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Wine & Spirits

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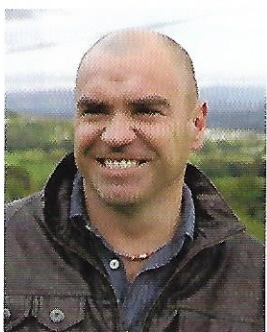
Jane Sigal lived in Paris for 12 years and earned a Grand Diplôme at L'Ecole de Cuisine La Varenne. Her food writing appears in such publications as *Food & Wine* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Even though her latest cookbooks are *Bistronomy: Recipes from the Best New Paris Bistros* and *Modern Greek Cooking* (with chef Pano Karatassos), after traveling to Alentejo to research "Black Pigs & Wild Asparagus" (p. 38), she wants to move to Portugal.



Jonathan Eicholz hails from Dix Hills, New York, and was raised glued to the Food Network, specifically to Alton Brown's *Good Eats*. After graduating from Colby College, he transitioned from a neuroscience lab to the cheese caves of Murray's in NYC, where he fell in love with food, beer and wine. Now the head sommelier at *Aquavit*, he considers how a new crop of fine-casual restaurants are working with wine. (p. 8)



Julie Case writes regularly about travel, wine, food and culture. Her passion for mushrooms, foraging and terroir has led her to Chile seeking *curanto* and carmenère, to a Sicilian hillside for snails, and to the heart of Oregon for truffles and pinot noir. For this issue, she delves into the practice of entomophagy—eating bugs—and what people drink with them. (p. 16)



When he's not tasting for *Descorchados*, his annual guide to South America's wine, **Patricio Tapia's** obsessions take him to the coast—close to home in Valparaíso for uni, to NYC for uni panini, to Lima, Peru, for ceviche or to Spain, for nose-to-tail tuna dining in Sanlúcar. Recently, he found the perfect companion for that tuna, in equally fresh, unfortified white wines from the albariza soils of Jerez. (p. 38)

W&S Italian wine editor **Stephanie Johnson** wrote about Sicilian wines for our Fall issue. Then she traveled to the far northeastern corner of Italy, close to Trieste, where limestone has dissolved into cliffs and caves, leaving little soil for the vines. In this issue, she explores the borderlands between Italy and Slovenia, Carso and Kras, politically divided, and culturally united by vitovska and malvasia. (p. 34)



