

Wines of Portugal Scholarship – October 2010

Discovering the Douro

Having completed the WSET Diploma, I was delighted to be awarded the Wines of Portugal Scholarship. In October 2010, I spent four days in the Douro Valley as a guest of ViniPortugal. ViniPortugal, the body that represents and promotes Portuguese wines and producers, arranged an impressive array of tastings, vineyard tours, winery visits and dinners. I expected that the trip would further my knowledge and open my eyes to Douro wines. The trip exceeded my expectations, I came back enlightened and even more enthused about the Douro.

For 300 years, the Douro Valley in northern Portugal has been synonymous with fortified wine. Whilst Port will always remain central to the region, the diverse range of unfortified wines is arousing curiosity and excitement. With a myriad of grape varieties, distinct geography, varying microclimates and the fusion of modern and tradition winemaking techniques, it is no surprise that the Douro offers a variety of wine styles. This reports looks into the diversity of the Douro, whilst uncovering some of its highlights and drawbacks.

The Douro, like the rest of Portugal, seems to be home to a never-ending array of grape varieties. The figure often quoted for the number of distinct varieties is eighty, however, whilst visiting Real Companhia Velha, I was told there are three hundred!

Having spent the past six years learning about wine and enjoying a fair few Douro wines in the UK, there were five varieties with which I was most familiar. All black grape varieties, they were Touriga Nacional, Tinta Roriz, Touriga Franca, Tinta Cão and Tinta Barroca. These five were identified as the 'best' varieties after research by ADVID in the late 1980s and were recommended for future plantings. During the trip, wine-makers kept referring to some other traditional varieties, which I had not come across before - the black varieties Sousão and Tinta Amarela and the whites Arinto and DonzELHO Branco. These varieties seem to be becoming more popular within blends as wine-makers favour their deep colour, structure, firmer tannins or higher acidity.

This multitude of grape varieties is both a blessing and a curse. Whilst diversity is exciting for wine enthusiasts and professionals, for the average consumer, it can be a hindrance. Consumers often associate a region with a grape variety and subsequently a style; Marlborough Sauvignon Blanc and Mendoza Malbec are two prime examples. Pronunciation and spelling also make it difficult to recognise and become familiar with Portugal's indigenous varieties.

In order to tackle this issue, there has been a slight rise in the number of single varietal wines. I was really impressed with the Quinta do Vallado Sousão, Quinta do Vallado Touriga Nacional and Quinta de Ventozelo Touriga Nacional. Touriga Nacional, most commonly seen as a single varietal, is starting to be considered as the national grape of Portugal. The theme of ViniPortugal's Wines of Portugal Conference this December is Touriga Nacional. Whilst important to promote one grape variety and a clear image to consumers, the excellent multi-varietal wines and that Touriga is grown in Australia, some in the trade are sceptical about this move.

I also came across wines made from a single international variety, although these were not common. Real Companhia Velha's Quinta de Cidr6 range includes a single varietal Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and Pinot Noir. It is clear that these wines and the familiar varietal names are targeted at the international consumer.

Family-owned wine company Sogrape Vinhos has turned its back on the conventional method of selling wine by single varietal. Their Callabriga brand, which focuses on the region, not on all the indigenous grape varieties, makes Portuguese wines more accessible and appealing to international consumers. The region is very clearly marked and the bottles are colour-coded; the Callabriga Douro bottle neck and labelling is blue whilst the Callabriga Dao is red and Callabriga Alentejo is orange.

Although grape variety plays an important role, such varied styles of wine can also be attributed to the Douro's differing *terroirs* and winemaking methods. Across the Baixo Corgo, Douro Superior and Cima Corgo, there is huge diversity of climate, soil and topography. Such diversity can also be seen within individual vineyard sites. At Sogrape's Quinta do Seixo, as we looked out onto the hillsides, it was evident that each site is unique with different altitudes and aspects. I could clearly see which parts received more or less sunshine, hence different temperatures and levels of ripening.



Another striking difference between the wineries was the distinct winemaking methods. Quinta da Foz, with the stone lagares where all the reds are foot-trodden, is quite a contrast to Quinta do Seixo where there are four different modern presses and I witnessed various mechanical foot-treaders at work. Like a number of modern wineries which have recently been invested in and re-developed, Quinta Nova de Nossa used both stone lagares and larger stainless steel lagares. Most wineries had stainless steel fermentation vats at ground-level; at Quinta do Portal, the tanks were suspended from the floor above and the winery was built over two or three floors. The Douro certainly seems to be a mix of new and old, tradition and innovation, from century-old winemaking methods to the latest technological devices.



I was also surprised to see different types of oak used to ferment and age the wines; fifteen years ago, the preferred choice was native Portuguese oak. Portuguese oak is still used, such as in one of the Douro's top reds, Abandonado¹, retailing for around £65, which spends twelve months in new Portuguese oak. However, French and American oak barrels are more frequently used. At Quinta Nova de Nossa, Hungarian oak is used, which the wine-maker advised me was less aromatic and more spicy, hence complementing the reds they produce.

The diversity of wine styles which I tried on the trip was incredible. From crisp fresh whites to barrel-fermented oaked whites, fruity rosés to rich concentrated reds, sweet late harvest wines, fortified Moscatels and, not forgetting all the various Port styles. At Quinta da Foz, I was impressed with their 100% Touriga Nacional Rosé. I also learnt about their current Rosé experiments, part fermentations at cool temperatures in stainless steel and part fermentations at warmer temperatures in small oak barrels. During a visit to Real Companhia Velha, I tasted my first Portuguese late harvest sweet wine. The Grandjó Late Harvest, produced from botrytis-affected Semillon, was fresh, concentrated, oozing with honey, orange peel and dried apricot flavours and backed up by a hint of oak. It was stunning! For me, this was the real surprise discovery from the Douro.

My trip to the Douro with ViniPortugal was an eye-opening experience, which demonstrated the passion, diversity and potential of this region and its producers. The Douro, and Portugal as a whole, may still be working out its identity and place on the international stage, but this does not mean it's backward or one to skim past, quite the contrary! I hope that more professionals like me as well as consumers take a similar voyage of discovery to the Douro.

¹ Abandonado achieved 94 points in Parker's Wine Advocate in December 2008