

NEXT STOP) THE DOURO

In Portugal, a New Stop on the Global Wine Trail

By GISELA WILLIAMS

ON a crisp fall evening a clutch of bigwig museum directors were barefoot and treading grapes in an old stone vat in the Douro, Portugal's port wine region. They included João Fernandes, the director of the prestigious Serralves Museum in Oporto, and Vicente Todoli, the director of Tate Modern.

"If you told me just a few hours ago I would have been doing this," Mr. Todoli said, cheerfully stomping away, "I would not have believed you!" He's not the only one. Not long ago, few would have imagined that the Douro (pronounced DOH-roo) would be on the lips of international art maven and tastemakers. A semi-remote area in north-eastern Portugal with small, winding roads that wrap around steeply terraced vineyards, the Douro River Valley was better known as a sleepy getaway for a stiff British crowd of a certain age who quietly toured the region's quintas, or port wine estates.

These days, however, this rugged valley is on the edge of becoming a fashionable wine trail. There are more than a few signs: a group of renegade winemakers who called themselves the Douro Boys; new luxury hotels with 1,000-euro-a-night suites; restaurants with Michelin-starred chefs; and new wineries designed by famous architects.

But unlike other, well-traveled wine regions, much of the Douro's intoxicating charms sneak up on you. I had come to Quinta de Nápoles, a 74-acre vineyard on an isolated hilltop overlooking the Têdo River, to taste its red wine made from the grapes of old port vines. Luís Seabra, the resident winemaker, led a small group of us on a tour among the barrels, pulling out batches from various vintages to taste.

The next thing we knew, Dirk van der Niepoort, an owner of the vineyard, joined our small group, fielding questions about the grape-growing climate and excitedly telling us about Quinta de Nápoles's new winemaking facility, a minimalist complex made of stone, designed by the Austrian architect Andreas Burghardt and completed this fall.

After regaling us with stories about the Douro's history, Mr. Niepoort spontaneously invited us to a dinner with Mr. Fernandes and his art friends. We comfortably around a long wood table as the family chef brought out plate after plate of earthy Portuguese fare: a big salad with juicy local tomatoes, followed by buttery potatoes and an enormous platter of cabrito (a roasted young goat) with sweet onions and carrots. And, of course, some of the vineyard's top labels were served: Charme 2004 and the Redoma Branco Reserva 2005.

"There's 2,000 years of winemaking history in the Douro," said Mr. Niepoort, a fifth-generation heir of the family-owned port company, Niepoort. "But it's only in the last 15 years that the wines are becoming good and in the last five that they've become outstanding."

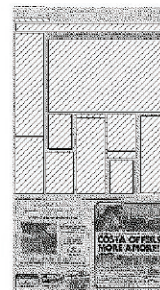
Much of that outstanding wine is being made by five small wine producers who recently formed a winemaking clique called the Douro Boys. These "boys" (Mr. Niepoort is one) range in ages from the early 30s to mid-60s — and one is a woman.

What binds them is an "obsession with quality, an ambition to bring our wines to international markets and a belief in sharing and helping each other to make that happen," said one of the older of the Douro Boys, Guilherme Álvares Ribeiro of Quinta do Vallado.

Another common denominator is that all of the Douro Boys are descended from, or have worked for, the region's old port-making families. The Douro Valley, which stretches almost 100 miles from the Serra do Marão mountains toward the Spanish border, was designated a wine appellation in 1756, making it one of the world's oldest.

But in the last two decades, the Douro's storied winemakers have gradually turned their attention from port to table wines, using indigenous grapes like tourega nacional, a rich, heat-loving fruit that they believe has the potential to make world-class red wine. (So do respected wine critics like Jancis Robinson.)

Wine-seeking visitors usually stay near the small towns of Peso da Régua and Pinhão along the Douro River. Until recently, that usually meant two options: charming but rustic bed-and-



breakfasts like the Casa do Visconde de Chancelheiros, an 18th-century manor about three miles outside Pinhão; and the Vintage House Hotel, the area's grandest hotel, where the bartenders open port bottles the traditional way: heating and snapping off the necks.

