



We headed north out of Lisbon on IC16. Beside the exit ramp to Leroy Merlin in Amadora, a steep-sided bowl of land sits between the highway, an access road to the Dolce Vita shopping mall and the high-rise public housing of Casal da Mira. Over a guardrail and down a few steps, we see a neat path that divides several small, fenced-in gardens planted with vegetables and sugar cane.

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On the Grogue Trail

Driving around the outskirts of Lisbon, with its confounding web of highways, big box stores and logistical centres, small cultivated patches on unutilized public lands can go almost unnoticed, a blur in the rearview mirror – here a neatly terraced garden on a steep embankment, there a mere wedge of turned sod next to a roundabout, over there row upon row of green shoots leading to a shed of tin and particle board. In the unclaimed spaces between the Portuguese capital and the countryside, the rhythm of agriculture life, quite often Cape Verdean life, is quietly churning on.

In Lisbon, the community from Cape Verde, an archipelago off of the West African coast and a former colony of Portugal, is vast and diverse with a sizable portion having immigrated due to frequent, crippling droughts. From the 1960s onward, Cape Verdean people immigrated to Portugal in great numbers, many of the men finding work in construction and the women in domestic service. In Lisbon, the newcomers were priced out of the city centre and took shelter where they could find it, often in improvised neighbourhoods, or favelas, that bloomed around the outskirts of Lisbon in the late twentieth century. Since the 1990s, the municipality has been in the process of demolishing favelas and relocating residents to social housing.

In these communities, Cape Verdean traditions flourished, and throughout the city a crop of restaurants appeared where Cape Verdean food, music, and creole language could reliably be found. But in those gardens on the side of the highway and behind closed doors in the favela, another significant phenomenon was taking place, as sugar cane was harvested, pressed and the juice distilled: a Cape Verde style rum, known as grogue, took roots in Lisbon soil.

Pedro Valera, an academic at Coimbra University who has studied the urban gardens of Lisbon, said: “The Portuguese took the sugar cane/slavery complex to the islands of the



Atlantic [five hundred years ago]. And, today, the Cape Verdeans, the descendants of that brutal colonialist past, are bringing the sugar cane cultivation to the Lisbon suburbs. It's all part of the colonial past – it's the past coming back again.”

As we approached one of the roadside gardens, we saw Senhor Cecilio hack and slash at the base of thick green sugar cane stalks with a machete and hoist several plants onto his shoulder. Through the leaves we could see the braces of the Vasco da Gama Bridge crossing the Tejo River to the steady hum of cars whizzing north on the E1. We were in Talude, one of Lisbon's last remaining favelas, at the invitation of Rolando Borges, a community activist and founder of the Associação para a Mudança e Representação Transcultural (AMRT), an association that serves the residents of the neighbourhood. Rolando grew up here after moving from the Cape









three men seated at a picnic table sipping a cocktail called *santxu e kabelu*, made from grogue mixed with fresh sugar cane juice. They were settling up with Senhor Cecilio before making their way back to the suburb of Oeiras with a large haul of grogue. They knew the grogue of Senhor Cecilio well, and swore that his was the best in all of Lisbon. "It's better than whiskey," they told us. "It cures Covid," one said, laughing. Toasts were made in honour of the grogue master.

Senhor Cecilio himself is a youthful man with a shaved head and bright eyes. He emigrated to Lisbon from the island of Santiago in 1993 to work in construction. He said he'd been making grogue since he was 15 years old. He offered us a tour of the place.

The collection of garages and sheds spun off of an open-air courtyard where thick vines meshed into a lattice for shade. Aside from the hangout space at the entrance, each area was dedicated to a specific phase of grogue production. Senhor Cecilio walked us back to the trapiche, past neat bundles of cane stacked in separate piles. These belonged to a sugar

cane farmer who brought them here to transform into grogue. Senhor Cecilio's payment was a percentage of the grogue produced, he explained. He flipped a switch on the trapiche and the lightbulb hanging above it dimmed to brown. It was a desk-top machine like an industrial document shredder. Senhor Cecilio sent footlong tubes of sugarcane in the backend and stiff, pulpy ribbons exited the front. A pipe coming off of the side of the machine funnelled the freshly pressed sugarcane juice off into a tub. "That's the *calda*," Senhor Cecilio explained, catching the juice in a can. Rolando pointed to a mat of shredded sugarcane at our feet, "It's for the animals."

