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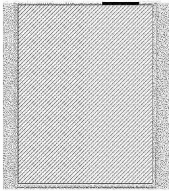
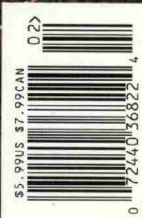
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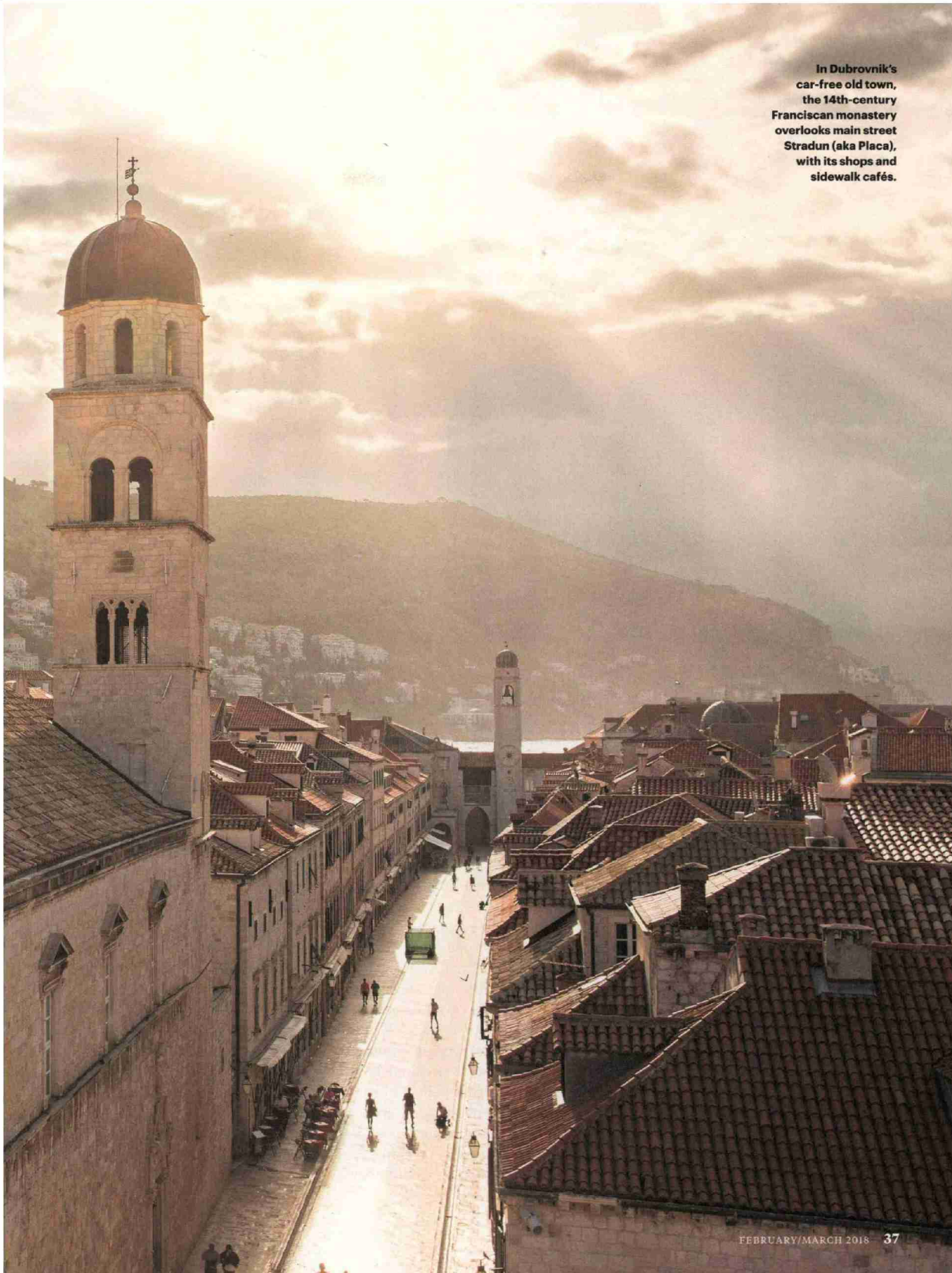
Croatian charisma and a feast of flavors

SEA

in Europe's next great dining destination

SAVOR

BY **DAVID FARLEY**
PHOTOGRAPHS BY **SARAH COGHILL**



In Dubrovnik's car-free old town, the 14th-century Franciscan monastery overlooks main street Stradun (aka Placa), with its shops and sidewalk cafés.

