

Portugal's Table Wines and Ports

Collection of THE SPANISH ACQUISITION, June 2017

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Even more than Spain, Portugal is a wine country recovering from 20th Century devastations: Post-phylloxera, political upheaval, military dictatorship, poverty, loss of confidence, an era of complacent, under-reaching co-operatives and the ongoing waning of quality and local authenticity are just now being overcome. Thanks in part to the EU, a nascent industry of delicious, and unique wines is among us!

The best wines of Portugal come from the VRs (regional zones) of Minho and Beiras. This spans most of Northern Portugal, starting just below River Minho and extending a couple of hours south of Porto; and from the Atlantic coast to the mountains of the inland border with Spain. Within these zones are a half dozen appellations, which, for us, break down into four places that matter: Vinhos Verdes and Douro (in Minho); Dão and Bairrada (in Beiras). South of Bairrada, towards Lisboa and ultimately the Algarve, the climate is too hot for quality viticulture, all wines requiring artificial acidification.

Portuguese wines can be official at any of 3 levels: firstly, quality protected place-specific DOCs (Denominacao de Origem Controlada). DOCs are governed by a CVR - Comissão de Viticultura da Região, equating to the Consejo Regulador of a DO in Spain. There are currently 31 such appellations, covering 29 actual places, since the Douro Valley and Madeira house overlapping table and fortified wine appellations. There are a further 14 broader GIs, whose wines are labelled as VR (Vinhos Regionais, regional wines). Then generic country wine, or Vinho de Mesa.

Recommended reading:

'Port and the Douro'; 'The Wines and Vineyards of Portugal'; both titles by Richard Mayson, published by Mitchell Beazley Wine Library; (easily sourced from 'Books for Cooks' (03) 8415 1415 www.booksforcooks.com.au)

DOCs AND GEOGRAPHICAL INDICATIONS PORTUGAL



VINHO VERDE	01
VINHO VERDE	DOC
MINHO	IG

TRÁS-OS-MONTES	02
TRÁS-OS-MONTES	DOC
TRANSMONTANO	IG

DOURO	03
DOURO	DOC
PORTO	DOC
DURIENSE	IG

DAO	05
DAO	DOC
TERRAS DO DÃO	IG

BAIRRADA	06
BAIRRADA	DOC
BEIRA ATLÂNTICO	IG

LISBOA	
ENCOSTAS D'AIRE	DOC 08
ÓBIDOS	DOC 09
ALENQUER	DOC 10
ARRUDA	DOC 11
TORRES VEDRAS	DOC 12
LOURINHÃ	DOC 13
BUCÉLAS	DOC 14
CARCAVELOS	DOC 15
COLARES	DOC 16
LISBOA	IG