photo of Jane Sigal by Fredrika Stjåme

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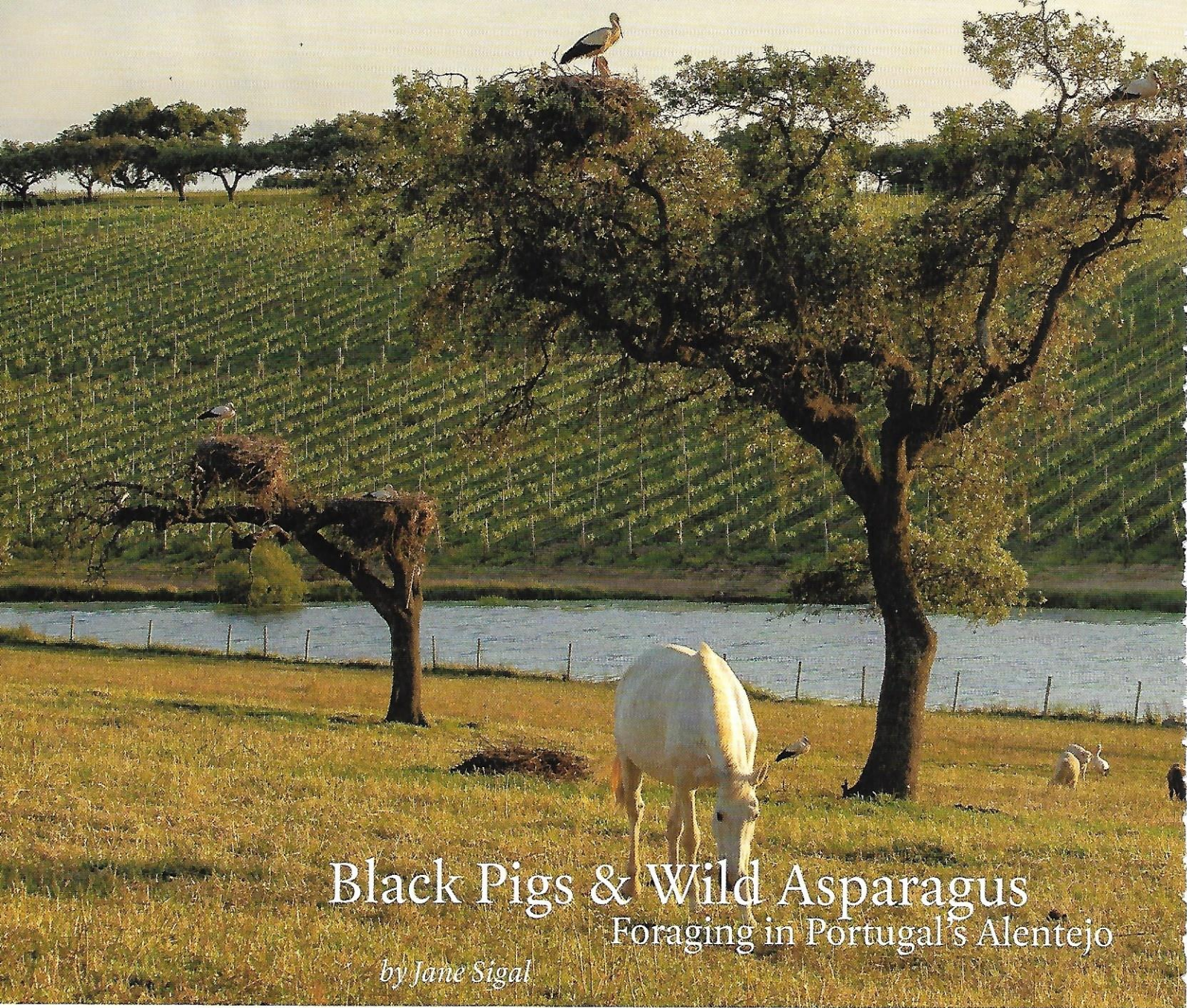
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Black Pigs & Wild Asparagus

Foraging in Portugal's Alentejo

by Jane Sigal

José Júlio Vintém was in hot pursuit of wild asparagus. On a warm spring morning, the self-taught chef was wading through the brush that rims the dirt road to São Lourenço do Barrocal, a hotel outside of Reguengos de Monsaraz, in Portugal's southern Alentejo region. He stopped every few yards to collect the frilly asparagus tips or to inspect a plant: waist-high fennel, wild arugula with butter-yellow flowers and, creeping everywhere, *poejo* (pennyroyal), a potent variety of mint with hints of oregano. "It looks lush now," he said. "But everything that grows in Alentejo is drought tolerant, and our cuisine is really the frugal genius of poor cooks."

photos this spread by Tiago Caravana



(Clockwise from left) Wild asparagus at São Lourenço do Barrocal in Reguengos de Monsaraz; Vineyards, grazing stock and wildlife at Herdade de Malhadinha Nova in Beja; Herdade do Rocim in Vidigueira.

I didn't feel the poverty as I crisscrossed the wide-open, sunbaked landscape from southeast of Lisbon to the Algarve, the country's southern coastal zone. Since 1974, after Portugal's shift from fascism to democracy and its integration into the European Union, the state has provided free education and healthcare. Additionally, just beyond São Lourenço do Barrocal's meticulously renovated 19th-century stone cottages, stables and barns, and forming part of the border with Spain, the damming of the Guadiana River in 2002 had created Lake Alqueva, Europe's largest artificial body of water. Today, cork, wine, olives and Alqueva-irrigated crops, along with a budding tourism industry, all contribute to an expanding economy. Plus, like Vintém, cooks here have a tradition of foraging for part of their diet, as well as planting vegetable patches, and keeping a few chickens, for eggs, and, perhaps, a black Alentejano pig.

