

## Sogrape Vinhos Scholarship

Lucy Stewart – June 2010

I was absolutely delighted when I was offered the Sogrape Vinhos Scholarship. This scholarship provided a unique opportunity to discover more about the wines of Portugal and what better way to do this than with Sogrape Vinhos Portugal. This following report summarises who Sogrape Vinhos Portugal are, with a specific focus on the four wineries I visited, while touching on regional differences and the factors that determine the styles of wine produced by Sogrape.

Sogrape Vinhos was established in 1942 by Fernando van Zeller Guedes. It is now run by Salvador Guedes and his brothers, who are the third generation directly from the founding member. **Sogrape Vinhos' mission is to drive the family-owned quality wine company forwards and to continue its international growth with a strong focus on the development of premium Portuguese brands.** Whilst they have wineries in Argentina, Chile and New Zealand, the heart of their interests are focused in Portugal where they have an enviable portfolio of prestigious brands, including Mateus Rose and Sandeman of worldwide notoriety. They specialise in all major Portuguese regions led by the notorious Casa Ferreirinha portfolio (Douro), the elegant and refined Quinta dos Carvalhais (Dão), the vibrant and exuberant Herdade do Peso (Alentejo), and the lively and refreshing Vinhos Verdes Quinta de Azevedo. This magical visit started south in Alentejo, after which we travelled northwards through the Dão, then the Douro, and finally into Vinhos Verdes, just north of Oporto.

### Alentejo - Herdade do Peso

The Alentejo is the fastest growing wine region in Portugal, and so in 1997, Sogrape Vinhos purchased Herdade do Peso. The estate is located in the heart of the Vidigueira sub-region of Alentejo. The winery has a total of 465 hectares, of which only 111 hectares are currently planted, while 20 hectares are taken up by a dam that supplies the water to irrigate the vineyards.

The area has a Mediterranean climate but with a strong continental influence. The region can have some of the highest temperatures in Portugal with very hot summer days but with large diurnal temperature fluctuations that favour good grape maturation. These high temperatures usually mean grapes are ready for harvest during August. Of the wines produced in this region, the Reds have the best reputation due to the hot climate and the Mediterranean clay soils with some limestone which is ideally suited to red varieties. As with all regions in Portugal, wines are based on indigenous grape varieties including Aragonês, Trincadeira and Alfrocheiro. Aragonês is thought to be one of the best grape varieties contributing colour and structure to the wines. Due to the importance of the international market and increasing pressure, Touriga Nacional, Cabernet Sauvignon and Petit Verdot are also being widely planted.

Herdade do Peso's winemaking team is led by Miguel Pessanha who is responsible for all oenology of Sogrape Vinhos. Their main wines are "Vinha Do Monte" which is a blend of both red and white grape varieties from the estate. They are also making a premium "Herdade do Peso" range of single varietal wines including Aragonês, Trincadeira, Alfrocheiro as well as a Reserva. The wines were generally full-bodied with lovely ripe fruit. What were particularly apparent about the wines were their exuberance, richness, vibrancy and fruitiness all resulting from the climatic influences, viticultural techniques and soil composition.

### **Dão - Quinta dos Carvalhais**

Our next visit was further north to the Quinta dos Carvalhais Estate in Dão. The winery, situated in the heart of the picturesque Dão sub-region of Berias, was purchased by Sogrape in 1989. Sogrape had a mission in the early 1990s to revolutionise what was almost a dormant winemaking area (with a rich and noble winemaking past). They succeeded, and over the past two decades, Quinta dos Carvalhais have attracted much attention based entirely on their drive for quality and innovation.

Revolutionary efforts focused on building a state of the art winery. Another focus was to produce a sophisticated computerised vinification process and to build a maturing lodge with ideal natural conditions. As well as the winemaking infrastructure, viticultural decisions were also important during this time on innovation. They planted new vineyards and, once again, with the emphasis on regional vine varieties. Today, of the 50ha under vine at Quinta dos Carvalhais, red grape varieties occupy about 80% of the area including Touriga Nacional, Tinta Roriz, Afrocheiro and Jaen; while Encruzado, Assario, Verdelho, Bical and Cerceal white varieties comprise the remaining 20%.

Berias is located in a very mountainous area which is generally cold and rainy in winter, and hot and dry in the summer. The combination of climate, granitic soils and shelter here provides unique conditions for wine production where each vineyard contributes their own characteristics to the wine. The winemaking team is led by Manuel Vieira who is one of the most reputed and celebrated winemakers in Portugal. I had the great privilege of trying a variety of his wines with him at the estate. Wines included the classic “Grão Vasco” and “Duque de Viseu” wines, the classy premium varietal wines of “Quinta dos Carvalhais” including Touriga Nacional and Encruzado. I also enjoyed the Espumante Classico Reserva (sparkling wine) based on Touriga Nacional and Encruzado. What really amazed me about these wines was the incredible elegance of them. They were such a contrast from the Alentejo exuberance but instead concentrated on delicacy of aroma and individual character and complexity that reflect the characteristics of the Region. I also observed this was one region where the quality of white wines from Encruzado rivalled some premium reds.