PENINSULA DE SETÚBAL	
PALMELA	DOC 18
SETÚBAL	DOC 19
PEN. SETÚBAL	IG

TEJO	17
TEJO	DOC
TEJO	IG

MADEIRA	25
MADEIRA	DOC
TERRAS MADEIRENSES	IG

AÇORES	
GRACIOSA	DOC 26
BISCITOS	DOC 27
PICO	DOC 28
AÇORES	IG

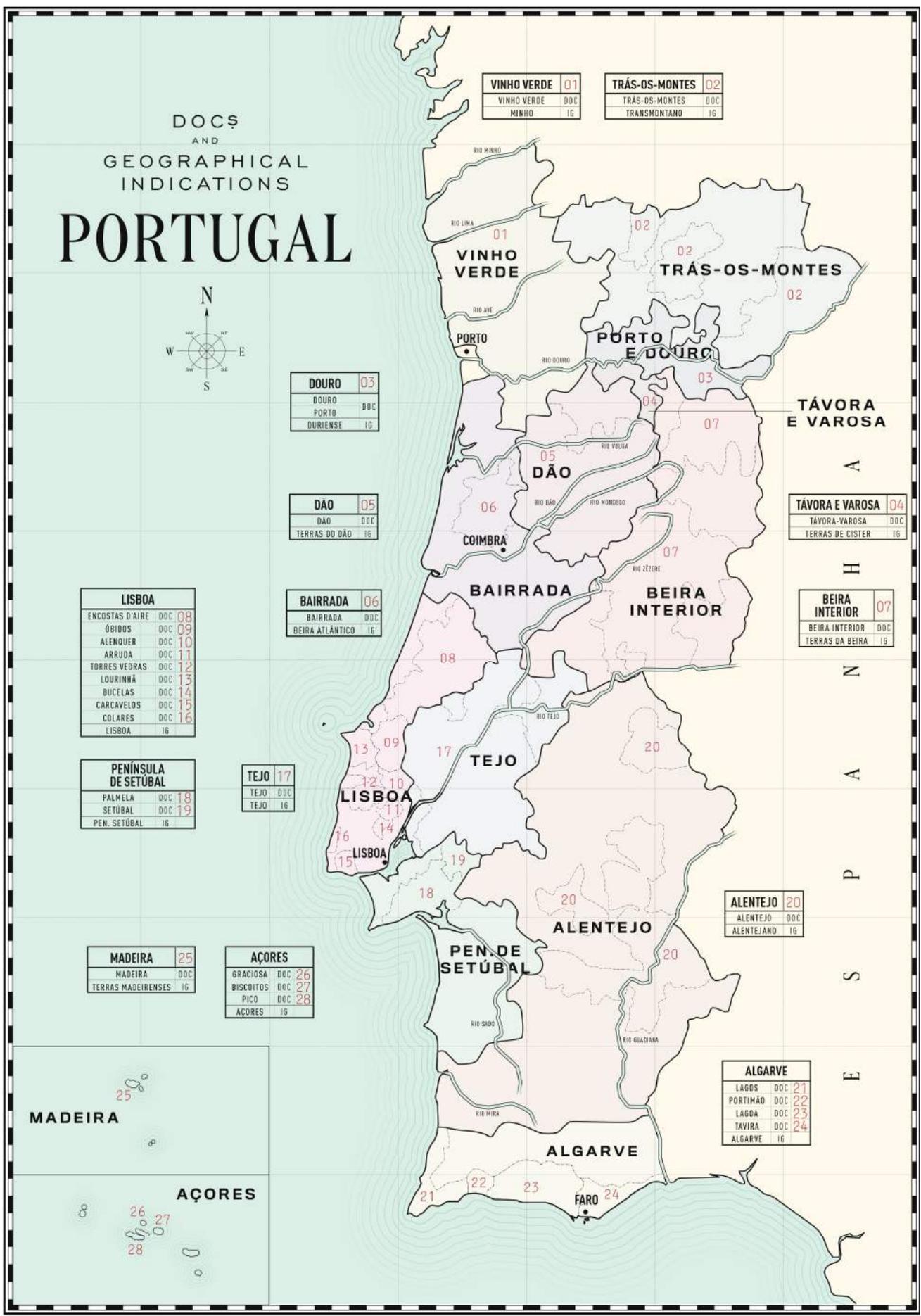
ALENTEJO	20
ALENTEJO	DOC
ALENTEJANO	IG

ALGARVE	
LAGOS	DOC 21
PORTIMÃO	DOC 22
LAGOA	DOC 23
TAVIRA	DOC 24
ALGARVE	IG

TÁVORA E VAROSA	04
TÁVORA-VAROSA	DOC
TERRAS DE CISTER	IG

BEIRA INTERIOR	07
BEIRA INTERIOR	DOC
TERRAS DA BEIRA	IG

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Quinta do Ameal

DOC Vinhos Verdes, sub-region Lima/Vinho regional Minho



Vinho Verde

Vinho Verde is both a regional appellation and a style of wine.

The 'green wines' known as Vinhos Verdes come from north-west Portugal close to the Atlantic coast. The region commences immediately below the Minho (Rio Miño in Spanish - the Spain-Portugal border), and extends south towards Porto and the north shore of the Douro (Rio Duero in Spain). The region is cold, with high rainfall and a permanent Atlantic foggy damp. The vines are usually grown on elevated pergolas, which allow for ventilation to protect from fungal infections. Vinho Verde was demarcated as a legal region in 1908 and was confirmed as a DOC in 1984. There are 21,000 hectares and 19,000 growers!

'Green' only in the sense of being edgy and made to drink young, Vinhos Verdes can be red or white. The reds are an acquired taste, drunk by few outside the region. Both red and white are strongly acidic, usually with a prickle of fizz, and are best drunk chilled. The wines are usually very light in body and alcohol (from 8.5 up to 11.5 degrees - the legal maximum, and rarely achieved). Many wines are heavily sulphured and can have as much as 15 grams of residual sugar hidden under a gas-fizz-sulphur mask. Once, in a time of poor quality control, the spritz resulted from malolactic re-fermentation in bottle, but is now mostly artefactual - the result of artificial carbonation. Quality dry, minerally still wines are the exception ...

Mostly, white Vinho Verdes are blends, with Arinto, Rabigato and another 20 varieties permitted. The best of these include sharp, lemony Loureiros, flowery Trajaduras (the same variety that is known as Treixadura in Spain) and extravagantly fruity Alvarinhos (aka Albariño).

Quinta do Ameal

Quinta* do Ameal is the quality champion of Vinhos Verdes, and devoted to the Loureiro grape variety. Ameal is a walled vineyard planted in 1948, in the northern sub-region of Lima. The soils are deep yellow granite sand (the yellow is from a clay component), slightly acid with little organic material. There are 14 hectares of vines, facing south, sloping gently down to river Lima. Viticulture is organic and biodynamic.

Today, Quinta do Ameal is owned and directed by the energetic (perhaps, visionary) Pedro Araújo, the first to anticipate and pursue Vinho Verde wines of excellence reflecting terroir. Pedro's father purchased Quinta do Ameal after selling out of the Ramos Pinto group in the 90s (Pedro's great grandfather was Adriano Ramos Pinto, one of the wine world's first 'marketeers'). At the time of purchase, the estate was run as a mixed farm with just a small production of grapes for wine. In 1999, Pedro took over and, acting on gut feel, he decided to phase out farming and focus on the production of wine - varietal Loureiro specifically. This was a deliberate, radical diversion from Vinho Verde's history of cheap (usually badly made) blended wines. Given that Ameal don't align themselves with commercial Vinho Verde, the DOC ID is on the back label.

Tucked away on a secluded bend of the Lima River, Quinta do Ameal is an ecological haven, where biodiversity is nurtured. The property gently slopes to the south-east until it hits the bank of the gushing River Lima. As well as the vines, Ameal is home to a diverse forest of nut, oak and fruit trees (if you're lucky, you'll see deer at dusk). The grounds are home to a number of centuries-old buildings, restored and used for the winery, offices, and luxury ecotourism apartments, all bound by the Quinta's dry stone wall.

[*A note on the meaning of 'Quinta'. Single Quinta wines have been the chief quality driver in Portugal's quality wine renaissance this past 20 years. Quintas are discrete estates, and thus have the potential of local genetics and site-and-soil-specific terroirs to explore and express. Not all the great wines of Portugal are single Quinta expressions, but the greatest impetus to improved viticulture, specificity and overall quality improvements has been from Quinta-based small producers, notably the so-called Douro Boys collective in the Douro Valley, and certainly Quinta do Ameal.]

Quinta do Ameal Loureiro ‘Clássico’



After careful viticulture, wine-making is simple and tech-driven: low-cropped old vines are sorted twice (first to eliminate disease, then further selected for quality); whole grapes undergo pneumatic pressing; must is cold-settled for 48 hours; a quite cool fermentation (max 15 degrees) takes place in stainless steel vats for 12-15 days; the wine is matured 6 months in stainless steel.

