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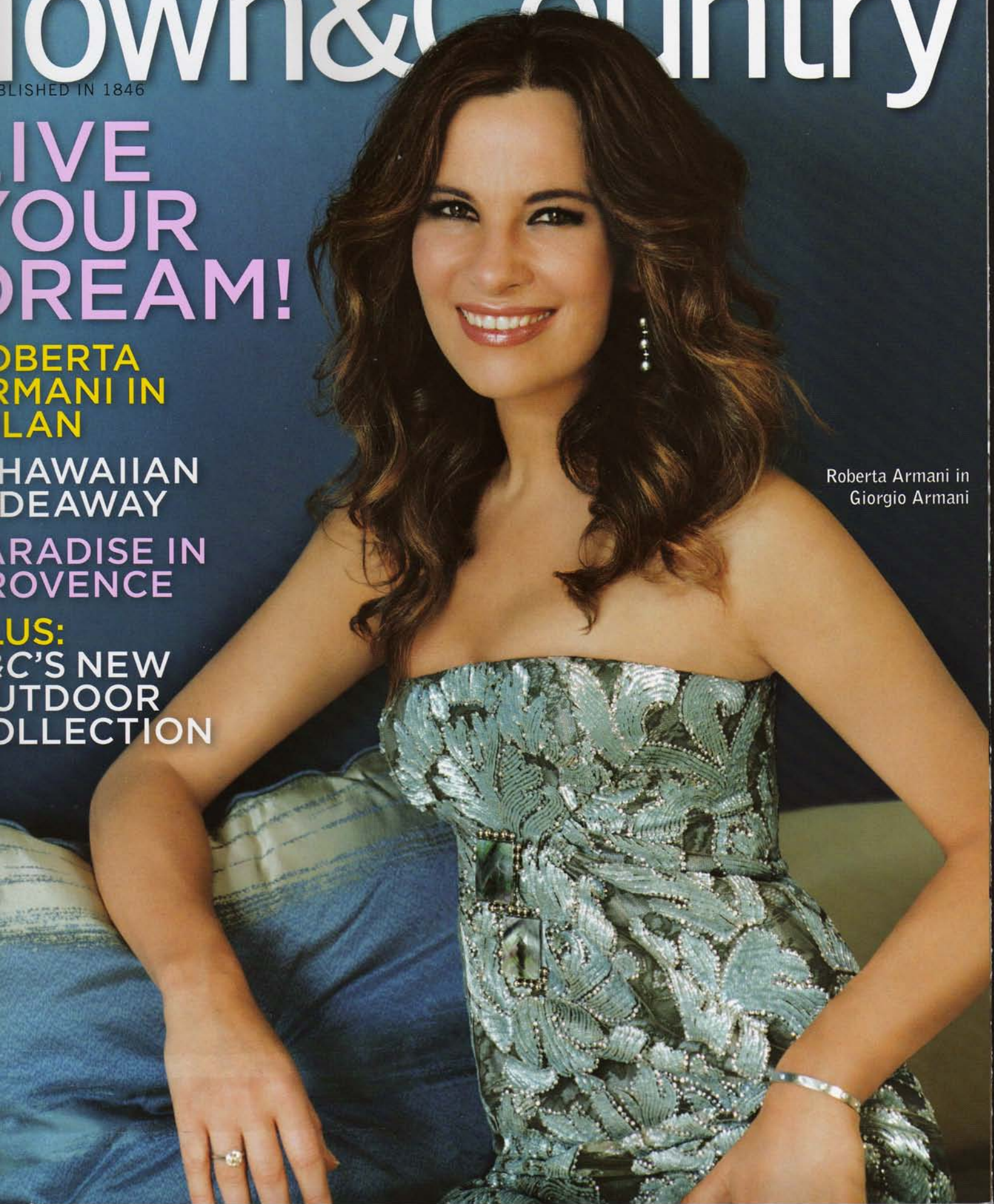
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Good as Gold

Boutique hotels, an undisturbed landscape and nobles dedicated to preserving their culture are pumping new color into Portugal's Douro wine country.

By Sharon Boorstin



A view of Aquapura, an 18th-century quinta turned boutique hotel.

OUR DRIVER maneuvers our vehicle along a narrow, twisting road toward the hilltop village of Provesende, in Portugal's Douro Valley. It's the end of harvest season in this seventy-mile swath of steep stone-terraced vineyards, where port wine has been made for centuries, and the leaves have turned russet. The sun casts shards of gold on the Douro River, and through the window, my husband, Paul, and I watch as smoke from piles of burning grape stems curls into the azure sky.

With a heritage dating back to the 11th century and a population of just 400, Provesende sits 1,200 feet above the river, granting spectacular views of the surrounding countryside. A

Edited by Heidi Mitchell

few locals play cards outside a café. We wander inside, and the owner offers us glasses of port from a bottle labeled Ferreira, a leading brand. I savor the sweet garnet liquid, enjoying its high-alcohol tingle on my tongue. When I pronounce it *delicioso*, he breaks into a grin and admits it isn't Ferreira but port that he made himself and poured into an old container.