### **Douro - Quinta do Seixo**

I was thoroughly looking forward to our visit to the captivating Douro valley. Whilst Port wine is a big focus in my working life, I was very excited to learn more from Sogrape Vinhos who have such a prestigious portfolio of Porto Wines that includes three top brands Sandeman, Ferreira and Offley as well as the iconic red “Barca Velha” and many other excellent still wines from “Casa Ferreirinha”.

Sogrape Vinhos is one of the main land owners in the Douro with a total of 9 top estates in the best areas of the Cima Corgo and Douro Superior sub-regions. Much of my time was spent at Quinta do Seixo which was bought by Ferreira in 1979. This estate is truly impressive. It has a spectacular visitor centre with incredibly views of The Douro Valley.

The Douro has an amazing diversity of different microclimates, with variable temperatures and humidity. The Marão mountain range, the river Douro and the topography of the region accounts for the wide variety of altitudes, aspects and shelter. Another crucial element for the vines is the schist soils that have very few nutrients and high acid levels. These soils mean vines stretch far below the surface in search of nutrients making them incredibly resilient. The soils are also crucial to retaining

and releasing heat and water which are vital in the hot summer months. The region has a continental climate with hot, dry summers and cold winters.

It will come as no surprise that all grape varieties are native including the more well known Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, Tinto Cão, Tinta Amarel. The winemaking team is led by Luis Sottomayor, again one of the most reputed and celebrated winemakers in Portugal. The enormous array of wines that Sogrape Vinhos produce in this area (both Port Wine and still wine) is a report in itself. However, of the still wines, it was the reds that really excelled; many of which were intense, rich, powerful, fruity, often complex, with impressive structure. These classy wines reflect the extreme and stressful conditions the vines endure in the Douro allowing for wonderful concentration of flavour.

### **Minho - Quinta de Azevedo Estate**

Driving forward Sogrape Vinhos' mission for quality and seeking to promote the uniqueness and identity of Portuguese grape varieties, Sogrape Vinhos took over Quinta de Azevedo in Vinho Verde in 1980. The estate is located in the heart of the Minho occupying a total of 40ha. The region is influenced by the Atlantic and therefore has a maritime climate with little variation in climate all year round. Winters are generally mild with high rainfall and summers are relatively dry and cool. High rainfall can be a problem in the vineyards because too much water leads to vigorous vines and therefore little concentration of flavours. In contrast, At Quinta de Azevedo there is some clay helping to retain water during the essential period of grape ripening. Soils are predominantly granitic and acidic resulting in lively and refreshing wines.

Quinta de Azevedo's winemaking team is led by Manuel Vieira. In the region both red and white wines can be found; however, red wines are characteristically sour, tart, low in alcohol and drunk young. White wines (usually made from Loureiro and Pedernã) are prominent in the region aimed to be fresh and lively with maximum alcohol strength of 11.5%. "Gazela" is their more commercial white wine from this winery but I also got to try some more premium wines including "Quinta de Azevedo 2009", "Morgadio de Torre" and "Alaverinho 2008" (all DOC Vinho Verde).

### **Conclusion**

This scholarship provided me with a rich expedition into Portuguese wines. There are so many factors that influence the huge array of wines produced in Portugal, which I had not previously appreciated. Significantly I learnt that whilst climate and soil play a determining factor in the diversity of wines produced, native varieties are so important in Portugal producing an abundant variety of different wines. Given their approach, philosophy, standards and investment, a company like Sogrape Vinhos Portugal is critical for the future of Portuguese wines. Not only do they have an incredibly portfolio of wines and brands of worldwide notoriety but they have so much influence and therefore an obligation in taking Portuguese wines into the future. They are totally committed to education and making their wines accessible to the international consumer including introducing their 'Callabriga' brand. They have wineries in all important wine regions and have some of the most reputable wine makers in the world.

I wish them every success in the future as they continue their passion, drive and commitment to Portuguese wines.

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Footnote: This was a fantastic scholarship. The itinerary was meticulously organised with very careful thought. I am indebted to Ligia Marques who is the Brand Ambassador for Vinhos Sogrape. She was a wonderful host for the week and I was amazed by her generosity, passion and knowledge. She was determined that the week was not just about wine but was also to enjoy some other wonderful cultural traditions in Portugal. I therefore took part in the hugely enjoyable Rabelos Regata in Oporto and was memorised by the chaos of the São Joao festival. I also had the privilege of being a guest at the 2010 Porto Wine Brotherhood Ceremony and Dinner. Ligia was a truly inspirational person. I also owe an enormous thank you to Vasco Magalhães who is their Wine Educator who gave me his undivided attention numerous times throughout my visit. It was also a real honour to meet Mr George Sandeman who was again an inspirational man who was extremely generous and hospitable. Finally, I must say an enormous thank you the Guedes family and in particular Mr Salvador Guedes for offering such a generous and fulfilling scholarship. It is a week I will never forget and I feel hugely privileged having spent these wonderful days with such a professional and inspiring company.

On a separate note, thank you so much WSET for offering me this fantastic scholarship.