

story and photos by Linda Villano

# The Azores Surprise

A little-known Atlantic island is a tea lover's delight



As Virginia, there is tea growing in Europe.

A thousand miles off the coast of Portugal in the Atlantic Ocean is Sao Miguel, the largest of nine volcanic islands that form an archipelago called the Azores. I visited this fabled lost city of Atlantis in April—I flew into Ponta Delgada, was welcomed by a rush of crisp, startlingly fresh air, and then piloted my rental car there.

Though Sao Miguel is a relatively small island (293 square miles), lush plant life abounds, with bursts of manicured color at every turn. The landscape is blanketed by flowers—namely hydrangea, azalea and *Camellia japonica* in white, red, pink and mixed hues. Driving around, one sees salty ship-ping ports with tall-mast vessels and wooden dinghies moored side-by-side.

There are the thermal springs in the Furnas district, where enormous ferns and sulfur pits create a prehistoric-like environment. You'll also pass waterfalls, craggy cliffs, pineapple farms, cows, quaint villages, churches, cows, corn, more cows and water, water everywhere.

But, most importantly, you will also find tea.

Sao Miguel is 39 miles long and 10 miles wide (at its widest point). With a population of approximately 138,000, it can feel to a visitor as if you alone exist in many corners of this magnificent paradise. Its history, like the that of the rest of the archipelago, is shaped by trade and travel: Discovered in the 1400s by Gonçalo Velho Cabral, the Azores became a rest stop for ships returning from India spice runs on their way to Brazil, then from Brazil on their way back to mainland Portugal. The Azores is now an autonomous region of Portugal.

During my recent visit, I met Hermano Mota, who owns Gorreana Tea Estate with his wife, Mathilde Hintze-Mota. Established in 1888, Gorreana has been continuously owned and operated by one family for five generations. After a leisurely tour of the factory and a stroll through the garden, I asked Mota, "Why tea?" He said, "Yes, 'Why tea?' is a good question. The answer is, 'Oranges.'"

Due to fertile soil and a temperate climate (winter temperature averages fall to just 52 degrees Fahrenheit, while the summer average is 77), agriculture has long thrived on the archipelago. Mota explained that the Azores was an orange-exporting giant in the

17th century, with most of the crop going to Great Britain. After an orange blight destroyed the lucrative industry in the 1860s, the Ministry of Agriculture sought replacements. Tea (*Camellia sinensis*) was one option—but it wasn't a new arrival for the area.

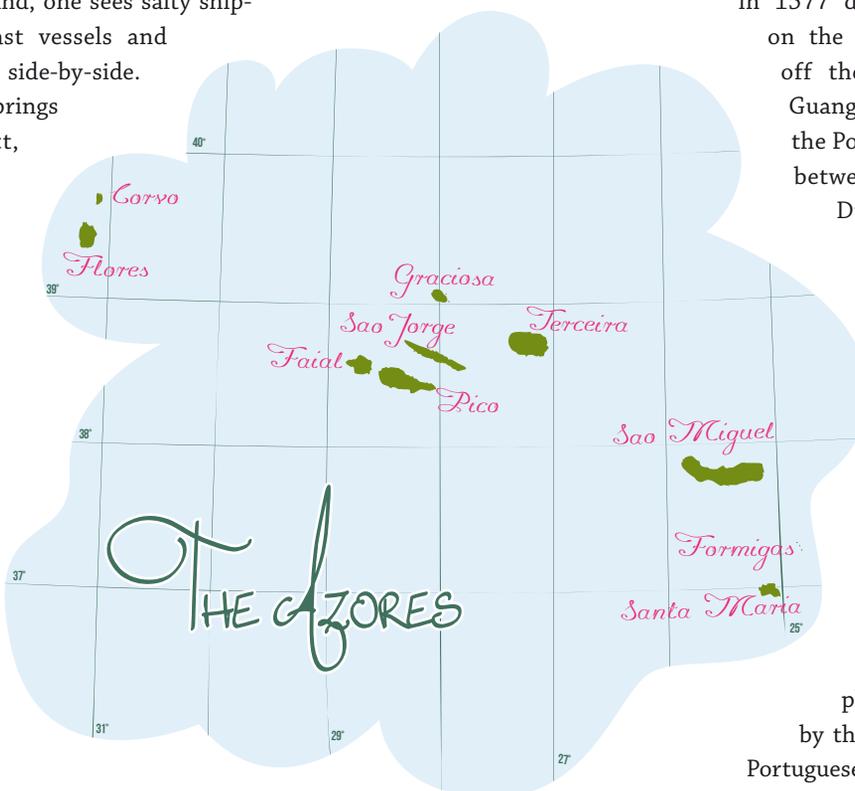
Portugal, it turns out, has a tea history stretching back to 1560, when a Portuguese Jesuit named Father Jasper de Cruz became perhaps the first European to experience and write about *cha*. It is interesting to note that the Portuguese (and many Eastern Europeans) use the Cantonese word *cha* as opposed to the Fukien word *te*, which was adopted by most Europeans. This is likely due to the location of Portugal's trading post, which was created