When lunch arrived, in one of Barrocal's white-washed, ivy-covered courtyards, I could see how the chef's food reflected the constant flux of nature. Farm-fresh eggs came two ways: one softly scrambled with the grassy asparagus stalks he had just picked; the other with slices of a yellowish-brown wild tuber the chef likened to truffles, but which reminded me of marble-sized sunchokes. The communal plates also contained tangy partridge *escabeche*—I later saw a rabbit variation; both came from game hunted in Alentejo's olive and cork groves. Pork fat-rich *migas* (a kind of bread dumpling) came flavored with the aromatic pennyroyal we'd picked that morning, but the *migas*, like the eggs, would evolve with the seasons to include sun-ripened tomatoes from Barrocal's extensive (Alqueva-watered) vegetable garden in summer, then, in autumn, a variety of wild mushrooms.



The clay-rich soils of the southern Alentejo provide the raw material for *talhas*, the traditional amphorae used to ferment and age local wines.



Vintém's menu was inspired by Alentejo's historical deprivation but it wasn't stuck there. So, if his dried-fava-bean salad hewed to peasant tradition with slices of lightly spicy chouriço sausage, it was also garnished with red-through-and-through strawberries, their juices mixed with the estate's olive oil to create a sweet-tart dressing.

Using Evora, a UNESCO World Heritage city, as a home base for my forays, I had been introduced to the comforting conformity of Alentejo's rustic cuisine at Quinta do Quetzal in Vidigueira, southwest of Barrocal. The sleek winery was created by Dutch art collectors, so the property is landscaped with native specimen gardens, and a gallery hosts a revolving slate of contemporary exhibitions. But hunger propelled me to the estate's light-flooded dining room with sweeping views of red-soil vineyards. At lunch, I learned that although, on average, red wine accounts for more than 75 percent of Alentejo's wine production, here it drops to less than 50 percent. That's because in spite of being Alentejo's most southerly wine subregion, Vidigueira has the mildest climate: While temperatures can climb into the 90s during the day, they can fall more than 35 degrees overnight, thanks to the cooling winds the hills channel in from the Atlantic, which is why the region can grow top-quality white grapes like *antão vaz*, the local star. And while Alentejo wines are mainly blends, the native *antão vaz* often appears on its own, offering wines with strong minerality and intense freshness.

As a cavalcade of terra-cotta plates and casseroles landed on my table, the obvious hit me. The red vine-

yards, the hand-painted earthenware (I had passed through São Pedro do Corval, one of Europe's major pottery towns, on the way to Quetzal), the clay floor tiles, curved roof tiles and *talhas*, the traditional clay vessels some vintners still use here: Alentejo's red soil figures in so many of its traditions.

Quetzal initiated me into Alentejo's soulful cuisine and its sources. The same buttery, curry-inflected meat turnovers that show the lasting influence of Portugal's spice hunting in the East Indies cropped up on menus throughout the region. So did *peixinhos da horta* ("little fish from the garden"). Portugal's southern hinterland is far from the coast, so local cooks swapped out seafood for green beans, coating the vegetables in batter and deep-frying them. (Alentejano chefs will tell you the Japanese learned this cooking style from Portuguese traders.)

I also sampled possibly the region's best example of rich, crumbly, smoked *farinheira* sausage, here wrapped, pork-on-pork, in *presunto do porco preto*, the region's silky cured ham. *Farinheira*'s particularity is that it's filled with a mixture of raw flour, paprika, chile paste and pork fat, and the apocryphal story suggests that it was originally a creation of Alentejo Jews who wished to avoid undue attention by preparing a kosher sausage that nevertheless looked like the usual chouriço. Did they use schmaltz instead?