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Y FRIEND MARIJA PAPAK, A BORN-AND-BRED

Dubrovnik denizen, is about to open a street-food stall in her Croatian hometown with a focus that is surprisingly radical for this coastal city: hyper-seasonal and super-local snacks. I am shadowing her on a tour of area farms to forage for hard-to-find artisanal cheese, sausage, and other

Dalmatian delights. First stop: the farm of Marko Bede and his wife, Jele, outside the village of Lisac, lodged up in the steep hills of the Dalmatian Coast about an hour's drive north of Dubrovnik. Before we get down to business—sampling products from the farm—the Bedes want to see if a New Yorker can milk a farm animal. Gamedly I pull again and again at a goat's udder: nothing. Not even a squirt of milk. As a farmer, I'm a failure. But as a lover of Dalmatian food, I am in exactly the right place.

Phrases like “farm-to-table,” “snout-to-tail,” “locavore,” and other parlance of the new-food movement that has transformed tables throughout the world in the last decade have only just sauntered through southeastern Europe. I've been traveling regularly to Dubrovnik for the last decade and a half and I could never really understand why restaurant food here has always been so mediocre: flaccid fried calamari, overbaked pizza, staid pasta dishes.

Then again, take one glance at Dubrovnik, and you'll realize that this eye candy of a town doesn't need to serve good food to attract visitors. The indigo Adriatic Sea and its alluring beaches form the backdrop for a balmy medieval town lined with glistening white limestone-paved streets and encircled by 80-foot-tall stone walls. Starring roles in *Game of Thrones* and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* have also helped put the city on the 21st-century grand tour itinerary.

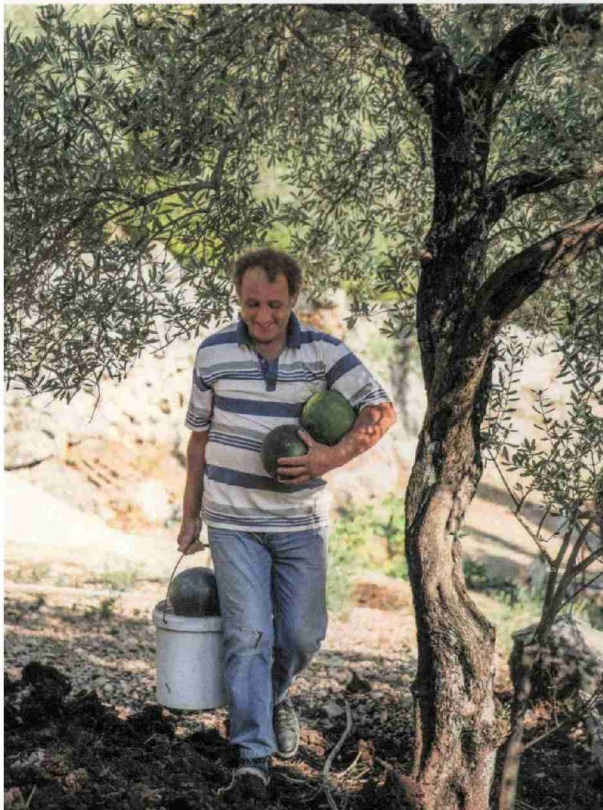
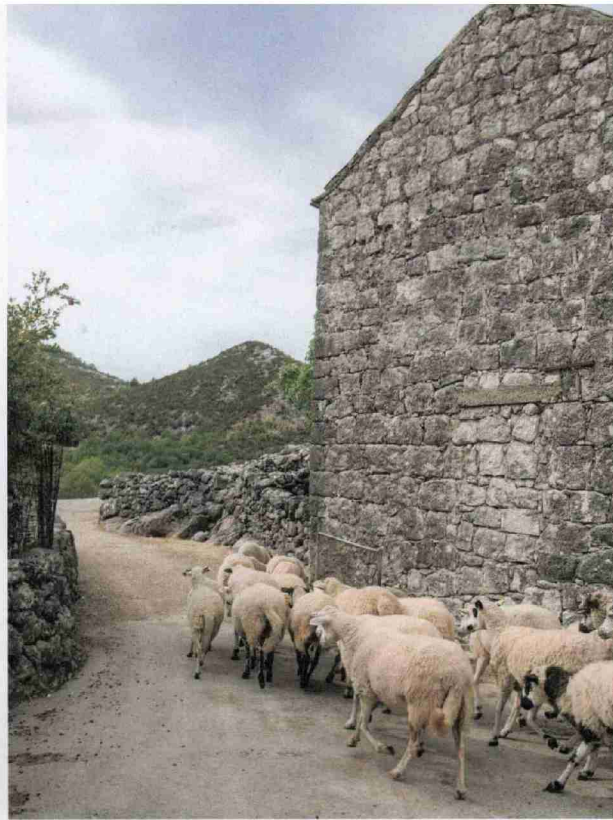
I've always wondered if Dubrovnik's inability to keep pace with culinary trends has roots in the communist period, when Croatia was part of Yugoslavia. Or was it the war that ravaged the Balkan region 25 years ago? Or something else?

