



THE EDIBLE TRAVELER

## DIPPING INTO SPAIN'S ALT EMPORDÀ:

*Ancient Ruins, Wineries, Local Food and Dali*

BY GEORGEANNE BRENNAN

The Costa Brava, a coastal region in the north of Spain which encompasses the Denominación de Origen (DO) Empordà wine region, has it all—from ancient ruins to fine wineries and fresh local food, plus Salvador Dalí's extraordinary home and museum.

Around every corner there are opportunities to stop for a *café cortado*, an icy beer or a glass of wine, and tapas are always available if you need a little something to keep you going—or to encourage you to linger. And then there are the expansive breakfast spreads, the late-night multi-course dinners and the briny air of the Mediterranean.

A good place to start exploring is from the Hostal Spa Empúries built on the edge of a pine forest fronting the sea and only a five-minute walk from the Greek and Roman ruins of Empúries. The hotel is a

somewhat curious mix of very modern and vintage buildings. The earliest part of the hotel, constructed at the beginning of the 20th century, was built to feed and house the archeologists excavating the Empúries site.

The fine-dining restaurant, Portixol, is in the original building and the wood-paneled space runs almost the length of the building, overlooking the sea. At night the room is lit by soft light that doesn't interfere with the silver road cast on the sea by the moon. It was easy for me to imagine it as it must have been a hundred years ago, except the food is definitely no longer boarding house style.

The chef is dedicated to local fare, and here on the coast that means the best and freshest fish and shellfish, and fresh produce from the hotel's

gardens and local market growers, all served with elegance, but not fussy.

The expansive breakfast buffet, which could have been my favorite meal of the day, began with *café cortado*, the Spanish version of the French noisette, but much, much better. The rich, dark espresso, topped with a layer of hot steamed milk, was served in a glass a little larger than the typical espresso cup. The coffee was the perfect accompaniment to the platters of cured meats, cheeses, multitudes of breads, house-made jams and, best of all, tomatoes, fresh garlic and olive oil to make my own toasts. A very good beginning to the day.

## RUINS OF EMPÚRIES

Empúries is one Europe's rare archeological sites where Roman and Greek ruins stand side by side. Tucked into a curve of the Mediterranean, the pristine site is surrounded by beaches and pine trees, and if I just squint my eyes I can imagine the Greek traders who first established themselves here in mid sixth century BCE. That first outpost, over the centuries, became a proper city with a salting factory, public squares, market places, religious centers and homes. I appreciated being able to wander among the ruins at will, rather than being herded by a guide. The site is exceptionally well signed and mapped.

The same is true for the ruins of the Roman City, which was established in the first century BCE, and includes some remarkable mosaics. In addition, the small museum on the site is worth a visit. When I felt the need to be refreshed after my visit, I just walked a few hundred feet down to the sandy beach for a swim in the warm Mediterranean waters, followed by a casual lunch on the terrace of the hotel.

From Empúries it is only about an hour drive to the tip of Cap Creus, where the lighthouse towers over the windswept site and signals across the sea to warn ships. From the twisting, turning narrow road, I could see vineyards high on the inland side of the cap, the origin of some of the Empordà's best wines.

From the far edge of Cap Creus, the easternmost tip of the Iberian Peninsula, I could see the rocky point not too far to the north, jutting into the sea, that is the end of the Pyrenees, with France just on the other side. There is a small bar next to the lighthouse with some scattered outside tables, so I settled into the view and contemplation with yet another *café cortado*, which invigorated me for my next stop, Dalí's home.

## DALÍ'S HOME AND THE FISHING VILLAGE OF CADAQUÉS

Casa Dalí Museum in Portlligat is a must-see. Its garden is full of fantastical sculptures of eggs, there are huge pink plastic lips that serve as a garden bench, and the house is filled with everything from stuffed animals and lush textiles to odd curios, plus window views of the landscape that inspired Dalí.

The house is also only about a 20-minute walk along a cobbled road from the port and fishing village of Cadaqués, located on the inner edge of the Cap Creus. The port is lined with plenty of *cafés* and restaurants where the local wines can be sampled.

For lunch, I had the good fortune to be directed to Enoteca MF-Es Poal, a wine bar and restaurant located right on the harbor and

owned by the Martin Faxio family, local vintners who have brought the family's old vineyards back to life as well as restoring the 14th-century villa that now houses the winery and a bed and breakfast, just about 10 minutes from Cadaqués in the hills of Cap Creus.

Recently the family also started making its own beer and olive oil. First, to refresh myself from the walk, I had an icy cold beer and a plate of toasts smeared with, yes, yet more tomatoes, garlic and olive oil. Then on to the more serious tapas, which showcase the local fish. I had two orders of tuna tartare, the best anchovies ever and a perfect scallop in its shell along with its roe, all washed down with a chilled Martin Faxio Picapolle (not Piquepoule, which is a different variety), deliciously crisp but complex. It's not surprising, given the quality of the food and wine, that the family is friends with Chef Adrian Ferria and supplied some of their wine to Ferria's now-shuttered world-famous El Bulli restaurant, where one of the Faxio sons worked.

## THE WINES OF THE ALT EMPORDÀ

There are more than 16 other wineries to discover in the Alt Empordà. There are white wines made not only from Picapolle, but from old vine Grenache Blanc; blends of Viognier, Rousanne and Marsanne; of Macabeau and Chardonnay; plus Cava, the Spanish sparkling wine. The reds seem to be dominated by Grenache and Carignan made from old vines, plus newer plantings of Syrah, Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon.

One interesting winery is Castillo Perelada, whose wines are considered among the top wines not only of the Empordà, but of Spain in general. But it is more than a winery. The Parc del Castell de Perelada, where the winery is situated, includes a restored 14th-century crenellated castle, a former Carmelite convent and over 10 acres of fabulously landscaped gardens with grottos, an aviary, lakes, bridges and museums. A short distance from the castle is the Perelada Hotel, spa and golf course, set amid one of the estate vineyards.

## AND FINALLY, FIGUERES

Figueres, the central town of Alt Empordà where Salvador Dalí created his surrealist museum, is only a few miles from Perelada. Like the Dalí house, the Dalí museum is a must-see. Visiting it can only be described as a surrealistic experience.

Fortunately, just down the street from the museum is the venerable Hotel Duran, where Dalí frequently took his meals. In its cavernous, somewhat old-fashioned dining room, all dark wood, old photographs and proper waiters, I could tuck in for a quiet, restful meal—one with perhaps a salad of salt cod croquettes followed by market fish or local lamb, and a glass or two of Empordà wine—and let my senses recover from the experience of the museum while reflecting upon the richness of the Alt Empordà.

*HostalEmpuries.com*

*CellerMartinFaixo.com*

*CastilloPerelada.com*

*The Emporadà Region and Wines: DoEmporda.cat/en/wineries.html*