one single plate."

But note: "Octopus Fishing" was only dish four of our 14-course meal. The dishes were tiny in size, but massive in impact, or, as one of our writers noted, "sweet, sour, smoked, tart and briny small plates were like opening gifts from the sea, each one unexpected."

**Our maritime haute-cuisine** journey started seven hours earlier. That's

when, just before the lowest tide at 12.52 pm, Chef Fernandes guided us down the coast, a kilometer south of the restaurant. The previous day we had foraged edible flora. Chef Fernandes now wanted to show us how seaweed was harvested.

He jumped like a goat between the wave-thrashed rocks, bent over to cut loose something hiding in the cliff, before bringing back morsels he wanted us to sample. "The site of Chef Gil Fernandes hopping from rock to rock, to collect seaweed to be served that night during our dinner, was a site to behold, like King Neptune, Roman god of the sea, surveying and sampling the riches of his kingdom."

Up on the wind-buffed rocks, Fernandes plucked a succulent called Hottentot fig, with its edible pink-and-yellow flowers; sea fennel, also known as rock samphire, which we learned was prized by chefs; and sea chard, with its spinach-like flavor, to be tasted later that evening in pureed form. Meanwhile, from the tidal pools, chef pulled out tiny mussels, sea anemones

and urchins, snails and limpets. His grandmother fried limpets with rice, garlic and coriander, he told us, but they had to be eaten quickly while hot, before they turned hard and gummy.

Gil Fernandes shot back down to the pounding water's edge, this time retrieving truffle seaweed, slightly red and tasting exactly as its name suggested; and high-iodine rockweed, brown algae also known as *fucus*. There was refreshing sea lettuce, which chef preferred to dry, to enhance its flavor; the red algae that constitute Japanese *nori*; plus, *laminaria* and other kelp that make tasty broths. Finally, there was *codium fragile*, also known as dead man's fingers, which tastes vaguely like barnacles.

"This is our garden," Chef Fernandes said, gesturing at the water and rock.

**The seventh dish** of the night was something mysteriously called "Ice Melting." We wondered what that was. It was to be followed by a *cozido*, which is Portugal's "boiled dinner," a farmer's staple made of pork sausages and beef sides and usually served in a hearty broth. We were also switching to a Pinot Noir, a Casal Sta. Maria 2023, to better match this meatier fare.

"A palate cleanser?" someone suggested.

"Melting Ice" was a bowl sealed by a layer of ice, obscuring what lay beneath, just as the grey surface of the ocean obscures the colorful world that exists beneath the waves.

But "as a diver can descend to experience the wonders of the deep," wrote one of our well-travelled members, "the poured warm broth melted the ice in our bowls, suddenly revealing the garden below the surface – green sorbet, made from

the edible *nasturtium* plant, and its colorful petals floating in a sea broth. The intention of this dish was to illustrate 'global warming,' but for me it was also how we can, with care, experience the majesty of our oceans."

"Sand-Comb," meanwhile, was a single wild clam fricassee, resting on a vivid green seaweed paste, touched with honey and a mustard-seed caviar. The small edible clam shell was served atop a "plate" made of sand riddled by worm holes and shellacked into a block. "The clam, and the small bits of seaweed and mustard seed, were both



**Clam fricassee**

sweet from the honey and tangy from the seaweed – and utterly delicious."

The mood of the night was established not just through the dramatic cliffside setting outside, but also through

the relaxed yet client-focused service within. "Many years ago, I went with friends to a Michelin-starred restaurant in the French countryside, and what I remember most clearly is the sense that the staff appeared delighted to see us. A similar sense of welcome and graciousness marked our Fortaleza do Guincho evening."

That was a tribute to the night's invisible hand, Petra Sauer, the hotel's general manager who seems to effortlessly inspire the efficiency and warm tone in the fort.

After the 14 courses were done and dusted, many of our diners were stumped. "I do not have

the vocabulary to describe what happened to me at that table. I think it was like having synesthesia," which is a neurological event when a triggered sense merges with other firing pathways.

That's why another writer focused instead on our revealing facial expressions. "A tentative group of fingers, forks and spoons, cautiously brought judgement and thought. 'Do I like this? Is this for me? Should I smell it first?' The first bite offered confusion, then wide-eyed surprise, before the skin relaxed, searching the memory bank for familiarity and finding nothing quite similar. The most audible incantation was voiced during the rhubarb delight. From the top of the table to the bottom, I heard 'OH!' recurrent in soprano and bass; along with hums, purrs and sharp inhales."