Passing to another room, the pungent smell of fermenting sugar cane juice mixed with smoke from a wood fire. Senhor Cecilio removed the lid on one of the blue barrels, revealing a thick mash of pulpy *calda* letting off that sweet and sour smell.

Verde island of Santiago at the age of ten. "All of this – corn, sugar cane, grogue, *cachupa* – is a symbol of resistance," he said. His organisation began with the goal to provide running water and electricity in the community, but it has since expanded its scope of interests to include the preservation of Cape Verdean culture. "Making grogue is a human activity, a method of survival. We are all born with the right to survive," he added.

Rolando works with members of his community, including grogue producers like Senhor Cecilio, to preserve the memory of Cape Verdean Lisbon as his community is threatened with destruction. Rolando and his organisation have plans to build a small museum of Cape Verdean culture in Talude which would feature grogue and, hopefully, lead to the legal production of Lisbon grogue in the future.

Back at Senhor Cecilio's distillery, we met





A note on terminology: Grogue – derived from the English “grog” and usually spelled *grogue* in Cape Verdean Creole – is believed to be named for the 18th century British Admiral whose nickname was “Old Grog”, who instituted the ration of a mixed alcoholic drink to British sailors who called it grogue in his honour. The term’s use spread throughout the world on British ships and probably took hold in Cape Verde in the coal yards of Sao Vicente in the 19th century when the British presence in the islands was strong.



Here it sits fermenting for two weeks in the cold months, one week in the summer, he explained.

On the other side of the room, a friend of Senhor Cecilio's in a blue and white striped smock fed logs into the fire blazing beneath the still. The copper onion dome, battered but handsome, sat atop the fire box. Tubes ran over from the still into a tub and to another spout that emerged from a wall in the stone tub. Senhor Cecilio took a half coconut shell and filled it from the stream of grogue trickling into a blue barrel. Offering it around to us and then tasting it himself, he told us that he's using a family recipe that goes back generations. His father and grandfather were all grogue makers in Cape Verde.

Grogue hits the mouth like butter and gives off a fruity smell, vaguely of bananas. The initial sensation of melted down candy is followed by a fume, an alcoholic reminder that this is not child's play. At 40 percent alcohol, grogue is on the lighter side of rum, but the production style is the same. Made from fermented and distilled sugar cane juice, as opposed to syrup or molasses, grogue is most closely related to Brazilian cachaça. Unlike its well-known cousins, grogue not only never made it to the industrial level, it barely made it out of Cape Verde. Outside of the Cape Verde community, grogue is not very well known.

Professor of African Studies at Lisbon University Maria Manuel Torrão has written much about sugar cane in Cape Verde. "Sugar cane was planted in all Portuguese Imperial spaces, but in Cape Verde it was not good. The land didn't permit it," she said. She explained that what sugar was produced in Cape Verde was only for domestic use by landowning families. One of its byproducts, grogue, was produced and consumed by enslaved Africans on the island.

After finishing their drinks, the three men from Oeiras offered us a ride back to town and we accepted. There was so much grogue in the trunk of the car that the driver waved us on to



walk up the hill. The four of us walked up the dirt path to the top of the hill, using our phones to light our way. At the top of the path was a gravel road that cut sharp switchbacks across the lip of a cliff overlooking the valley of Loures. Along the road sat small, neat one-story homes — lights on — beside piles of rubble, walls pushed in, bathroom tiles and broken sinks. Above, the dark sky was crisscrossed by wiring strung between heavy electricity towers crowned by flashing lights, presumably as a warning to aeroplanes. On the other side of the road, tall reeds were cinched into improvised fencing made from scrap particle board, discarded wooden door panels encircling dozens of small cane patches. Rolando said that if this place was completely destroyed, they'd plant elsewhere, wherever there was water. "Where there are Cape Verdean people, there is sugar cane," he said.