The good news: Dubrovnik's dining landscape is changing quickly. The city recently welcomed its first artisanal coffee spot (Cogito), serious cocktail bars (including Bar by Azur), its inaugural craft brewery (Dubrovnik Beer Company), and its first



Back to the country (clockwise from top left): on the Bede family farm in Lisac, weighing tea leaves and herding sheep; in the Konavle Valley, freshly made cheese and ripe produce on Miho Kukuljica's farm

NG MAPS

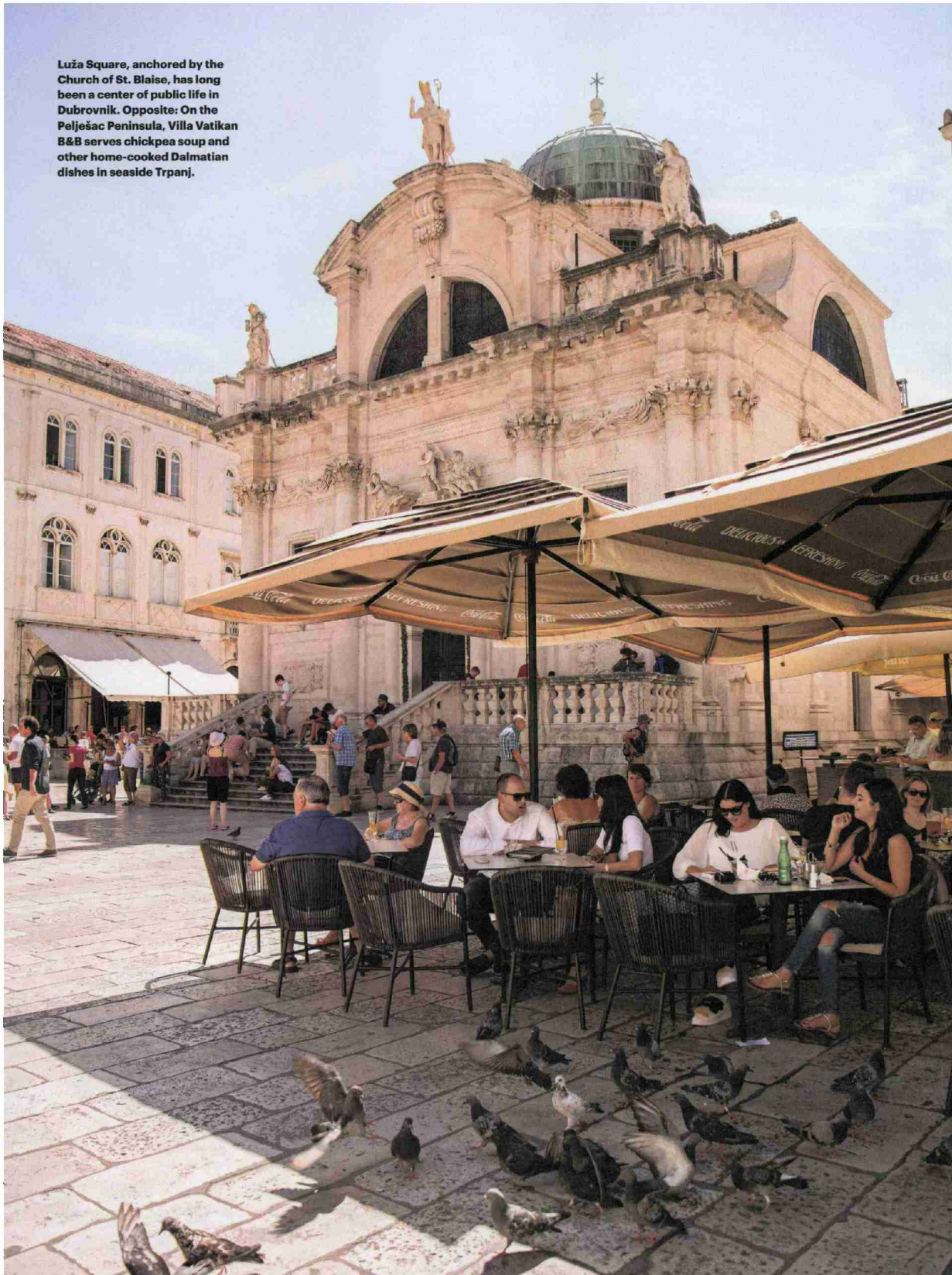




A bounty of local shellfish prepared at home by chef Marija Papak includes sea eggs, sea urchins, deepwater prawns, wild oysters, mussels, Noah's ark shell, and limpets.



Luža Square, anchored by the Church of St. Blaise, has long been a center of public life in Dubrovnik. Opposite: On the Pelješac Peninsula, Villa Vatikán B&B serves chickpea soup and other home-cooked Dalmatian dishes in seaside Trpanj.





roaming pop-up restaurant (Gypsy Table). But a group of young, food-obsessed people are taking it into their own hands to make a change in the way people eat here. Is this the food revolution I've been waiting for? Moreover, are Dubrovnik and the surrounding Dalmatian coast—which stretches 340 miles, from Rab Island in Croatia to Kotor in Montenegro—on the verge of becoming Europe's next great dining destination?

ONE OF THE KEY PLAYERS, I quickly learn, is Marija Papak herself. I first met Marija in December 2016 during the city's month-and-a-half-long Winter Festival. As I walked down Stradun, the main thoroughfare of the fully pedestrianized Old Town, the scent of grilled sausages mingled with briny oysters, and Croatian folk tunes seeped from speakers affixed to roofs. I'd had my fill of mollusks and meat, offered at nearly every food stand. But then I came across Marija's stand, which served classic

Dalmatian fare with a twist: She used artisanal products she'd found by scouring villages up and down the coast. She even sold something called a "sea egg." When I asked her about food, she glowed with passion. Her goal, she told me, was to bring real food to the people of this city, to reintroduce them to the dishes their great-grandparents ate, which were still being purveyed in tucked away villages. She loathed the fact that so many of her Dubrovnik friends had come to rely on the two major super-market chains, Pemo and Konzum, sprinkled around town. She wanted to acquaint them with a better way of eating. "You should come with me to meet some of these villagers," she said.

And so here I am, six months later, trying to milk a goat. I am soon relieved of my duties, and we all gravitate into the farmhouse for an epicurean feast.

