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Empordà vineyards

- 1 Vinyes deis Aspres
- 2 Vinyes d'Olivardots
- 3 Marti Fabra
- 4 Roig Parais
- 5 Hugas de Batlle
- 6 Terra Remota
- 7 Mas Estela Estate

My perfect day in Empordà

A route winding through vineyards, olive groves and umbrella pines with the Albera mountain range as backdrop and out to the coast via Cadaqués to L'Escalà. Tastings at Terra Remota and Mas Estela and visit to the Dalí Museum must be pre-booked.

Morning

Start the day at Terra Remota (www.terraremotacom.com), a huge, new, organic winery between Capmany and Sant Climent Sescebes created by French couple Marc and Emma Bournazeau. For another day, note their picnic lunch option (€38 for two), before continuing east on the country road to Llança. Then head south along the winding coast road to just short of Port de la Selva and take a right up to La Selva de Mar. Press on through the village and up a cement track into a wild valley criss-crossed with hiking trails – Sant Pere de Rodes is just over the top. At the end of the track is the lovely Mas Estela (www.masestelacom.com) where Nuria and Diego Soto-Dalmau and son Didac, established here since 1989, will show you their range of organic and biodynamic wines.

Lunch

Return to the coast road and make your way across the rugged Cap de Creus peninsula to the whitewashed fishing village of Cadaqués, made famous by Salvador Dalí, who settled in



Port Lligat

next-door Port Lligat. Enjoy a creative tapas lunch at Compartir*.

Afternoon

Take a 15-minute stroll to Port Lligat to the Dalí House-Museum*. Return to Cadaqués and drive back inland to Castelló d'Empúries and across the Aiguamolls wetlands to L'Escalà. Time for check in at Hostal d'Empuriés*. Time for an evening swim in the bay or spa.

Evening/overnight

Either dine in-house in Restaurant La Teresita or go round to El Roser 2* in L'Escalà – a 15-minute walk or a five-minute drive. In summer you can take the Carrilet tourist train, which stops by the entrance to the Empúries Museum.



For details of places marked with an asterisk (*), see p97

Above: the whitewashed fishing village of Cadaqués, made famous by Catalan artist Salvador Dalí, is a must-see during your travels in the Empordà region

extensive network of terraces and dry stone walls that still indent the steep hillsides of the magnificent Cap de Creus National Park.

Then came phylloxera, which arrived from southern France in the 1870s and laid waste to these northern Catalan vineyards. It was a disaster from which (at least in terms of quantity) Empordà never recovered: of the 40,000 hectares of vines planted then, the figure is now less than 2,000ha.

Where it all began

Quantity certainly suffered, but quality is a different story. By the 1990s a few bodegas, led by the pioneering Castillo Perelada (www.castillopereladacom.com), were beginning to grasp the potential for improvement, but it's in the past decade that things have really taken off. Rafel Sabadí, sommelier at Restaurant El Roser 2 in L'Escalà (see box, p97), describes Empordà today as 'en plena efervescència' – bubbling with life.

A bunch of young, highly motivated winemakers, fresh from their oenology studies, are busy >

The Decanter travel guide to

Empordà, Catalonia



FACT FILE

Region DO Empordà
Planted area 1,826ha
Grape varieties Carinyena, and Garnatxa, plus Tempranillo, Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, Syrah, Picapoll, Macabeu, Moscatell, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Gewurztraminer
Production 65,000 hectolitres (60% red, 17% rosé, 19% white, 4% sweet)
Main soil types sand, slate, decomposed granite

The wines of the historic region of Empordà are bubbling with life and Mediterranean character once again thanks to young winemakers in northern Catalonia, as Sue Style discovers

IT HARDLY MATTERS which way you approach the Empordà region of Catalonia: whether it's via Languedoc-Roussillon in southern France and across the border through which countless Republican refugees streamed at the end of the Civil War, or from Barcelona, which lies a little over one hour's drive to the south. The landscape,

flanked by the shimmering Mediterranean and dominated by the Pyrenees, which rise to the north, is equally distinctive whichever route you choose.

Vines have been laboriously cultivated here since the Greeks arrived on the coast at Empúries in the sixth century BC and established their settlement Palaia Polis. The Romans followed, expanding and building upon the Greek city (the site is a must on any Empordà itinerary, see p97) and exporting their wines throughout the empire. Later, in medieval times, it fell to the monasteries, including that of the wildly beautiful Sant Pere de Rodes perched high above the sea, to continue the wine-growing tradition.

Empordà's golden age of viticulture began in the 1760s and continued for a century. Ample evidence of this viticultural richness can be found in the



Clockwise from top left: the stunning monastery of Sant Pere de Rodes; the elegant Hotel & Spa Mas de Torrent; K La Gina in Garriguella; delicious wines and tapas at reasonable mark-ups make dining in Empordà a treat; soak up the view at Restaurant Villa Teresita at Hostal d'Empúries



Don't miss Decanter's Spain & Portugal Fine Wine Encounter Saturday 22 February 2014, 10am to 5pm In less than three weeks' time, Spain and Portugal's finest producers will be coming to London to pour their wines for you. More than 300 wines will be available to taste from a number of iconic wineries, with Masterclass and Discovery Theatre tickets available to book too. To buy tickets, visit www.decanter.com/events or call +44 (0)20 3148 4513

Photographs: age fotostock/Alamy; Simon Reddy/Alamy

renewing those ancient terraces and dry stone walls, resurrecting old vines – principally Garnatxa and Carinyena – and planting new ones. Their wines have bags of character and a strong sense of place, marked by the Mediterranean and given a good dose of tough love by the *tramuntana* winds that blast across the mountains from the north, stressing and airing the vines in equal measure.