Over the past decade, organic and biodynamic viticulture has progressively added a deeper, richer fragrant bay leaf character to the lemony precision of Pedro’s outstanding crunchy-yet-textured Loureiro white.

Quinta do Ameal Loureiro ‘Solo Único’ (natural, un sulphured)



Solo (meaning a tribute to soil, in this case QDA’s yellow granite) is an un-sulphured and pretty-much untouched wine. Pedro selects a particular section of vineyard, whacks it in a vat, yeasts do their thing (including a partial malo that adds textural development), it’s parked in bottle without sulphur. The only real touch is a light filtration with the protection of an inert gas blanket to avoid oxidation. Only 2,500 bottles produced.

Intense, wild, raw, deeply textural, pure and unadulterated. Solo is darting and nuanced, herbal with lemon (pith-and-rind) and bay tells. The palate twists and twines with essence of bay and a trace of powdery tannin; there’s lilt within the intensity, and a nice saline brace to finish. The wine’s body is outstanding: power and creamy-softness with mineral line and great freshness.

Quinta do Ameal Loureiro ‘Escolha’



‘Escolha’ means selection; this is the very best, and most mature fruit (in terms of potential alcohol, and therefore vinosity) of the Ameal land. Extremely gentle pressing of whole grapes precedes a cold soak and then fermentation and ageing with bâtonnage in old Nevers oak barriques for 6 months. Oak adds nothing to the wine except deep stabilisation of the wine’s rich intensity. Escolha is bottled direct from cask with the lightest possible filtration and no further stabilisation. 4,000 bottles only.

Note, some of this action is outside DOC VV rules, so this is effectively an IGT, labeled as a Vinho Regional Minho, a regional non-DO classification. 11.5% alcohol. Pedro made Escolha in his second vintage, 2000, and that wine is rocking on very nicely indeed ... this is a wine which ages brilliantly!

Clear and bright, Escolha is filled with honeysuckle and candied lemon, pastry dough, acacia florals and orange blossom. Fruitiness has a smoky vanilla counterpoint, which moderates but does not mask Loureiro’s explosive florality. This is really deep, wide textural wine featuring stunning complex acidity with a volatile nip. The wine journeys out, back, down and away, through the palate and deep into the throat. A butterfly effect of deep-set bay kicks back in an epiglottal rebirth. Utterly alive, long and complex, Escolha benefits from decanting and is a prime candidate for extended bottle ageing.

Quinta do Ameal Loureiro ‘Special Harvest’ (375ml sweet white)



To make this sweet white, late-harvest grapes are air-dried prior to vinification, concentrating sugar in the must. This process takes several weeks from early November and the grapes are turned and inspected 3 times weekly to avoid rot and mould. The must is partially fermented in old wine barrels, a slow fermentation which stops in the cold of late winter. The resultant wine is 12% a/v with just over 100 grams of residual sugar. 600 half bottles produced.

A wonderful, almost acetic volatility gives room to mandarin marmalade, salt caramel-butterscotch and Madeira-like plantain. Yes, it’s viscous and sweet, but multiple volatile-sours dominate the sugar.

It’s creamy-foie-thick, wild-herbal tangy and utterly harmonious.

If a wine could be Inception, this thing has a level 4 – buy it and regret nothing!

Casa da Passarella

DOC Dão (sub-região Serra da Estrela)



The Dão is south from The Douro Valley, inland towards the Spanish border.

It's high country, bound on all sides by the spectacular mountains of the spectacular Serra de Estrela on the Spanish border. Here, wine is grown between 400 and 700 metres in cold granitic soils. The mountains protect from continental extremes of temperature and also from drenching Atlantic rains – nevertheless rain averages 47 inches, albeit most in winter. Summers are mild and dry.

Dão reds in the past tended towards over-ageing and an over-dependence on oak, but have changed greatly over the last two decades. As with most Northern Portuguese wine regions, the Dão is typified by very small land-holdings. Until the 1990s, production was dominated by complacent cooperatives and the resulting wines were tough, tannic and unlovely. There is great potential here for good growing and sensitive handling to yield expressive red wines with smooth tannins and natural freshness.

Casa da Passarella was founded in 1892, before Dão was demarcated as a wine region (in 1908), and are founders of the region. Casa da Passarella's founder, Amand D'Oliveira made his fortune in Brazil then returned home to found a winery (the eponymous 'Casa' is a Brazilian-style pile). Having fallen into disrepair, Passarella was acquired by Ricardo Cabral in 2007, and then restored. Talented winemaker Paulo Nunes was appointed to renovate the wine program. Nowadays, Passarella is a holding of 100 hectares, 60 of which are vine land (much of it around 100 years' vine age).

There are seven cultivars planted: Encruzado, Verdelho and Malvasia Fina whites; Touriga Nacional, Tinta Roriz, Jaen and Alfrocheiro reds. Handling is traditional, in concrete vats and large old wood, with fruit manually crushed by ancient devices. Passarella is in the Serra de Estrela – very high, cold and poor soils in the 'mountain to the stars', the pass separating Portugal from Spain. The climate is Continental, at an altitude of 600 metres and allows for long hang times, resulting in sleek ripe tannins, excellent acidity and overall freshness.



CASA da PASSARELLA 'A Descoberta' Rosado



This is a dry pink blend of Touriga Nacional and Tinta Roriz, bled from skins, fermented dry and aged on lies 5 months in raw concrete. *Filled with wild crackleberry herbs, this is an electric purpled-pink! Soft earthy berry fruit with a barbed edge. A sensational jangle and clatter of herbal cut clears any possibility of fruit cloy. A SMASHER.*

CASA da PASSARELLA 'A Descoberta' Tinto Colheita



Made in stone lagares and aged in cement tanks and large old wooden vats, this is a typical Dão blend of Touriga Nacional, Tinta Roriz, Alfrocheiro and Jaen. A Descoberta means 'to be discovered': the label is a folkloric reference to a form of time capsule. It depicts a box tagged 1942, which was found hidden in the stone walls of Casa Passarella. In it, a will to be opened 50 years hence, which directed the riches of the box be re-distributed to the poor. The box was empty ... Enrichment comes from the intangible not the material, it seems.