A few days later we're at it again. This time we're in her car snaking through the back roads of the fertile Konavle Valley in the hills southeast of Dubrovnik. As our car twists and turns, Marija tells me more about her forthcoming street-food stall. "Wild asparagus," she says, "is actually only in season for about 10 days. I'll only serve it for those 10 days. Then I'll move on to whatever is in season next."

When Marija and I pull into the village of Mihanići, she tells me we are visiting one of her favorite farmers to try out some of his cheeses and cured meats.

Within minutes of arriving at the home of 51-year-old Miho Kukuljica, his wife, Kate, is filling our glasses with homemade *travarica*, a grape brandy infused with local herbs. We raise our glasses, toast "živjeli!"—to life—and then, down the hatch. Their long wooden table fills up with soft, grassy-tasting, one-day-old cheese, one-month-old cheese, and cheese marinated in olive oil. Then there are the pork products: overflowing plates of pancetta, prosciutto, thick slices of sausage, all derived from the fatty *pata negra* pig. There are fluffy slices of country bread, bottles of olive oil, and pickled peppers. Carafes of Chardonnay and a red blend of Shiraz, Merlot, and Cabernet Sauvignon materialize, along with jugs of walnut and cherry liqueur.

Even more remarkable is when Miho says, "I made everything on

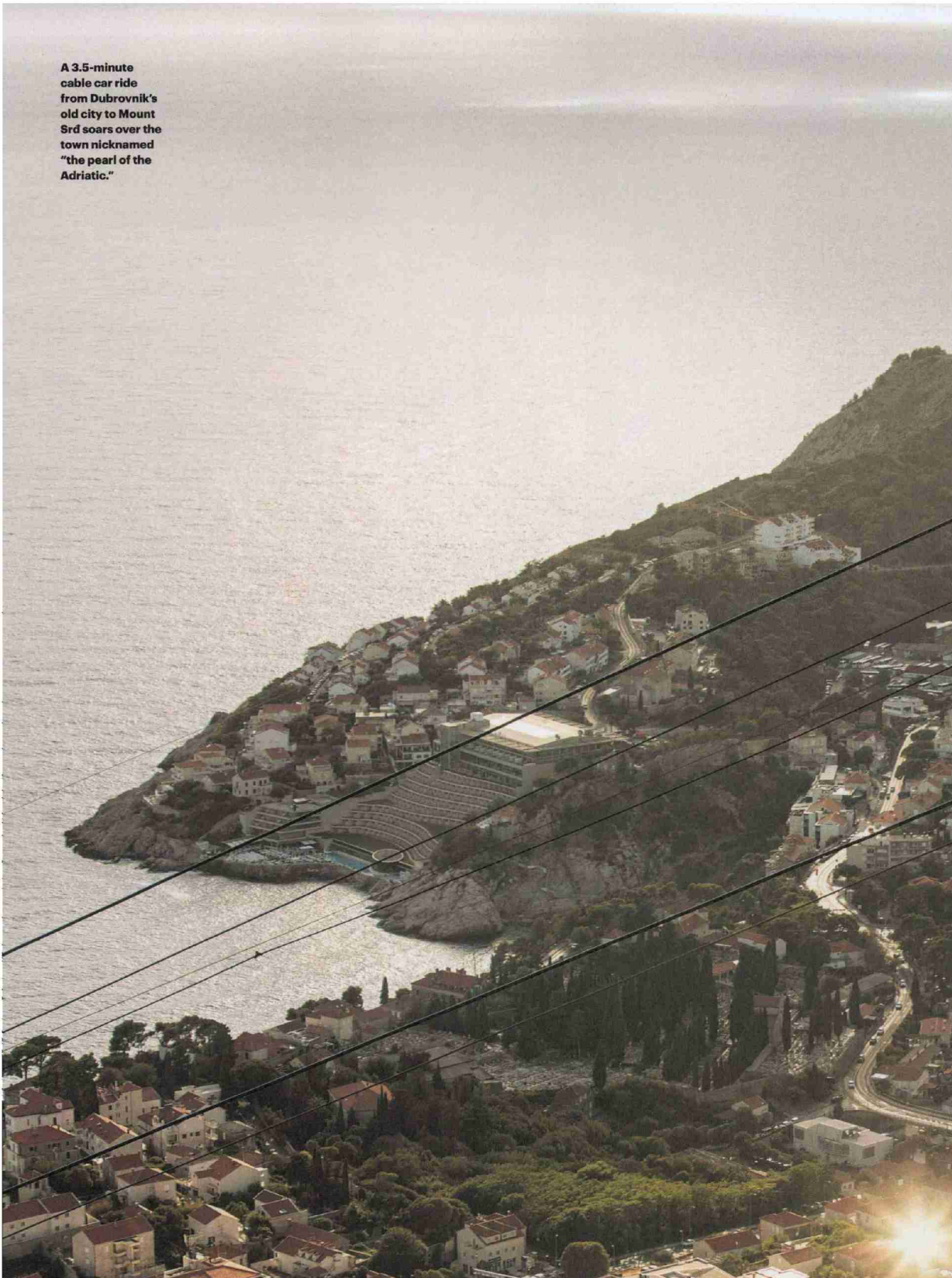


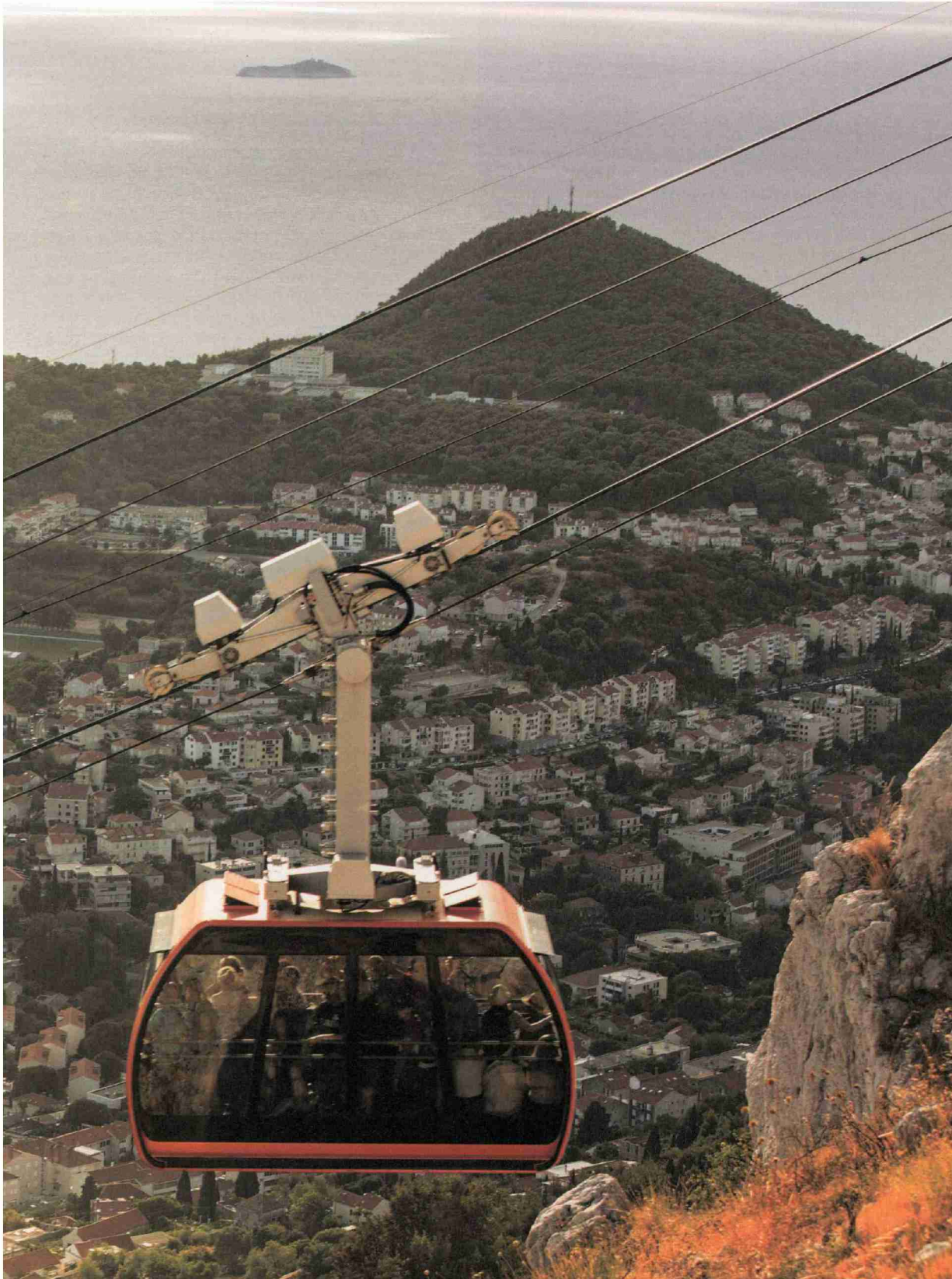
Romantic steep streets lead down from Dubrovnik's city walls south to Stradun.



