

Espinho

Diane Smyth, 2021

The fishermen in the Bairro Piscatório, Espinho, north Portugal, still use the traditional Arte-xávega, a type of trawling that involves fine nets. Working with two wooden boats, local crews send the nets out to sea then haul them back to shore with the catch; arte-xávega is labour-intensive and hard, but it's been done this way for centuries. It's remarkable it's survived, and all the more so when you consider the history of Espinho – a once-sleepy fishing village that was rapidly transformed by industrialisation.

Espinho's pristine beaches started to attract a new bourgeoisie from the 1830s, but its fate was sealed in 1873, when a new railway station opened in town. Linking Espinho with nearby Porto, this line led to huge growth, the village becoming a parish by 1889 and a municipality not long after. A grid of streets was built and electricity, telephones and telegraphs introduced; cafes, hotels and several spas opened, and in 1890 British Port wine traders established a golf club.

Somehow the fishing community survived, living in a small Bairro bounded on two sides by the golf course and the railway. The other two sides are delineated by the sea and the local museum, which is housed in a former canning factory. Opened in 1894 by four brothers, made rich by colonial Brazil, this factory once dominated Espinho. Initially it focussed on local sardines, said to be exceptional because they didn't have scales, but Fábrica de Conservas Brandão, Gomes & C.^a was ambitious, its company motto 'Always improving'. Expanding into other produce, it started exporting around the world, its preserves proving particularly popular in Brazil.

One of the company's old adverts shows a bird flying over the ocean, its beak holding a tin in place of a fish. It's a neat metaphor for a certain approach to nature, one which conceives of the world in terms of resources, waiting to be commoditised into so many cans. It speaks of a confidence in mastering nature, a confidence perhaps also evident in the railway and the rapidly-modernised town; this sense of mastery perhaps also underscores the tourism industry in Espinho, which is now its main source of income. There's the golf course, which takes the countryside and landscapes it for fun, and then there are the beaches, transformed into picture-perfect resorts. Even the sea seems there for the taking, Porto's big, modern boats efficiently extracting fish.

But where there's confidence there can also be hubris, and Espinho's also seen that. The 'Always improving' Fábrica de Conservas Brandão, Gomes & C.^a went bust in 1986, and modern fishing methods have rapidly depleted stocks. Meanwhile the fishing community in Bairro Piscatório lives on. Arte-xávega is sustainable and, with faces and bodies weathered by the elements and the force of the sea, the locals have a healthy respect for nature. Though they take fish, they don't take too many and, though there isn't much money about, they've also resisted commoditising themselves. One of the fishermen went to Porto, to try working the company boats; he soon came back, he told photographer Vincen Beeckman, because it made him feel like a slave. At least in Espinho he's living and working with friends.

Beeckman first went to Espinho in 2016, stumbling on the town by accident and then happening on the Bairro Piscatório. He's been back ten times since, hanging out with the locals and photographing them and their lives. His images show people outside, often together, maybe enjoying the sun or freshly cooked fish; they also show flashes of everyday creativity, a DIY barbeque, perhaps, or a hand-painted sign. His shots don't show fishing in action, the beach, or the colourful boats; such images are too evidentiary, he says, he's not a photojournalist there on commission. Maybe they're also too commercial, the kind of shot used to sell Espinho to tourists. For Beeckman photography works more like a language, helping him communicate without words; he can't speak much Portuguese and the locals can't speak French or English, but each

time he goes he takes images, and that's given them a way to bond. Together they've staged an exhibition in the Bairro Piscatório, gluing photographs up on the walls; he sees this book as a kind of family album, where the family in question is the whole community. For the locals' part, they're kind-hearted enough to be welcoming, to invite him to stay and to share. Without wanting to romanticise, it seems both he and they know how to share, not take. They know how to happily co-exist, both with each other and with nature.