A lovely wine – supple, fleshy and spicy, with delicate tannin and subtle oak. From the lead-off, cherry-chocolate fruit is replete with Dão granite, and laden with wiry dark herbs. It's fleshy-meaty and mineral-fresh, round, with good movement and fruit-earth interplay. It has excellent presence in the mouth but is not reliant on weight for the show. Wonderfully composed, effortless in affect. Gorgeous delicate tannin is the frame, rimming the mouth and allowing the fruit and spicy acid to radiate delicately.

A compelling advertisement for varietal blends.

Luís Pato

Vinho Regional Beira Atlantico (sometimes, DOC Bairrada)

Bairrada is the Southern-most of Portugal's superior northern appellations. To drive through Bairrada is to be confronted by viral eucalyptus and wattle - it feels unnervingly like driving around Australian farm country. This Atlantic coastal region has very high rainfall - up to 47 inches, albeit most in winter, with a moderate summer. A narrow window of dryness for harvest in autumn makes for vintage difficulties. This region of sand and clay-chalk soils (the latter tend to waterlog) has a staggering number of small growers - nearly 5,000 of them manage tiny plots, many of which are old vines, most becoming poor quality co-op wines.

Unusually for Portugal, Bairrada is a region dominated by just one red grape, the often-maligned Baga. 80% of wines from this region are red, and almost all of these are made from Baga - thick-skinned, high in acidity and tannic. Combine this with the common practice of leaving stems in the fermentation, and Baga makes unbearably tough wines. Luís Pato was responsible for introducing the practice of temperature-controlled fermentation of de-stemmed Baga, in order to temper its meanness. Luís has long been ambiguous about releasing his wines under the DOC appellation (with which he struggles to identify due to overall quality issues), and currently de-classifies his wines to the regional classification, VR Beiras.

The Wines of Luís Pato

Luís Pato (secret gangster nickname = Louis the Duck) is the leading producer in Bairrada, an hour south of Porto, just inland from the Atlantic coast. Luís has 65 hectares, largely planted to Baga, with some Touriga Nacional and the local whites, Sercialinho, Cerceal and Bical.

Luís trained as an engineer, and took over the family estate in the 80's when his father João retired. Working mainly with the traditional variety of the region, Baga, Luís quickly took to experimenting, pushing at local norms.

Luís Pato 'Vinhas Velhas' Branco

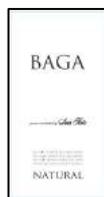


50% Bical grown on chalky-clay; 25% Cerceal and 25% Sercialinho from sand.

Orange oil, peach and citrus pith, nutty aromatics and a touch of white floral. Gently phenolic texture carries the orange, citrus, nut and white florals through a mildly glyceric palate with no discernable oak. Effortlessly balanced, it's a textured, sophisticated white.

Luís Pato Baga Tinto (natural, un sulphured)

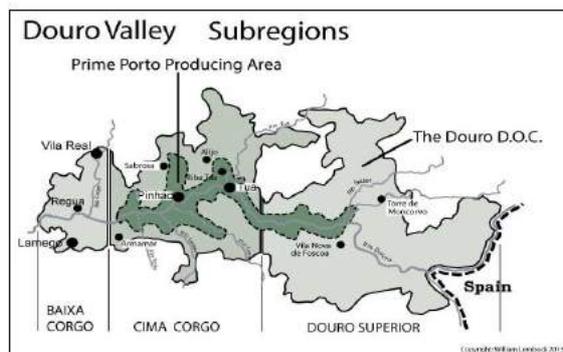
Fermented in traditional lagares, made with no added sugar, sulphur, yeast, acid or malic bacteria, and bottled unfinned. Labelled Vino Regional Beira Atlantico, 12.5%



Has the fleshy, grapey snap of Baga - redcurrant skins and all, with red berry tea, plum flowers and a touch of ash. Clean varietal character, uncluttered and savoury, it's driven by the tannin and acid of Baga, but without fierceness. Grapeskin yields nicely, allowing the ashy red berry fruit to wander through the palate unobstructed. It's charming and savoury, graceful all the way to a gently grippy, lean and dry finish. Unlike many un sulphured wines, the tannins are complete and textural, and there's a nice perfume waft in the mouth when all is done.

Table wines and the Douro Valley

The Douro Valley is the last wine place on a long river journey, which commences near Soria in remote north-eastern Castile. From here, Rio Duero flows roughly west and configures DOs Ribera del Duero, Cigales, Rueda and Toro, before it becomes the Douro for its final stretch, from the Portuguese border into the Atlantic. The area demarcated as Douro commences 60km upstream from the coast's dual cities (Porto and Vila Nova de Gaia), and ranges east 90 km further towards the Spanish border.



The Douro Valley is home to both DOC Douro and DOC Porto. There are three Douro sub-zones:

- Upstream towards the Spanish border, Douro Superior (near Vila Nova de Foz Cão) is the hottest, highest and driest part (16 inches average annual rainfall), with an extreme continental climate.
- The central zone is Cima Corgo (east of Regua, towards Pinhão). The hills and valleys upstream of river Corgo have rainfall of 28 inches. While this sector of the Douro Valley is home to the best grapes for Port wine, the tributaries (the Corgo itself, Torto, Tedo and Pinhão rivers) are tighter valleys with cooler aspects, well suited as source material for finer red wines.
- west of the Corgo towards the coast is Baixa Corgo (around Regua). The area below Corgo is colder and wetter (35 inches or more) with more alluvial soil, yielding lesser quality table wines, and base wine for Ruby Port. (1/3rd of Baixa Corgo's 45,000 hectares is under vine, compared to 1/5th of Cima Corgo's 95,000 hectares and the 10% which is planted of Douro Superior's 110,000 ha.)