In quaint Cavtat, south of Dubrovnik, Bugenvila restaurant creates an artful seasonal menu with dishes such as this pork belly with roasted peppers, apple puree, and edible flowers.

A 3.5-minute cable car ride from Dubrovnik's old city to Mount Srđ soars over the town nicknamed "the pearl of the Adriatic."





this table,” waving his hand across it like some kind of culinary wizard. He isn’t boasting. He’s just stating a fact. This is a meal by a gastronomic superman.

He sells his products out of his home but is currently converting his garage into a small shop. “I sell everything I produce, and I sell it before I even make it,” he tells me, as I let a piece of prosciutto melt in my mouth, its salty taste lingering on my tongue long after I swallow it.

Miho hasn’t always had this level of success. “In the last few years, business has picked up. I think people here are finally starting to realize that the food we small farmers produce—and there are only a few of us left here in Konavle—is not only better food, but it’s better for the community to support us.” He says if he could only hire some help, he’d be able to produce more, but “everyone here wants to work in the tourism industry.”

BACK IN DUBROVNIK, I stop in for lunch at Pantarul, located in the Lapad area of the city. Opened by food writer Ana-Marija Buijč, Pantarul offers a modern, global take on traditional

Dalmatian fare. As I savor a fava bean and octopus risotto—fava beans being in season at the moment—and a wild-herb flatbread that is mostly found on the nearby island of Vis, Ana-Marija stops by my table. “At first our intention was to serve only locally produced, seasonal ingredients we could get from the main food market in Dubrovnik and local producers,” she says. “But we soon realized that wasn’t possible in Dubrovnik.” She admits that only 80 percent of what’s on the plate is from small farmers. When Pantarul opened in 2014, its approach was revolutionary for the city. “It usually takes one restaurant to do something and then others will follow,” Ana-Marija says. And she’s right. Since then, a handful of inspired new restaurants, including Glorijet, Amfora, and Lokal (in the nearby town of Župa) have followed Pantarul’s lead.

Pantarul also differed from the typical Dubrovnik restaurant by catering to a local clientele. “There’s so much focus on feeding the tourist industry here, but that’s now changing. A younger generation is becoming increasingly interested in good food. Our weekend brunch, for example, is almost all locals.”



Sponza Palace was Dubrovnik’s customs office and now houses an exhibit of photos of those who lost their lives during the bitter 1991-92 siege.

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FIFTY MILES UP the coast from Dubrovnik, on the rustic Pelješac Peninsula, I discover where the Dalmatian food movement may be percolating the most. Morana Raguž, an active member of the local Slow Food convivium, is the glue that holds Pelješac's culinary community together. Along with her parents, she runs the food-centric inn Villa Vatican, located in the seaside village of Trpanj. She promises to take me around. At Croccantino, in the town of

Orebić, we eat organic ice cream infused with local ingredients like thyme and mint that 29-year-old owner Marija Antunović foraged in the hills. When I ask why people are only now starting to pay attention to better food, Marija points to the wars of the early 1990s. "It helps that my generation was not really as affected by the war. We are more open to the future. When my father was my age, the war began—at what should be one of the most beautiful times in one's life. His brother was killed in the war. My generation doesn't have that burden."