In the evenings after visits in the countryside, I dined in the region's capital, Evora, home to a remarkable range of outstanding restaurants with excellent wine lists given that it's a city of only 60,000. For me, *Enoteca Cartuxa* was a standout. The modern, red-



São Lourenço do Barrocal
in Reguengos de Monsaraz

and blond-wood space is operated by Evora's Cartuxa winery, so the house's crisp whites and fresh, fruity reds are on offer alongside a menu that's an evolution and continuation of Alentejo's culinary arts. It was a great spot to sample the region's nutty sheep and goat cheeses and hand-sliced presunto do porco preto. Spain's black-hooved *pata negra* pigs get most of the attention, but Alentejo's forest-fed pigs also gorge on herbs, fallen fruits and acorns.

Like all Portuguese, Alentejanos love their *bacalhau* (salt cod). It's a national passion that dates back to the 15th century, when Portuguese sailors crossed the ocean to fish for cod on the Grand Banks, then preserved their catch in salt for the voyage home. *Enoteca Cartuxa* caters to this centuries-long bacalhau mania with multiple preparations: in *açorda*—one of Alentejo's most essential dishes—a humble soup of pennyroyal, garlic, olive oil and water thickened with stale bread; tossed with matchstick potatoes and fried egg; in a velvety chickpea soup with poached egg and spinach; or as an entrée with chick-

pea puree, pickled red onion and parsley-infused olive oil.

To end an already hearty meal, *Enoteca Cartuxa* served an updated version of *toucinho do céu*—literally translated as “bacon from heaven,” because this egg and almond cake was originally enriched with pork fat. Portuguese cooks deploy eggs, sugar and/or ground almonds and cinnamon in every possible combination. They're called “conventual” desserts, because, in one justification, nuns had a glut of left-over egg yolks after using the whites to starch priests' collars (although winemakers favor the explanation that the whites were used in fining wines).

I indulged in the region's achingly sweet desserts, which required long constitutionals in Evora's twisty streets, past whitewashed houses banded in ocher. I didn't spot any wild asparagus sprouting between the cobblestones but at least I could stare off at the city's floodlit Temple of Diana. It wasn't hard to trace a line from the Ancient Romans to today's talha wines, farms and olive orchards.



Chickpea Soup with Cured Cod, Spinach and Poached Egg Serves 4

Alentejo cooking has traditionally been one of scarcity and making do. Why throw out the cooking water when poaching cured cod? At *Enoteca Cartuxa*, the chef continues this zero-waste ethos by flavoring soup with the tasty liquid. This recipe unites three of the region's favorite ingredients—chickpeas, bacalhau and eggs.

Kosher salt
8 ounces skinless cod fillet
1 bay leaf
1 teaspoon black peppercorns
2 tablespoons extra-virgin olive oil,
plus more for drizzling
1 medium onion, sliced
2 garlic cloves, sliced
Two 15-ounce cans of chickpeas, rinsed
4 large eggs
8 ounces baby spinach, sliced
freshly ground pepper
chopped parsley, for garnish

1. Spread 2 tablespoons of salt on a large plate. Set the cod on the plate and pat 2 tablespoons of salt on top. Cover with another large plate and weigh it down with a heavy can. Let stand at room temperature for 30 minutes.

2. Rinse the cured cod. In a medium skillet, combine the cod with the bay leaf, peppercorns and 4 cups of water. Bring to a simmer, then cook over low heat for 5 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the cod to a bowl; let cool slightly and shred it. Strain the cooking liquid through a sieve into a glass measuring cup; discard the contents of the sieve. (The cooked cured cod and cooking liquid can be refrigerated, separately, overnight.)

3. In a medium saucepan, warm the oil over moderate heat. Add the onion and garlic and cook, stirring occasionally, until softened, about 5 minutes. Add two-thirds of the chickpeas and 3 cups of the cod cooking liquid and bring to a simmer; reserve the remaining cod cooking liquid. Reduce the heat to low and simmer the soup, partially covered, until the chickpeas are very soft, about 30 minutes.