But, wait! These are mere wine facts. It's time to screech to a story-telling halt.

The Douro Valley is an amazing place, facts alone don't cut it ...

The Douro itself is massive, imposing and impressive: strong, slow, deep, broad, winding. From its banks, steep hills reach up and away to a high, wide sky. Mostly, there is just river-and-hills, then sky. No room for townships and little place for roads, save for a narrow, treacherous flange carved alongside the river, into which the road up the valley is wound. It's a crazy, tight, winding drive; many hours are needed to get to the Spanish border. It is possible to take a ferry or train from Porto to the Douro: safe and scenic, for sure. However, you almost certainly *should* hire an Audi and wind it out on the tight bends all the way up river.

The valley is very humid. The heat-sink effect of the river causes fog to plume into the morning clouds low on the river, extending a smoky, hazy overhang affect late into the morning. And then there is the soil. Well, actually there is no soil. The hills are layers of smoky mineral schist, which join with the grey river and clouds in a menace lowering towards midday, then the heat burns off the clouds and it's all shiny metal slate glinting into the far away sky. Smoky, sultry Douro, glinting majestic.

Alright, more wine facts, then.

It's hard to overstate the scale and pace of change that is has taken place in this spectacular wine region since the 1990s. The steeply terraced vineyards contain wonderful terroirs, but due to the economic dominance of the Port trade (and the socio-economic struggles of Portugal during the 20th century), it is only recently that Douro vineyards have been afforded the investment (of money and curiosity) needed to produce premium wines. Table wine has long been made here, but has been grim stuff in the past, usually badly made from low quality grapes, surplus to the requirements of Port producers.

Traditional Douro vineyards, whether for Ports or Douro Tintos are planted to a host of varieties (see appendix) which were traditionally inter-planted, co-harvested and co-fermented. These are known as 'field blends'. Of late, there has been a trend towards planting varietal vineyards, particularly of Touriga Nacional and Tinto Roriz. Traditional handling has been to foot tread, macerate and ferment in 'lagares' – open, shallow stone/concrete fermentation vats, and then to age wine in larger, older wood. Lately, there is more stainless steel, new small oak and other international technology in place. Such modernity is a mixed blessing here, as elsewhere, though ...

Antecedent to recent attempts at great Douro red wine was a Douro Superior expression known as 'Barca Velha' (the 'Old Boat'). Inspired by the great wines of Bordeaux, and hoping that the Douro was capable of making fine dry red wine, the management of AA Ferreira sent their head wine-maker on a study trip to Bordeaux in the early 1950s (almost exactly paralleling the story of Penfolds' red wine pioneer in Australia, Max Schubert). Nicolau de Almeida began working on a Ferreira-controlled estate, Quinta do Vale Meão, as source material, and Barca Velha has been intermittently produced since a first, experimental wine from 1952. Very expensive, and stylistically curious, it is nevertheless the precursor to the exciting wines emerging today from the vineyards of the Douro Valley. Back in the 1950s, Almeida had to resort to using blocks of ice protected in a sawdust covering and brought by boat up the Douro from Porto in order to cool his must!

Nowadays, we have the pleasure of Douro reds which avoid 'Portiness' (high alcohol, jammy fruit, low acid, thick and heavy extract). Various factors have helped reach this point. Most importantly, a critical mass of like-minded winemakers has emerged, utilising advances such as temperature-controlled crush-and-ferment, de-stemming and so on. Perhaps more important has been exploration of specific sites, aspects and soils to produce fruit better suited to table wine elegance. The chief locus of these pursuits is a group known as The Douro Boys, inimitably led by Cristiano van Zeller, maker of astonishingly good-and-good-value wines as Quinta do Vale Dona Maria. As well as working on his own project, since the mid-1990s Cristiano has also laboured long helping the other 'Douro Boys', Vallado and Meão in particular.

While the quality of contemporary Douro table wine is good overall, a variety of contradictory styles is emerging, in a similar fashion to the complex changes seen over the past couple of decades in Spain and Italy. Despite mono-varietal plantations, the introduction of new French oak, Inox fermenters - the panoply of technical possibilities - the most interesting wines retain a connection to varietal blends and the use of lagares. Of less interest are varietal Touriga Nacionais produced in accord with contemporary international-modernist orthodoxy, which tend to the heroic and monolithic.

Let's visit some Quintas!

The logical place to continue the story is at Quinta do Vale Meão. This is one of two 'Douro Boy' branches of the familial legacy of Dona Antónia Adelaide Ferreira: Vallado and Meão are cousins and Ferreira descendants. Contemporary Meão wines re-interpret the terroir which gave rise to Barca Velha ...



Quinta do Vale Meão

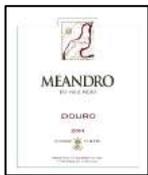
DOC Douro/DOC Porto

Quinta do Vale Meão started life as one of the shrewd acquisitions of Dona Antónia Adelaide Ferreira (owner of 30 quintas by the time of her death). In 1877 she purchased 270 hectares of land near Vila Nova de Foz Côa in Douro Superior, and established a quinta and vineyard; several generations along, now owned by Francisco (Vito) Olazabal. Vito was president of AA Ferreira, which is where Meão's grapes went for a century as Port material, later forming the base of Barca Velha - for decades the most notable table wine to come from the Douro. In 1998, Vito retired from Ferreira, in order to make his own wine from Meão, together with his son (also called Francisco, but known as Xito). Some fruit from Meão is still sold to Ferreira so that Barca Velha (and its second wine, 'Ferreirinha' ... the affectionate diminutive nickname given to Dona Antónia) would still have a base in their historical source.



