

Eastern Algarve

Charred sardines, fruity olive oil, garlicky clams and piri-piri chicken — the Portuguese port of Olhão is all about simple pleasures

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS:
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We're digging our heels into the sand, splaying our toes, looking for the fast, shiny shimmer of a *conquilha* shell. Scanning the sand for air holes and chasing the bubbles in the seawater we try to catch this tiny but exquisite crustacean as it's dragged rapidly up and down the shore by waves.

It's low tide on the Ilha da Armonia, a sheltered isthmus backing onto the Ria Formosa Estuary National Park and facing out into the wild Atlantic. With a bucket in her hand, my guide, Célia Pedroso, is trying to impart in me a skill she learned as a small girl, when she spent whole summers chasing these sweet, ear-shaped clams with her father. Up and down the beach we see figures doing the same thing, their eyes scanning the outgoing surf for a prize they'll cook simply with garlic, coriander and olive oil or perhaps in a copper *cataplana* with other seafood.

It's a long game, but Célia assures me our patient picking will be worth it. We leave our prize *conquilhas* in a bucket of salted water — which will draw out the sand before we can cook them — to explore the lagoons, backwaters and salt pans that make this place a haven for lovers of seafood and *flor de sal* (sea salt).

This is the Eastern Algarve, far removed from the tourist traps and high-rise blocks lining the more westerly parts of this Portuguese coast. Here, the marshes, salt lakes, sand banks, barrier islands and beaches of the Ria Formosa are a conservation area for birds and marine life. We gulp the ozone in big, fat purifying lungfuls and hop on small boats that ferry us from a jetty in the fishing town of Olhão to sand-spit *ilhas* (islands) with wide, white and often empty beaches. And along channels cutting alongside clear waters that are gently nursing *amêijoas* (clams), *berbigãos* (cockles) and *ostras* (oysters).

Early on Saturday morning we head for Olhão's municipal market, located in two vast



red-brick halls — one for fruit, vegetables and meat; the other for fish so silver they look like they've been intricately made by a jeweller. Open on most other days of the week, it's on a Saturday that the market is truly at its joyful best, with stalls spilling out from under the green cupolas and onto the streets. Locals congregate in the town, bringing cockerels in supermarket trolleys, oysters they've scavenged, scarlet tomatoes, jars of fiery, homemade piri-piri, gnarly-looking pumpkins, and donuts, known as *farturas*. Célia — a food writer as well as co-owner of food tour company Eat Drink Walk — leads me round, pointing out the best of the produce and helping me haggle with toothless, smiling old ladies. We leave with tiny, sweet almonds, bunches of dried oregano, garlic and bay leaves, dried figs, best ends of ham and folar de Olhão, a cake much like an oversized cinnamon roll; sticky with ▶

Clockwise from top left:
Ria Formosa Estuary National Park; Olhão market; grilled fish. Vai e Volta; olive tree



FOUR PLACES FOR A TASTE OF THE EASTERN ALGARVE

Tasca o Galo

Tasca o Galo is a tiny, slightly down-at-heel, often rowdy and authentic *tasca* (cafe) that serves mostly locals with a choice of just two dishes: fresh fish every day of the week except Monday, when the fishing boats don't go out and piri-piri chicken is offered instead. Everything is cooked on the outside grill and served with Algarvian salad — seasoned with freshly picked oregano — and hand-cut chips. Meals come with a jug of local wine decanted from a recycled five-litre water bottle and followed by an espresso and an ice cream or pudding.

How much: From €7 (£5.77) per person, including wine. *Rua da Gazeta*, 7.

Vai e Volta

Tucked away in the old merchant's quarter of Olhão, this *rodizio* (grill) only opens for lunch and serves all-you-can-eat fish, charred and skin-bubbled, with potatoes, gorgeous, sweet potatoes, bread, salad and *açorda* — made with stale bread, olive oil and coriander. A red-faced Maria João, master of the grill, wanders from table to table with a tray of just-charred horse mackerel, salmon, sardines and bream, beseeching customers with her tongs to eat more.

How much: All you can eat, from €8.50 (£7), not including wine. *Largo do Grémio*. [facebook.com/pages/Vai-e-Volta/385339352816](https://www.facebook.com/pages/Vai-e-Volta/385339352816)

Marisqueira Fialho

Skirting the Ria Formosa, this lagoon-front restaurant in the little hamlet of Pinheiro is housed in a tin shack offering simple surroundings and spectacular seafood and rice. In high summer, a long queue regularly forms outside on the sand-strewn single-track road as people vie to get a table at this place, equally as famous for its grilled fish dishes as for its clams and cockles.