in 1577 during the Ming Dynasty on the island of Macau, directly off the coast of Canton (now Guangzhou). In the early 1600s, the Portuguese became "brokers" between the Chinese and the

Dutch East Indies Company, which brought tea and other goods to parts of Europe. In 1622, Duchess Catherine of Braganza married King Charles II, and she is credited with bringing the tea-drinking custom—which was quite popular among the Portuguese elite—to England.

In the early 1800s, tea plants were given as a gift by the Emperor of China to the Portuguese King Joao VI, who was then residing in Brazil. The plants flourished in Rio de Janeiro gardens. After the orange blight, tea seeds were brought from Brazil to Sao Miguel and planted throughout the northern coastal region of Ribeira Grande. *Camellia sinensis* was already growing as an ornamental plant on the island. The new crop, however, was intended for cultivation, manufacture and exportation to Europe. Two Chinese natives, a tea expert and an interpreter from Macau were brought in to assist the project in 1878, and the tea plants prospered in 14 gardens.

Of those first 14 tea gardens in Sao Miguel, two remain: Gorreana Tea Estate and Porto Formoso. Gorreana produces about 90,000 pounds per year, and its output is shipped beyond Portugal, which means it's the only commercial tea grown in Europe. Seventy percent of the estate's production is black tea (orange pekoe, pekoe and broken leaf grades), and the rest is green. The garden is 79 acres in size, and the highest-elevation bushes on the property sit at 2,000 feet. Harvest time runs from March through August/September, depending on the weather



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**TEA BY THE SEA:** Hermano Mota (left) is the fifth-generation owner of Gorreana Tea Estate. He claims his bushes have adapted to the area's salty winds.

conditions. Gorreana wholesales throughout the Azores, mainland Portugal and the Portuguese archipelago Madeira, as well as in Germany, France and—as of recently—the United States.

In the oldest section of the garden, one can still find the variety Chinese *jat* (*Camellia sinensis* var. *sinensis*). However, in 1948 Assamica tea plants (*Camellia sinensis* var. *assamica*) from India were introduced and are now generously planted throughout Gorreana. In the late 1960s and 1970s, the lava walls and fences protecting the tea plants from the harsh salty winds of the Atlantic were gradually removed. Mota, with a twinkle in his eye, refers to his plants as “*Camellia azorica*,” claiming they are a unique type of bush, one that is resistant to these salty winds. It’s also noteworthy that no fertilizers or feeds are used on the bushes. Gorreana’s teas are grown organically (though they aren’t certified), and Mota sends soil samples at the end of every harvest to a lab in Germany to test for toxins. He is proud to share

the results with anyone purchasing the tea and says the soil has always tested toxin-free.

Another fascinating aspect of Gorreana: There is no nursery—no cuttings, no hybrids and no clonals. The garden is self-propagating. The plants flower, the bees cross-pollinate and new plants grow. It’s that simple.