The Meão Quinta occupies a deep loop (meander) in the upper Douro. Effectively a headland, there are multiple soils and aspects beneath a hilltop forest replete with wild boar (as depicted on the Meão coat of arms). The estate has 62 hectares of vines on three different soil types: slate, granite and alluvial gravel. The Touriga from granite tastes fresh Dão, whereas from schist it's richer and fuller. The vines are planted in varietal blocks: Touriga Nacional 40%, Tinta Roriz 30%, Touriga Francesa 15%, Tinta Amarela 5%, Tinta Barroca 5% and Tinto Cão 5%. From 1998, Meão's old cellar was renovated and turned into a modern winery, but retaining the old granite lagares. Table wine grapes are foot-trodden in lagares, but finish fermentation in temperature-controlled stainless steel. Port grapes are trodden and fully fermented in lagares until spirit is added to stop fermentation and fix residual sugar at the desired level. The first Meão Tinto and Porto releases were from 1999.

Quinta do Vale Meão 'Meandro' Douro



30% Touriga Nacional, 30% Tinto Roriz, 30% Touriga Franca, 5% each Tintas Barroca and Amarela. Named in celebration of the Meão quinta's situation within a meander of the Douro.

Meandro has coal briquette aromatics in which purple fruit pastilles nestle; these replicate in the mouth - luscious fruits sit deep in an intensely earthy palate glinting with dark minerals. There's a glyceric gloss, lovely spice, fine tannin and natural acid nerve.

Quinta do Vale Meão 'Meão' Douro



55% Touriga Nacional, 35% Touriga Franca, with Tinta Roriz and Tinta Barroca. Foot trodden in lagares for 4 hours, then vinified in temperature controlled stainless steel vats. Grape varieties are vinified separately, then blended and aged in Allier barriques (2/3 new).

Meão follows 'Meandro's' themes, with a purple fruit spectrum of baked cherries and India ink, blue flowers, boysenberry and lavender held deep in dark-spiced flashing Douro minerality.

It's a fabulous wine of marvellously controlled lushness.

Quinta do Vale Meão Vintage Port

60% Touriga Franca, 25% Touriga Nacional, with Tinta Barroca, Tinta Roriz, Sousão and other varieties.

An explosive sweet licorice, herbs and blackcurrant pastille nose with sourberry thrills. The sweet, ripe-fruited palate opens to an amazing top'n'tail of spice and chocolate. A wine of great fleshy-velvety volume, with integral tannin-acid framing. Incredibly precise, profound and restrained.

Quinta do Vallado

DOC Douro/DOC Porto

Quinta do Vallado is 30 minutes downstream from Pinhão, 1km north of the Douro along the banks of its tributary river, the Corgo. Vallado is one of the oldest estates in the Douro, and recently celebrated its 300th anniversary. Quinta do Vallado is run by João Ferreira Álvares Ribeiro and Francisco Spratley Ferreira, 6th generation descendants of local legend Dona Antónia Adelaide Ferreira (who owned the Quinta in the 18th century). These are cousins to the Olazabels of Quinta do Vale Meão.



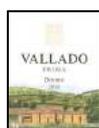
For 200 years, the Quinta focused solely on the production of Ports. These were sold to the family-owned Ferreira Port House. Recently, Vallado has seen great change. Over the past 30 years, the family has focused on table wines and sold off Ferreira (until recently, Ferreira was managed by the Olazabels). Today, production is 80% table wines and 20% Port. The winemaker is Francisco Olazabal (of Vale Meão), operating a new winery spanning 4 levels and constructed to vinify with gravity. The original buildings of the estate have all been restored, marked in classic Vallado orange. The new winery and boutique hotel were built in 2009 from Douro slate, and glisten blue-grey in contrast.

Vallado Vineyards

Vallado's vines have been radically renovated (with 38 ha of new plantings, some of which are in a new Quinta upstream in Douro Superior), and viticultural care has vastly improved. Nestled into the south-west facing slope along the Corgo river, Quinta do Vallado's 70 hectares span much of the hillside, looking vertiginously down to the quinta from between 400 and 800 metres altitude. A treasured old field blend vineyard is astride the top. It is 20 hectares of 90+ year-old bush vines, densely planted, with over 40 varieties identified in the field. The newer vineyards have been replanted with discrete varietal selections from the field blend. Both the renovated and historical vineyards are managed with minimal intervention organic viticulture. Vallado's first release table wine was a 1995 Douro Tinto.

Quinta do Vallado 'Prima' Moscatel Galego

Muscat à Petit Grains, handled at low temperature in stainless steel.



What a clever wine! Punchy Muscat smells immediately morph into Douro schist soil characters. The wine lingers on in an amazing fruit-soil interplay - a complete sublimation of Moscatel's aromatic bossiness. Soft green herbal licks and gentle soulful (soilful) acidity knit in perfectly. Great length, effortless, perfect harmony.

Quinta do Vallado Touriga Nacional Rose

Pale dusty rose with earthen rhubarb fruit, tobacco and light spice. It's savoury, textural, dry, austere and mineral, quietly powerful, arresting. Delightful palate weight, effortless movement.

Quinta do Vallado Douro Tinto

A blend of 70% old, 30% young vineyards. Touriga Nacional 25%, Touriga Franca 25%, with Tinta Roriz, Tinta Barroca and Sousão. The younger vines age in stainless, the older spends 16 months in 3-4 yo French oak.



Red-blue fruits and florals (violet and the local scrubby bush 'Esteva') with smokey blue schist aromatics - definitively 'Douro'! There are lovely cake-bake aromatics - think Clafoutis, along with the stone-soil-berry amalgam. The palate is led by a stony austerity, quite the opposite of any 'Porty' referent. Restrained, fresh-and-earthly wine with lovely fruit spice and super elegant.

Quinta do Vallado Touriga Nacional



Fleshy game meats and mature sweet fruit, blackberry, spice, licorice, black tea and tobacco. Refined oak and creamed berry are the drivers of a slick and not-too-tight palate. This is Touriga Nacional that is showy (all that bergamot and violet floral fruit!) AND texturally interesting as a varietal wine. (Subtly oaked - 16 months in new, 1 and 2 year old barriques).

