

Vine and dandy

Equipped with a corkscrew and an industrial-sized tin of Andrews Liver Salts, **Matthew Hirtes** embarks on a tour of the vineyards and bodegas of **Lanzarote's** winelands



It was the not-so-well known German poet and translator Johann Heinrich Voss who rather more famously pronounced: "Who does not love wine,

women, and song, remains a fool his whole life long." So being, as I like to think, nobody's fool, I set off for my sojourn in Lanzarote's La Geria region with my wife Cristina and a case full of our favourite CDs to play in our hire car's stereo.

From the airport in the south of the island, it's a mere 20-minute drive to the centre of Lanzarote and our first vineyard, El Grifo. El Grifo lies three kilometres away from the noted landmark, Monumento al Campesino, on the LZ-30 heading in the direction of Uga. The oldest bodega in the Canaries and one of the ten oldest in the whole of Spain, it has been making wine since at least 1775 – the earliest date of an inscription in stone found on the premises – initially for use in mass at church %



Despite climatic setbacks vine growth prospers on Lanzarote's rich, volcanic soil

An esteemed architect and artist, Manrique did much to preserve Lanzarote's rugged beauty. It is thanks to his sterling efforts to avoid the perils of mass-market tourism that high-rise buildings remain banned on his home island. Wine-fuelled carousing, on the other hand, was certainly not discouraged. By anyone. Indeed over indulging in the local tittle appears to be a practice that has been going on for some time, even as far back as Shakespearean times. The Bard's Falstaff, for example, is indelicately described in 'The Merry Wives of Windsor' as "given over to fornication, taverns, Canarian wine and the wind".

Displayed in the museum stands various machinery. Most has been imported, including one pioneered by France's Louis Pasteur. Garcia reveals that the family also bought a job lot of new technology from some Germans who relocated to Lanzarote to open a new vineyard but gave up in response to the treacherous conditions.

The white Malvasia grape forms the key component of most of El Grifo's (and the region's) output. Their most popular wines, which are exported to locations as spread out as the UK, US and Japan, include sweet, semi-dry Moscatel de Ana – a variety named after a girl born in the El Grifo cellar at the turn of the 19th century – and Canari, a dessert wine that doubles as an aperitif. All of which I can personally vouch for following the tasting session that concluded the museum tour. A session

following the Spanish conquest of the island. They currently produce in the region of 700,000 litres of vino per year. That's around 500,000 new bottles available for consumption annually.

The story of wine production at El Grifo in particular, and Lanzarote in general, has an against-all-odds theme to it. That's why the level of production varies so much. El Grifo's Alberto Garcia Morales, who gives my wife and me an informative private tour of the museum, which attracts around 50,000 visitors a year, highlights the unique conditions that should make Lanzarote a no-go area for viniculturists: "The land's very dry, there's a lack of rain and the

lunch with his young daughter in La Geria's bar/restaurant. We follow his example and order some tortilla, Spanish omelette, to keep our hunger at bay. Although in my case, as my wife is chauffeuring me around, it has as much to do with lining the stomach as filling it.

After our snack, we follow Alberto down to the vines. I feel like Neil Armstrong encountering the moon for the first time as the surrounding landscape is decidedly lunar in appearance. Lopez-Pelez Fernandez explains how the vines are planted in holes excavated in the island's volcanic rock. The holes are then refilled with picon, volcanic ash. This retains the morning dew and maintains the spongy texture of the soil below, soil which I feel after Alberto metamorphoses into a terrier before my very eyes to dig a hole to retrieve some.

The vines are protected from the wind by Los Zocos, semi-circular walls built from volcanic rock. As we head back to taste some wine straight from the stainless steel tank they now use instead of barrels, I take a Patsy-from-Ab-Fab-like stumble. It's not only the alcohol coursing through my bloodstream that's to blame. It's pretty difficult terrain to navigate at the best of times. In the early days of production, La Geria would use camels rather than horses to transport the grapes from the vine as they were far more suited to walking in these conditions.

The first wine we sample is red, which I nearly spit out when Albert informs me that they used to add bull's blood to it. Thankfully, this practice is now prohibited by law and I



strong wind doesn't help either."

While last year is considered one of the best vintages, 2004 was a bad year in that a heatwave singed most of the crop. The property where the family who own El Grifo used to live and work houses the present-day museum. The idea for its creation, along with the use of a griffin as the company's logo, came from family friend César Manrique (1919-92).

curtailed by my wife discreetly pointing out, by stopping our host pouring me another glass and suggesting I treat fellow visitors to a rapidly deteriorating impersonation of Jilly Goolden, that we had to make tracks for our next refuelling stop: La Geria, a vineyard targeting the local market more than the foreign one.