"Everyone makes port in the Douro, whether they're big producers or locals tending vines in their backyard," Manuel Villas-Boas says later that evening at Casa da Calçada, his family home. The affable Lisbon ad executive explains that the estate has been in his family since the 17th century, when nobles who

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TRAVELER'S NOTEBOOK

owned vineyards in the Douro were required to build houses in the village. "That way the king kept them out of his royal hair," he says.

In the past year Douro (which means "of gold"), the oldest demarcated wine region in the world, has attracted a growing number of cosmopolitan travelers, and not just those who fancy its famous dessert wines. To give them a sumptuous place to have a meal, Villas-Boas recently opened Casa da Calçada to groups of up to forty people. "My family is proud to show visitors a piece of unchanged Portuguese life," he says. He leads us on a tour of the rambling house's six bedrooms, its dark-wood floors creaking underfoot, and points out portraits of his ancestors. He tells us about one 19th-century countess who was so distraught when her four-year-old son died that she had his body embalmed and kept it by her side. In the chapel I'm aghast to see the child's preserved remains in a glass-topped coffin. "I know it's creepy, but after the revolution in 1974, it kept the villagers from destroying our house," says Villas-Boas. "They had too much respect for the little boy."

Our host, who often joins his guests at mealtimes, pours his family's impressive Morgadio da Calçada wines during a roast-turkey dinner. He explains that they are made in partnership with vintner Dirk van der Niepoort, one of the five "Douro Boys" who in the past six years—for the first time in history—have won awards for the region's table wines, not just port. Villas-Boas credits the resulting international interest in Douro table wines as one reason for the growth of tourism. The other is that UNESCO designated the region as a World Heritage Site in 2001, literally putting it on preservationists' maps. "Since then, new construction has been restricted and the

The 17th-century Casa da Calçada, where guests can sample Portuguese specialties and local wines.



restoration of historic buildings encouraged," he explains.

Joana van Zeller, a descendant of an old Douro Valley family who is married to Cristiano van Zeller (another of the Douro Boys), believes it is possible to welcome more visitors while preserving the region's distinctive character. She is the director of guest relations at Aquapura, one of two sophisticated resorts that opened last year. The fifty-room, twenty-one-villa Aquapura ("pure water") sits on eighteen acres of vineyards flanking the riverbank, in the footprint of an 18th-century stucco quinta (estate). The interior, however, is done in a modern Baliesque style with black carpeting; walls and floors are painted brown and burgundy. The lighting is so dim that I find myself stumbling on steps in the lounge and unable to see myself well enough in our bathroom mirror to apply my lipstick.

"The idea was to create a dark, tranquil, Zen-like retreat from the harsh Douro sun," van Zeller says. Because of complaints, however, the hotel has installed clearer bathroom mirrors and lamps in the corridors to increase the light level. Nevertheless, the Zen design suits the 24,000-square-foot spa, where I relax with a Thai aromatherapy massage and swim in the indoor pool that seemingly flows, through a picture window, into the river.

In the dining room, water trickles from a spherical stone sculpture, and wines from the hotel's hundreds of Por-



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The infinity pool at Aquapura,
overlooking the Douro Valley.



tuguese and international labels line the walls of the alcove. I'm relieved to discover that in a country where the staple is bacalao (dried, salted cod mixed with potatoes and olive oil), Emmanuel Soares, the Alain Ducasse-trained Portuguese chef, specializes in light, contemporary dishes using fresh ingredients. (He has since been replaced by Philippe Bossert.) Silken cantaloupe soup with basil-lime sorbet, mullet seasoned with algae butter, and coconut mousse with passion-fruit ice are among my favorites.

In keeping with Aquapura's water theme, our guest room has an extra-long bathtub and a river view. It also has what Paul and I agree must be one of the world's most comfortable beds. Is it the satiny 100 percent Portuguese-cotton sheets? The eiderdown duvet? The pillows that come in what I call Papa Bear, Mama Bear and Baby Bear sizes? Before I can decide, I'm asleep.