4. Meanwhile, poach the eggs: Bring a medium skillet of water to a simmer. Crack 1 egg at a time

into a small bowl; then gently slide each egg into the water. Cook over moderately low heat until the whites are set and the yolks are still soft, about 3 minutes. Using a slotted spoon, transfer the eggs as they're done to a paper towel-lined plate to drain.

5. In a blender, puree the chickpea mixture until very smooth. The soup should be thick but pourable; add a little of the reserved cod cooking liquid if necessary. (At this point, the soup can be refrigerated overnight.) Return the chickpea soup to the pan and reheat gently. Add the spinach and remaining whole chickpeas and cook until the spinach wilts, about 1 minute. Taste for seasoning, keeping in mind that the cured cod is salty.

6. Divide the shredded cod among soup bowls. Ladle the soup on top and add a poached egg to each bowl. Garnish with parsley, drizzle with oil and serve.

photos this spread by Jane Sigal



Crispy Pork with Potatoes and Pickled Cauliflower Serves 4

Braised meat is the essence of Alentejo's farmhouse cooking. In this recipe from Quinta do Quetzal, tender pork is shredded, then fried in olive oil until slightly charred, and seerved with potatoes, pickled cauliflower and a carrot purée.

Pork and Potatoes

5 tablespoons plus 1 teaspoon olive oil
One 3½-to-4-pound bone-in pork shoulder
kosher salt and pepper
1 medium leek or onion, halved crosswise
2 small carrots, 1 halved crosswise
and 1 finely diced
1 mint sprig
1 oregano sprig
½ cup dry white wine
12 ounces small new potatoes or red potatoes
½ small onion, finely diced
½ small celery rib, finely diced
½ small red bell pepper, finely diced

Pickled Cauliflower

One 1-pound cauliflower, cut into small florets
1 cup distilled white vinegar
2 tablespoons kosher salt
2 teaspoons black peppercorns

1. Make the pork: In a medium Dutch oven, warm 2 tablespoons of the oil over moderate heat. Season the pork with salt and pepper, add to the pot and brown well on all sides, about 15 minutes total. Spoon off the fat. Add the leek, halved carrot, mint, oregano and wine and bring to a simmer, scraping up any browned bits from the bottom of the pot. Cover and cook over low heat, turning the meat every 20 minutes, until very tender, about 2 hours. (The pork can be left to cool in the pan juices, then refrigerated for up to 2 days.)

2. Meanwhile, pickle the cauliflower: Place the cauliflower in a 1-quart canning jar. In a small saucepan, bring the vinegar, salt, peppercorns and 2 cups of water to a simmer, stirring to dissolve the salt. Pour the hot brine into the jar, cover and let stand for at least 2 hours. (The extra pickle can be refrigerated for up to 1 month.)

3. Make the potatoes: In a medium saucepan of boiling salted water, cook the potatoes until tender, 15 to 20 minutes; drain.

4. Transfer the pork to a carving board and let

stand for 10 minutes. Strain the pan juices into a small saucepan and skim off the fat. Boil over high heat, stirring, until the juices reduce to 1¼ cups (about 5 minutes); season with salt and pepper. In a medium bowl, remove the meat from the bone and discard the fat. Shred the meat.

5. In a large skillet, heat 1 tablespoon of oil over moderately high heat. Add the diced carrot, onion, celery and bell pepper and cook, stirring, until lightly browned, about 3 minutes. Add 2 tablespoons of oil and the shredded meat, season with salt and pepper and cook, stirring, until the edges turn brown and crispy, about 5 minutes. Return it to the bowl.

6. In the same skillet, heat the remaining 1 teaspoon of oil over moderately high heat. Add the potatoes and cook, stirring occasionally, until they are lightly browned, about 3 minutes. Cut the potatoes in half. Mound the meat mixture in the center of a platter or plates and moisten with some of the pan juices. Sprinkle with a little of the pickled cauliflower and surround with the potatoes. Serve with the remaining pan juices. ■