Here, we surprise another Alberto – Alberto Lopez-Pelez Fernandez – who's enjoying an early

manage to salvage the wine that was heading for the floor, much to the chagrin of my wife who would like to see me spit more and swallow less.

What seems to be the sweetest white known to man, and my favourite of our whole trip, follows before a bone-dry white which only serves to accentuate the former's honeyish properties. Lopez-Pelez Fernandez explains that the wine %



Above: El Grifo vineyard, responsible for some of the island's most esteemed wines

will always taste better out of the tank than a bottle because of its more expansive flavour.

Lopez-Pelez Fernandez then leads us into his laboratory. Here, I enjoy some of his work in progress: a liqueur made from figs. It tastes fine to me, but our guide scurries about to locate a test tube. He inserts the mysterious ingredient and invites me to sample the beverage again. He's right – it's even better. All hail sugary water, which turns out to be the secret ingredient that he adds. We bid farewell to Lopez-Pelez Fernandez before embarking on some sightseeing which doesn't require turning off any roads or even stopping if you're in a hurry, which you almost always aren't as you adapt to the slow-paced lifestyle of Lanzarote.

On the drive towards Tinajo we are treated to the towering vista of Montanas del Fuego, serving up as stunning a view as their name would suggest. They are one of the main attractions of the Parque Nacional de Timanfaya, an environment that is conserved as a monument to Lanzarote's past – which, wouldn't you happen to know, was created by that man Manrique.

After moseying round Tinajo for a short while, we head off to nearby Tiagua and El Tenique, otherwise known as 'Orlando's Place'. Greeted at the door by a waiter who proffers fresh, soft goat's cheese and a glass of wine, it's the warmest welcome I've received in years. We order a bottle of El Grifo semi-dry from an extensive wine list including all the local vineyards and not just because Senior Garcia

Morales and his senorita sit at a nearby table. After the wine arrives, so do my wife's sardines. To her bemusement (and my amusement) Orlando himself ignites them with a lighter. Recovering to blow them out, my wife proceeds to attack them with gusto and declare them the best sardines she's ever eaten – some compliment coming from a native Gran Canarian.

The menu includes one set Canarian dish a day. When we visit, it's goat – a meat typically reserved for special occasions in these parts. Yet El Tenique's traditional and modern at the same time, not least my dessert, a sweet potato and

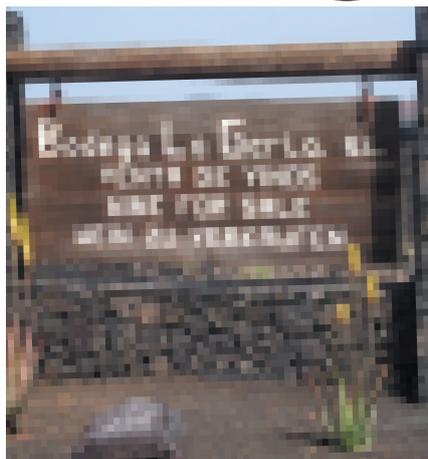
kiwi mousse. As we retire to an outdoor table, Orlando brings us a complimentary glass of 'licor de moras', a homemade blackberry liqueur – the perfect end to a perfect meal.

We make our merry way, I, it has to be said, more merrily than my wife, to our car. I look towards the occupant of the driver's seat, my beautiful wife, turn on the stereo to play some music, and ponder what's missing... Ah yes. Wine. Vineyards here we come! ml

British Airways, operated by GB Airways, flies to Lanzarote from Gatwick. For further information visit ba.com

Where to sample Lanzarote's finest vintages

Making a splash



El Grifo

The free-entry museum is open every day of the week (excluding public holidays) from 10.30am to 6.30pm. Contact details: El Grifo, El Islote 121, San Bartolome ☎ +34 928 524951
 📍 www.elgrifo.com

La Geria

Contact details: La Geria, Ctra. de La Geria, Yaiza ☎ +34 928 173178
 📍 www.lageria.com

El Tenique

Open 12.00pm to 12.00am. Closed Sunday evenings and all day Monday. Contact details: El Tenique, Ctra Arrecife-Tinajo, Tiagua ☎ +34 928 529856