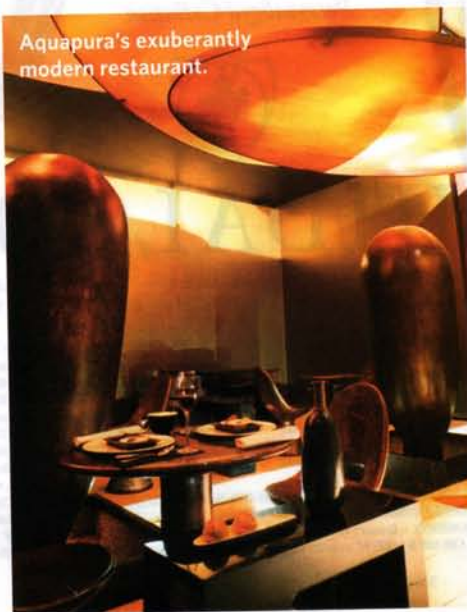
One morning we join van Zeller for a private visit to a winery. As we journey upriver on the train east toward the Spanish border, she explains that many port labels are emblazoned with British names—Cockburn, Taylor, Sandeman—because after the British lost the Hundred Years War to France, in 1453, they

sought non-French sources for wine. They discovered the grapes of the Douro Valley and began transporting barrels of the wine made from them in boats down the Douro River to Porto and then on to England. There was only one problem: the wine didn't travel well, and much of it turned rancid during the long sea voyage. So in the 1840s some enterprising traders started fortifying the wine with brandy to prevent spoilage. The brandied wine was not only more durable but sweeter and higher in alcohol content. It suited the British palate, and soon port from the Douro Valley became Portugal's leading agricultural export.

We climb off the train at Quinta do Vesuvio, part of the Symington Family Estates, whose brands include W.&J. Graham's and Dow's. Douro is one of the few wine regions left in the world where grapes are not only picked by hand but crushed by foot. Mario Natario, the winemaker, tells us that last night workers stomped the final batch of this year's grapes. "The first two hours everyone works together in unison, but the third hour it's 'freestyle,'" he says. "Musicians play, and everyone dances on the grapes."

While we enjoy touring the vineyards, Paul and I also make time to see some of the valley's other landmarks, such as a beautifully preserved 18th-century Baroque church in São João Tarouca. We are awed by the intricately carved statues of the saints that glitter with Brazilian gold. And because this is Douro, there are no

Aquapura's exuberantly
modern restaurant.



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busloads of tourists to spoil our view.

The serenity we experience there follows us to Romaneira, the other upscale resort to open last year, which we're delighted to have nearly all to ourselves. Developed by Maisons des Rêves, a French group with boutique resorts in Morocco, it is set among 900 acres of vineyards in two 19th-century quintas on a cliff above the Douro River. The property is so far removed from a road that it's quiet enough to hear birdsong from the opposite riverbank.

When Romaneira's white-stucco, red-tile-roofed buildings were being restored, the designers were careful to retain the original structure in accordance with UNESCO's guidelines. The interiors, however, were done in a style that blends Portuguese and contemporary French with touches suitable for a British men's club and some whimsy, such as Amazonian Indian feather headdresses and Goan tree-trunk storage containers, which Romaneira owner-designer Thierry Teyssier gathered from Portugal's former colonies. In the sitting area of our suite I lounge on a four-poster daybed (or is it an opium bed?) from 19th-century Macao. I swim in the indoor pool fashioned from former grape-crushing vats, above which dangle large canoes. Paul's favorite spot is the library, where the leather armchairs cry out to be filled by gentlemen sipping port and smoking cigars. Mine is the Chocolateerie, paneled in burnished apothecary cabinetry from Goa, where we indulge in pastries and hot chocolate.

The nineteen guest rooms at Romaneira lack TVs and telephones, but we are quickly seduced by the seclusion and the pampering. Meals are served to guests in a variety of locations. We have one lunch in a sun-dappled grape arbor and another on the resort's old wooden cruiser as it

Romaneira's interiors blend Portuguese furnishings with colonial touches.



glides up the river. One dinner is in the winter garden, where large Amazonian insects are framed like works of art and hang on the crimson walls. On another night, we're seated alone at a long dining table carved from a tree trunk.

At each meal we marvel at the attentive but unobtrusive service—and the spectacular cuisine. Chefs Philippe Conticini and Miguel Castro e Silva dazzle us with a parade of small dishes that combine modern French, Spanish and Portuguese flavors. Among the most memorable: a salad of garbanzo beans and refreshingly unsalty bacalao; a shot glass of ethereally foamy Parmesan-cheese soup; succulent rosemary-infused pork; and passion-fruit sorbet with caramelized pistachios.

As we leave Romaneira I spot a helipad and ask our driver if anyone has ever used it. "Not yet," he replies. I imagine that, as locals like Manuel Villas-Boas and Joana van Zeller continue to awe visitors with the quintas and boutique hotels of their vineyard-striped valley, the word will get out. And soon, the helicopters of heads of state and celebrities will touch down here.

Casa da Calçada: Meals from \$114, including wine. Provesende; 011-351-254-732-218. **Aquapura Douro Valley Resort:** Doubles from \$367. 5100-758 Quinta de Vale Abraao, Lamego; 011-351-213-600-040; aquapurahotels.com. **Romaneira:** Doubles from \$1,517 per night, all inclusive. 5070 Cotas; 011-351-254-732-432; maisonsdesreves.com. ✕