Later that day, we sip organic wine—a robust, fruity red—at Križ Winery. "People here thought we were crazy for going organic when we first started," says owner Denis Bogoević Marušić. "A generation or two ago it was normal, but now most wineries here use pesticides. My grandparents made organic wine. It was just the way you did it."

His wife, Marijeta Čalić, recently helped bring back *varenik*, a thick molasses-like sweetener made from the local *Plavac Mali* grape. With the help of Slow Food, she and three other winemakers now produce it. "This local product was used to sweeten food. It disappeared a couple of generations ago, but we've brought it back and now three chefs in Dubrovnik are using it in their food."

Morana, my guide, adds, "Varenik is a perfect example of how we need to have pride in our food. Dubrovnik is such a tourist-driven city, and we just give tourists pizza and pasta because we think that's what they want."

Križ Winery's Marijeta says that the sluggish pace of change has roots in the communist period. "We lived in fear someone was going to tell the authorities we were doing something wrong."

Tourists will certainly benefit from the changes happening in the Dubrovnik food scene, but Dalmatians themselves will be the biggest beneficiaries. In eating well, they are also connecting with a forgotten heritage.

"That's the thing," Morana says, "we've always been Slow Food; we were before Slow Food existed. Hopefully soon, more people will realize this is the true Dalmatian way of eating."

DAVID FARLEY (@davidfarley7) is author of *An Irreverent Curiosity and the forthcoming Underground Worlds: A Guide to Spectacular Subterranean Places*. *British photographer SARAH COGHILL* (@sarahcoghill_photography) lives in Copenhagen, Denmark. This is her first feature for Traveler.



Travel Wise: Dubrovnik

WHERE TO STAY

Hotel Bellevue
 Situated on the cliffs overlooking the Adriatic Sea, this five-star spot is a quick 15-minute walk to Dubrovnik's Old Town. Hungry visitors don't have to go far to find good food here, as the in-house restaurant Vapor serves just-pulled-from-the-sea fish and upscale Dalmatian dishes. adriaticluxuryhotels.com

One Suite Hotel
 This new property consists entirely of one- and two-bedroom suites. Located in the town of Župa, about five miles south of Dubrovnik, these stylish digs make for a good base to explore the Konavle Valley. The top-notch in-house restaurant, Lokal, cooks up Dalmatian dishes with ingredients procured from local farms. onesuitehotel.com

Villa Vatican
 Located in the small charming seaside town of Trpanj, this 200-year-old stone villa that was once inhabited by a priest (hence the name) is run by Lenka and Joe Raguž, who prepare for guests some of the tastiest home-cooked meals this side of the Adriatic. +385-91-909-8027

NOT-TO-MISS

City Walls
 Dubrovnik's medieval city walls are among the best preserved in Europe. Extending for some 1.25 miles, they rise to a height of 82 feet in places and are up to 20 feet thick. Your Dubrovnik City Walls tickets also get you into St. Lawrence's Fortress, which will be a familiar setting for *Game of Thrones* fans.

Dubrovnik Summer Festival
 The 69th annual festival, held from July 10 to August 25 this year, schedules a spectacular roster of music, opera, theater, and dance performances. Events take place in historic settings in Dubrovnik's old town. World-class artists that have performed in the past include the likes of London's Old Vic and the Cincinnati Symphony. dubrovnik-festival.hr

GO WITH NAT GEO

Nat Geo Expeditions offers an active itinerary along Croatia's Dalmatian Coast, which includes hiking and wine-tasting in the Pelješac Peninsula and a guided walk along Dubrovnik's medieval walls. natgeoexpeditions.com/explore; 888-966-8687

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