Harvesting, which was done by hand in the past by women, is now a five-man operation—four hold a harvesting machine, while one person guides it. The plants are located very close to the factory, so once there, the tea leaves—packaged in large bundles—are hoisted up to a second-story loft by a hook and wench. A worker on the second level opens the loft doors and the tea is loaded. There the leaves are withered in traditional wooden troughs and fanned from below. Several trips from the field to the troughs are made each day. The next day, these leaves are manufactured into black or green tea using Marshall Machinery

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**PRETTY THINGS IN SAO MIGUEL:** Porto Formosa; Tea pudding.

products that date back to the 1940s and earlier. One interesting piece is a wooden steamer (or “sterilizer,” according to the wall note) from the 1920s. This is still used for the first step of green tea production. The factory machines run on a combination of hydro-powered electricity and local electricity—the hydro source has actually been in operation since the 1920s and is fueled by an underground stream running through the property.

Gorreana Tea Estate’s working factory is also a museum that is open seven days a week. The free, self-guided tour takes a curious tea enthusiast or tourist through the details of the manufacturing process. First, one passes through the rooms with machines, moving into the tea-bagging area. The visitor then arrives at a tasting station where ceramic cups and thermal press pots allow the sampling of several teas: green, black OP and black pekoe. This area contains memorabilia galore, including tea-making accouterments, scales, ceramic and metal teapots, and ceramic tea cups. The far wall is lined with large picture windows framing a spectacular view—rows of tea plants, gentle slopes and the mighty Atlantic beyond.

About a mile down the road from Gorreana sits another tea garden and factory called Porto Formosa. Whereas Gorreana Tea Estate is clearly a working operation, Porto Formoso is tourist-driven. But it is charming nonetheless. The neatly painted, stucco-walled entrance proudly displays a large, black cast-iron teapot with stylized lettering bearing the estate’s name. Upon passing through the small gate, the visitor encounters another view of sloped rows of carefully manicured tea bushes that seem to eventually blend with the vast ocean below. There are flowers in bloom, a tea nursery to the left and a stone path to the right leading to the white stucco factory/tearoom. A knowledgeable guide leads the complimentary tour, where you’ll see male and female tea pickers’ garb, complete with black gloves (with cut-off fingers) and wicker baskets (also made on

the island). Objects such as a manual wooden tea-rolling board, a large pan-frying bowl and old tea chests are displayed and clearly explained on wall placards.

Porto Formoso was in operation from the 1920s through the 1980s, after which time it was abandoned and neglected. The current owners revived the property and the tea fields, then reopened in 1998. This is also a working factory, though it manufactures only black tea and sells exclusively to the Azores islands, Madeira (another Portuguese island, located southeast of the Azores) and mainland Portugal. Beautiful, handmade paper packages, locally made ceramic tea cups and teapots with traditional white and blue accents are found in the tearoom. Here I was happy to also find locally made tea liquor. The stone-walled room is rustic and cozy, and the open kitchen in one corner displays different-sized crocks, island-made wicker baskets, a large cast-iron kettle and flats of young *Camellia sinensis* plants. I sat at one of the dozen or so rough-hewn wooden tables and chairs, sipping a freshly steeped cup of Azorean black tea while a gentle breeze blew through the open but curtained windows. A more relaxing moment I couldn’t recall.

## UNEXPECTED TEA HAVEN

I thought my Azorean tea experience had ended. However, during the last few days of my stay, there were a few more surprises. In a local market in Furnas district, I found locally made hard green tea candy. The ingredients were simple: sugar, vinegar and green tea. The vendor, amused by my excitement, told me quite matter-of-factly that the tea ingredient was from Gorreana. Then the day before departing, I enjoyed an excellent meal at a scenic spot overlooking the Atlantic in Ribeira Grande. I was thrilled to see Pudim de Cha on the dessert menu. Again, the server proudly reported that the tea was from the island’s very own Gorreana Tea Estate. Who knew the lost city of Atlantis would be a tea mecca? ☘