But the participant claiming she didn't have the vocabulary to do the dinner justice, did find precisely the



right words the next day, during an uncensored moment on Facebook. She wrote, "I am not sure how one is supposed to comport oneself at a Michelin-starred restaurant, but I'm pretty sure it is not by clutching your chest and muttering 'holy shit' when tasting every course." ■



**Fortaleza dining room**



# The Vines are Drunk

## An oenophile's tour of Portugal with Casca Wines

**T**he founder of [Casca Wines](#), Hélder Cunha, insisted we fortify ourselves before we tour his vineyard, so we started our day with *pingados*, espresso dashed with hot milk, and the specialty found at [Sintra's](#) 4th-generation [Casa do Preto](#): *Queijada*, thin-crust pastry with a creamy and caramelized cheese, cinnamon, and sugar filling, yet another underrated Portuguese dessert tasting like nothing found elsewhere in the world. But there was no time to ponder this fact, because we were off to the 200-year-old Colares vineyards, located a mile from the rugged Sintra-Cascais coast.

The wedge of sandy clifftop land—behind a stone wall and squeezed in between seaside-facing villas—looked wild and neglected: shapeless

flowering apple trees and gnarled vines crawled along the ground like they were drunk. “I have toured a number of vineyards over the years—California, France, Argentina—and there’s a similarity in structure and appearance, with long rows of plants trained along wooden- or wire- fences. In Colares, the very sandy soil and the salty air have shaped the vines to grow along the ground like watermelon vines in summer.”

Powerful storms coming hard off the Atlantic can result in severe crop damage, of course, so the vines are allowed to grow close to the ground, protected by the surrounding stone walls and cane windbreaks. When the vines start bearing heavy grapes that need a little elevation off the hot sand, the short supports that prop up the

vines are whittled from the cut-down nearby cane. Cunha explained that the two ancient and indigenous grape varieties, Malvasia de Colares (white) and Ramisco (red,) flourish in sandy soil along the coast – and that was their savior.

When European vineyards were decimated in the mid 19th century by the aphid-like American louse, phylloxera, it couldn’t feed on the Colares vines’ roots because the bugs’ tunnels through the sand inevitably collapsed. The *terroir* today produces only 1000 bottles a year, and the area’s foggy mornings and salty winds are the “seasoning” that gives the Colares wines their maritime flavor.

To appreciate that fully, we traveled a short distance to the cliff bluffs overlooking Aguda beach, to taste the Colares wines labeled Monte Cascas. Aged three years in French oak, these tough little wines are best drunk a decade after fermenting, and the 12-year-old Ramisco in particular hit us like we were drinking bottled survival. “I am drinking history,” one writer wrote.

**We had our** final writing workshop of the week in the [Condes Castro Guimarães Museum](#), a Revivalist-style folly of a palace built in 1900. After a brief tour of the castle—replete with Indo-Portuguese furniture and the 1505 illuminated manuscript *Chronicle of King Alfonso*—we reviewed our food writing in the elegant wine-red music room housing a rare Neo-gothic (1753) organ, a salon the museum closed off for our private use.

Afterwards, we were led into the palace’s sunny garden and courtyard, where traditional codfish cakes and shrimp crescents awaited us. Hélder Cunha’s mission is to preserve Portugal’s unusual winemaking

traditions and *terroirs*, so we invited Cunha and his colleague Mariana Viana to give us a final tour of the nation via their lively portfolio of Casca Wines.

“As a small green parrot sang from a high tree that shaded the



Courtyard tasting

garden, we breathed in and sipped a septet of vintages, starting with a lively sparkling wine, the 1808 Brut Nature for €20, from the Beira Interior region.” Cunha described the fermentation process designed to tame the wine’s “nervous bubbles.” We ended our tour with an 1808 Field Blend Douro red for €63, where we discovered edgy minerals singing a *fado* duet with lush fruit, and in between, we traveled down to the Alentejo in the South and back up to Dão in the mountainous central north.

Our favorite for reasons that will soon become apparent: The Cabo do Roca Reserva Arinto, an acidic wine with a green-apple- and lemon- twist that is made just north of Lisbon and nicely paired with fish or seafood. Not only is it terrific value for money at €14 a bottle, it also delivers a high-quality literary finish.

Portuguese wines made from the Arinto grape, known in 16th Century England as “Charneco,” are joyously quaffed in William Shakespeare’s *Henry VI, Part II*. ■



Copyright RCM Media LLC