This summer, the region saw the arrival of two modern boutique hotels, which are drawing a younger, more cosmopolitan breed of travelers to the region. The Aquapura, a chic Asian-inspired hotel designed by the Portuguese architect Luís Rebelo de Andrade, opened with 50 bedrooms including 9 suites, 21 villas with burgundy plunge pools, and a 23,600-square-foot spa.

And the place that has everyone talking is the Quinta da Romaneira, which was transformed into a luxurious resort on 990 acres of terraced hills covered in vines. It has 20 suites and apartments, a riverside spa and an eye-popping all-inclusive rate of 1,000 euros a night for two, which includes meals, private cooking lessons and chauffeured wine tours.

BUT perhaps the surest sign of the Douro's rising status is the rush of chef-driven restaurants. For Redondo, its upscale restaurant, Romaneira brought in two renowned cooks to create the menu: Philippe Conticini, formerly of Petrossian in Paris, and Miguel Castro e Silva, one of Portugal's most respected chefs.

In Peso da Régua, the culinary buzz is at Douro In, a riverside restaurant with old stone walls, modern Philippe Starck furniture and an inventive menu that blends Portuguese fare with global styles. And in between Régua and Pinhão, there's the excellent D.O.C., the latest outpost from Rui Paula, whose first restaurant, Cêpa Torta in Alijó, has been a favorite of the Douro's wine producers for more than a decade.

On another evening, at the remote Casas do Coro, a hotel spread throughout what once was a medieval village, I encountered yet another of the Douro's unexpected surprises. The hotel's modern restaurant — with gleaming wood surfaces and theatrical lighting — served a traditional meal of mirandesa (veal from the region) cooked by the owner's talented wife. Both the surroundings and the food captured the essence of the new Douro — a destination stepping toward the future, with one foot firmly in its rich, earthy past.

Still, the meal I remembered most

was the spontaneous dinner at Quinta de Nápoles. Maybe that's because for several days after I returned home my feet were still purple.

UP A LAZY RIVER

GETTING THERE

Oporto's is the closest international airport to the Douro (www.ana.pt); it is served by several major European airlines. From there, the roughly 80-mile drive to Peso da Régua takes about two hours.

Alternatively, one can take a seven-hour cruise down Douro River with Douro Azul (351-223-402-500; www.douroazul.pt; from 57 euros each way depending on the season, or \$83.79 at \$1.47 to the euro), or a two-and-a-half-hour train ride to Peso da Régua's historic station (351-213-185-990, www.cp.pt; from about 8 euros one way).

WHERE TO STAY

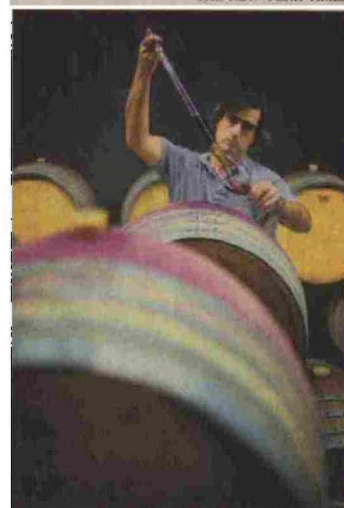
The new Aquapura near Peso da Régua (351-254-660-600; www.aquapurahotels.com) has 50 bedrooms of which 9 are suites, 21 villas and 3 restaurants. Rooms start at 300 euros.

Opened last June, Quinta da Romaneira (Cotas; 351-254-732-432; www.maisonsdesreves.com) is an ultra-luxurious resort on a beautiful old wine estate near Pinhão. Rates are 1,000 euros for a couple sharing a room and is all-inclusive.

Casa do Visconde de Chancelheiros (351-254-730-190; www.chanceleiros.com) is a quaint, 10-room bed-and-breakfast. Rooms start at 120 euros.

Until the Romaneira came along, the Vintage House Hotel (351-254-730-230; www.csvintagehouse.com) was the area's most prestigious hotel. It has 37 elegant rooms, and several suites, starting at 125 euros in the low season.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MATIAS COSTA FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ABOVE View of the Douro, in northeastern Portugal. BELOW Checking a sample at Quinta de Nápoles, which now makes red wine from the old port vines.

Printing imperfections present during scanning