The map on the DO Empordà website (www.doemporda.cat) is a useful guide to help shape your travels. Most bodegas are in Alt (Upper) Empordà, north of Figueres with a handful more in Baix (Lower) Empordà, out towards the coast from Girona. Most require an appointment and charge a modest fee for the visit.

Vinyes dels Aspres in Cantallops (www.vinyesdelsaspres.cat) is the most northerly vineyard, where winemaker David Molas works with 30ha of vines planted on slate and granite. Top of the range here is S'Alou, an impressive Garnatxa-Carinyena-Cabernet Sauvignon-Syrah blend, while Blanc dels Aspres, an old-vine Garnatxa Blanca, is one of the region's best-value whites.

Exciting bodegas

Just to the south in Capmany, Carme Casacuberta, at tiny Vinyes d'Olivardots (www.olivardots.com) is one of the new generation to have swelled the ranks of DO Empordà members from 26 to 50 in recent times, harvesting her first crop in 2006. Look out for Gresa, a four-grape blend including some from

'The wines of these young guns have bags of character and a strong sense of place, marked by the Mediterranean'

100-year-old Carinyena vines, which snagged the top award at Arrels del Ví, the annual wine fair and Empordà showcase (*see opposite page*).

It's worth visiting Joan Fabra at Martí Fabra in Sant Climent Sescebes (info@cellermartifabra.com) to taste the full range from this exciting bodega, but if time is short you can find their wines (favourites are Masia Carreras, both white and red) on the lists of the top restaurants in the region, including Pera Batlla in L'Armentera. And while you're at it, note the modest mark-ups at the region's restaurants, which adds to the delight of dining here.

Before heading out to the coast, make a date to visit Mariona Parals at Roig Parals in Mollet de Peralada (www.roigparals.cat). Top of their range is Camí de Cormes, a muscular wine from 120-year-old Carinyena vines (known here as Samsó), whose 15% alcohol is tempered by the grape's natural acidity. More accessible is Tocat de l'Ala, a stylish, blend from old-vine Carinyena and Garnatxa made in a joint venture with Montsant producer Coca i Fitó.

Your last stop should be at the new kid on the

Your Empordà address book



Hotel Peralada Wine Spa & Golf

HOTELS

Can Xiquet

Five chic, modern rooms with vineyard views. The restaurant serves local food with a short wine list favouring the best local producers. www.canxiquet.com

Hotel Peralada Wine Spa and Golf

Four-star country club-style hotel under the same ownership as Castillo Peralada winery. Restaurants, wine bar, wine spa, indoor and outdoor pools and golf course. www.hotelperalada.com

Hostal de Empúries

A respectfully modernised 1920s-built hotel on the beach next to the Empúries archaeological site (*see right*). Enjoy dinner on the seafront terrace at Villa Teresita or an epic breakfast buffet both courtesy of consultant chef Rafa Peña, then book in to the decadent spa. www.hostalempuries.com

Hotel & Spa Mas de Torrent, Torrent

Customary Relais & Châteaux elegance in this stone-built former *masia* (farmhouse) with pool, spa and two restaurants with Mediterranean-inspired food by chef Jorge Garrido and monthly tastings by sommelier Pere Palmada. A good base for exploring Baix Empordà. www.mastorrent.com

RESTAURANTS

El Roser 2

With a prime position and picture windows looking onto L'Escala's famous bay. Top fish

block, Hugas de Batlle (www.cellerhugasdebatlle.com). Tastings are prefaced by a bone-shaking tour in a 4x4 of the four dramatically sited vineyards, carved into the hillside high above Colera with sweeping views out to sea. Later, as we sip a flowery Moscatel-Garnatxa and sniff the spicy, bramble notes of Coma de Vaixell (Merlot and Cabernet), Edu Hugas de Batlle reminds us of the four key elements

producers here have to play with: vines, mountains, sea and *tramuntana* winds, all captured in the bottle.

'It's more than 2,000 years since the Greeks first brought vines to Empordà,' says Dominic Abernethy, the brains behind the Arrels del Ví wine fair and champion of the region's wines, 'but it's only thanks to the huge rise in quality in the past decade that they're finally gaining recognition.' Time for a visit. **D**

Compartir, Cadaqués

Stylish, top-quality, excellent-value sharing plates from an ex-El Bulli team. There's a patio fringed by orange trees, cool dining rooms, attentive service and a wine list with input from former El Bulli sommelier Ferran Centelles. www.compartircadaques.com

ACTIVITIES

Arrels del Ví, Sant Martí d'Empúries

Meet the top wine growers of DO Empordà, taste their wines and buy at ex-cellar prices at this annual, open-air wine fair organised by local resident Dominic Abernethy in the beautiful medieval village of Sant Martí d'Empúries. 8-9 June. www.arrelsdelvi.com

Salvador Dalí House-Museum, Portlligat

A suitably quirky shrine to the surrealist artist, which was originally a fishing shack on the beach and his home from the 1930s until 1982. Booking via the internet is essential. www.salvador-dali.org/museum/portlligat/en_index.html

Archaeological site, Empúries

Extensively excavated remains of Greek and Roman settlements on the coast between L'Escala and Sant Martí. Guided tours run daily in summer. www.mac.cat/eng/branches/empuries

Museu del Suro, Palafrugell

See how the bark is peeled from the local cork oaks and is then boiled, pressed, cleaned, shaved and cut to shape in this former cork factory. www.museudelsuro.cat

How to get there ✈

By plane to Barcelona or Girona, then by train to Figueres or drive from Barcelona via the AP-7 motorway. Otherwise, drive from France via the A9 Languedocienne/Catalan motorway and cross the border at La Jonquera.

Sue Style writes on food, wine and travel for numerous print and online publications, including www.suestyle.com and www.zesterdaily.com