How much: Three courses from €30 (£24) per person, without drinks. *EN 1339, Sítio do Pinheiro 8800-118 Tavira*.

Casa Velha

A drive down towards the Spanish border will bring you to Casa Velha, at the heart of the spectacular cliff-side village of Cacela a Velha. The restaurant has a sunny terrace (always busy when the sun shines), affording views across working fields. Try *percebes* (goose barnacles) for €40 (£33) per kilo, or the restaurant's signature dish, razor clam rice, which slides down even easier with a bottle of *vinho verde*, a light, slightly effervescent, greenish Portuguese wine.

How much: From €25 (£20) per person without drinks. *Rua de Cacela Velha, Vila Real de Santo António*

FIVE EASTERN ALGARVE FINDS



FAZENDA NOVA

Beautifully converted Algarve farmhouse amid orchards and countryside, with doubles from €155 (£127), including breakfast. fazendanova.eu

OLHÃO MUNICIPAL MARKET

Almonds, fig and carob cakes, piri-piri sauce, dried oregano — all represent an authentic taste of the Algarve to take home, fresh from the market. *Av. 5 de Outubro.*

MONTEROSA OLIVE OIL

Artisan producer of award-winning olive oil, offering tours, tastings and lunches on the estate, which is home to 49 acres of olive groves. monterosa-oliveoil.com

PASTELARIA TAVIRENSE

Head for this bakery in Tavira, the Algarve's prettiest town, for the checkerboard cake. *Rua Dr Marcelino Franco, 17.*

FLOR DE SAL

Produced around Sapal de Castro Marim, where the ancient process of sluicing seawater into salt pans results in a top-quality salt. Flor de sal is gradually skimmed from the briny surface and sun-dried. castromarim.terrasdesal.com



caramelised sugar and laden with fennel seeds and cinnamon.

When we leave the market, our nostrils are assailed by wafts of charcoal and sizzling fish skin, immediately inducing a craving for grilled sardines. Just around the corner, we find a hole carved in the wall, housing a grill cooking fish so fresh, the fisherman who has just dumped a bucketful is waving goodbye. These iridescent beauties are about to be brushed with sea salt and join their brethren on the flames. *Tasca o Galo* is a salty-old-sea-dog kind of place, with just two choices: today it's salt cod, boiled egg and chickpeas; or those sardines, served with straight-from-the-pan chips. For just €7 (£5.78), we also get Algarvian salad seasoned with oregano, a jug of local wine decanted from a recycled five-litre water bottle, an espresso and a fake Cornetto.

A few miles away, in nearby Moncarapacho, Leo Dyrssen greets us at the Monterosa estate and leads us through olive trees. "We trim them down like bonsai so that we can pick them by hand. It's not good for the tree if you have to use machines to harvest the olives," he explains,

Clockwise from top left: Ria Formosa Estuary National Park; *conquilhas* with garlic and coriander; grilled fish, *Vai e Volta* restaurant

before pointing out a wizened tree that's estimated to be at least 2,000 years old. "It's still producing olives," he says.

In the pressing house, Leo fills plastic espresso cups with the four different oils — *Maçanilha*, *Cobrançosa*, *Verdeal* and *Pical* — and urges us to swirl the oil like a good wine, warm it with our hands for 20 seconds, then smell and taste it slowly. He demonstrates how we must first sip, let the oil slide over the tongue then suck in loud gulps of air to aspirate it. My favourite is the *Maçanilha* — rich, fruity, slightly bitter, with a lasting note of pepper — which turns out to be a gold medal winner.

We return to the waterfront by Olhão market for a truly remarkable sunset; light bouncing off the red bricks, over the cobblestones and down into the *Ria Formosa* as the last of the fishing boats bring in their catch.

Returning to the kitchen of my apartment at country house hotel *Fazenda Nova* with baskets full of market bounty, I watch as Célia lightly cooks those *conquilhas*. When done, we take them outside to a table among carob, olive, pomegranate and orange trees and eat them with bread cooked in the 200-year-old oven at the heart of this old farmstead. Those tiny clams, that olive oil, the dark, crusty bread and a glass of *petillant vinho verde* — gloriously simple and just perfect. □