Quinta do Vallado Ports



Vallado still make Port. They make *very* good Tawny Port - probably the most fine and elegant of all. Vallado's Ports are still aged in old chestnut (chestnut was used instead of oak as the wood is much harder, which was necessary when shipping the barrels on boats down the Douro). The casks are neutral, 600 litres and larger. The Ports are blended from many red varieties, predominantly Tinta Roriz, Tinta Amarela and Touriga Franca.

Quinta do Vallado 10 Year Old Tawny Port

Nuts, straw, field herbs, all very autumnal, but retaining a sense of primary red fruits. Fresh overall, with honey/nut/brulee sweetness on entry. Bright, quality spirit and lovely tannins give a clean, dry finish.

Quinta do Vallado 20 Year Old Tawny Port

Deeper, brandied nuts on nose; riper, rainforest timber and roasted almond. The palate is extraordinarily fine with wonderful interplay between fruit, oak and aged spirit. Entry sweetness is now peanut brittle, grilled bread, panforte. Clean and outrageously long finish. The drying grip of fruit tannins and barrel perfectly frame the wine's stunning elegance of spice, honey and clove down the back. 3% is 65 years old+.

Quinta do Vallado 30 Year Old Tawny Port

The evolution of Tawny, whereby wine character fades into aged spirit of increasing complexity and textural interest, is inadequately resolved until Tawnies reach 10 years, and is theoretically complete by 20 years. Beyond 20 years, the harmony, depth and texture is close to ridiculous!

Quinta do Vallado 40 Year Old Tawny Port

Average age of the material used is actually 60 years. Words fail ...

Quinta do Vallado 1866 Tawny Port 'Tributa Adelaide'

This centennial Port Wine was bottled in honour of Vallado's ancestor Dona Antónia Adelaide Ferreira's 200th anniversary. It's a very rare Colheita Tawny, produced in 1866 (in between the Oidium and Phylloxera crises), a single barrel which was forgotten and not topped for 50 years. The result is huge concentration and viscosity. The wine has plenty of VA, which adds acidity to balance the concentration of sugars. An Elixir!

Quinta do Vallado 'ABF' Very Old Port 1888

Bottled in 2016 to celebrate Vallado's 300th anniversary! There are 900 bottles (crystal decanters) only, and only 300 of these thus far released. Named as an *homage* to António Bernardo Ferreira who purchased Quinta do Vallado in 1818 (ancestor of Adelaide Ferreira and of the current Vallado heirs). It is entirely from pre-phylloxera grapes, aged 120 years in 650 litre old wood cask.

Quinta do Vallado Vintage Port

Vallado's VP is based on very old vines from a field blend rented by Vallado on the Douro Tributary, Rio Torto (near to Cristiano Van Zeller's Quinta do Vale Dona Maria). The balance is Touriga Nacional from the home vineyard. Vinified with foot treading in traditional lagares for 4 days then run into stainless steel with temperature control and aged 20 months.

LAVRADORES de FEITORIA

DOC Porto

The 'farmers of the marked-out land' (Lavradores are farmers). This is a collaboration of 19 quintas across the 3 sub-regions of the Douro (Baixa Corgo, Cima Corgo and Douro Superior). Started in 2000, this 'kind-of-co-operative' has 48 shareholders selecting from 600 hectares of possible source material, thus summing the Douro. The wine world's Ultimate Super Group?!



The term 'Feitoria' denotes the Douro's history as a trading post, a superior land within which to make wine for export trade (predominantly for cod and textiles with the English). In 1756, the Marquês de Pombal had the region officially demarcated, by 335 totems, which served as boundary stones. This made Douro the first demarked wine area in human history.

The Lavradores wines are a refined pan-Douro expression.

Boal, Codega, Gouveio, Malvasia, Sauvignon and Viosinho are source code for the white.

The red is from Alvarelhão, Tinta Amarela, Tinta Barroca, Tinta Roriz, Tinta Cão, Tourigas Franca & Nacional.

LAVRADORES de FEITORIA Douro Branco

Fruit from the Douro's highest, coolest slopes, fermented in stainless steel.

Malvasia Fina (60%) with Gouveio and Síría (Codega), from vines around 30 years' age.



A nose of crunchy citrus with a plop of white peachy-richness is nuanced with subtle herb and spice touches. The palate has clever textural elaboration – it gets spread and mouthfeel down and back after a fresh entry, and then relaxes and releases. The citrus-orchard fruit hybrid is beautifully balanced between lemon drop and pear. Mid-weight, rounded in the middle with good length, freshness and pop.

LAVRADORES de FEITORIA Douro Tinto

Unwooded, based on Touriga Franca (50%), with Tinta Roriz, Touriga Nacional and Tinta Barroca. Fermented in stainless steel. I love the textural maturity of this wine. It has fantastic typicity, unmasked by oak, but none of the 'tin can, going nowhere' constraint that steel can promote. No handcuffs on this.



Beautiful, slightly meaty cherry-choc fruit with ashy-spicy licorice-and-earth underpinning. Nimble and relatively delicate, this speaks Douro plain and simple. Nicely clipped glycerine allows fruit and earth to talk loudest, with gentle but structurally effective tannin. The wine is harnessed beautifully and gathers to release with ease. Unwooded but mature, with no callow gassy joven edges, it has a good whack of flavour and great composure. Glinting mineral and tar, with nice juice relief, it's fun, typical, and delicious.

Quinta do Vale Dona Maria (by Cristiano van Zeller)

DOC Douro/DOC Porto

Dona Maria is the property of Cristiano van Zeller, former owner of legendary Port house, Noval. After his family sold Noval, Cristiano set out to promote and foster a certain attitude and marketing thrust in the Douro: the specialist, small-volume, vineyard-based Quinta. Cristiano is the driving force behind 'The Douro Boys' – a collection of great Quinta-based producers. As well as Vale Dona Maria, these include Niepoort, Vallado, Meão, and the wines of Cristiano's head winemaker, Sandra Tavares (albeit not very much of a Boy at all!). These quintas have co-operated (under Cristiano's leadership) for 20 years, slowly achieving elegance and finesse in full-flavoured Douro table wines. Each is family-owned and quinta-based.



Vale Dona Maria is situated in the (relatively cool) valley of a tributary to the Douro, Rio Torto. It's a property long held in ownership by Cristiano's wife Joana's family. There are 16 hectares of old field blend vineyards (50 years+), 10 hectares of younger vines planted in 2004 and 5 hectares of vineyards under management. Orientation is a cool north/north-west. A considerable amount of time, energy, planning and expense has gone into re-vivifying vineyards. These, and the physical plant of the estate, were run down and neglected when Cristiano and Joana took over the property. During their first years at Dona Maria, about 70% of the production was port wines, and 30% table wines. Now the balance has reversed. Like the vineyards, the winery needed renovation, and a new cellar was constructed. Modern temperature-controlled granite lagares were installed, coupled with stainless steel tanks and clean newish oak.

Vale Dona Maria Tinto

Bottled without any fining or filtration after 18 months ageing in French oak casks, Quinta Vale Dona Maria Douro is foot-trodden in lagares for 12 to 24 hours and are then fermented in temperature-controlled oak vats with manual pigeage before malo and ageing in barrique.



Small goods meatiness, pippy spice, raspberry high notes and fabulous dark depths on the nose. The wine opens to coal-tar, black earth and mace perfumes floating up off terroir tells of mineral-stone-licorice. Gamey-savoury and plush: very high quality red-black fruit with terrific underlying tannin structure. A long, dark, very spicy finish. Oak is fine and deft, sitting inside and structuring the fruit.

Vale Dona Maria Ports

Ports from Torto river valley are full-bodied and, well structured, with a deep, dark purple colour, and concentrated aromas of mature fruits - blackberries, black cherries, red plums. Tannins are ripe and soft and the wines have a very long finish. All Ports are foot trodden in lagares throughout the fermentation. Half the eventual spirit of the Port is added early in the fermentation to slow and cool this phase, before the balance is added to stop fermentation and fix sugar at the desired level.

Vale Dona Maria LBV (Late-bottled Vintage) Port, 375ml

Unfiltered, having spent just under four years maturing in cask, this is very elegant Vintage Port material. The blue-note, sarsaparilla fruit has lovely tannin definition, and is genuinely great value.

Vale Dona Maria Vintage Port



A blend of 25 traditional Douro grape varieties. Grapes are foot-trodden, together with 15% of the total spirit which would be added to the final Port (more is added once fermentation starts). The must and spirit stays in the lagar for a few days, with a short 10 minute treading twice a day. It's then racked to vat together with the pressings (from traditional basket presses). The wines age in ancient (over 100 years old) oak and chestnut casks for 18 months.

Niepoort Vinhos

DOC Douro/DOC Porto

Niepoort has been an independent family business since 1842.

Through five generations the business has passed from one Niepoort to the next. In most cases, the older and younger generations worked side by side for a long period. The fifth generation, Eduard Dirk Niepoort is now head of the business. Dirk joined his father Rolf in the family business in 1987, and set about adding a viable table wine wing to the long-standing Port operations.



Niepoort's Port production has been consolidated in a winery in Vale Mendiz - a valley in the heart of traditional Port growing and making in Cima Corgo. Table wines are now grown and made lower in the Douro at Quinta do Nápoles. The Niepoort table wines project commenced with the first Redoma Tinto in 1991; the first Redoma Branco was from 1995.

Niepoort Vineyards

Dirk has acquired two Quintas for red wine production: Quinta de Nápoles and Quinta do Carril, which are adjacent to one another in lower Cima Corgo. Niepoort's white wines are from an 80 yo high altitude blue slate vineyard in the Covas Valley at the margin of the Cima Corgo, near the upper Douro.

All of the fruit grown by Niepoort is organic.



The main holding is Quinta de Nápoles, which was purchased by Niepoort in 1987, and has nearly 30 hectares of vineyard. The vines are at an altitude around 250m and are aged from 20 to more than 70 years. Located on the left bank of river Têdo (one of several key tributaries to the Douro), Quinta de Nápoles is where Niepoort makes their red, white and rosé wines. (Note: it is an interesting point that the best Cima Corgo red producers, Niepoort, Vallado and Vale Dona Maria are all situated in relatively cool sites on tributaries to the Douro – Niepoort at two locations on the Têdo and Pinhão Rivers, Vallado on the Corgo itself and Dona Maria on the Torto). Quinta de Carril, situated next to Quinta de Nápoles, was purchased by Niepoort in 1988. The slate of Carril has more blue stone than the soft yellow schist of Nápoles.

A new winery (a hell of a new winery!!)

Next came the new winery, completed in time for the 2007 harvest at Quinta do Nápoles.

It's an amazing underground gravity-fed job, air-conditioned by a mountain block of Douro schist heart rock.

Without and below it features amazing stone-masonry made from countless thousands of chunks of local slate.

Fruit is hand sorted, destemmed and handled entirely by gravity. Fermentation takes place mostly in open circular stainless steel 'lagares', with some Seguin Moureau foudre also in use. All whites are sulphur-blocked after fermentation to avoid malo, which would otherwise destroy all trace of the Douro mineral terroir.



Niepoort Table Wines

Niepoort make a lot of wines now, including many 'projects' in regions outside of the Douro (in both Portugal and Spain), often in collaboration with other producers (for example, Dirk makes the single vineyard Mencia, 'Ladredo' from one of Pedro Perez's select plots at Adegas Guimaro in Ribeira Sacra).

TSA concentrates on the 'essential' Niepoort table wines, which reflect the Douro in a pure and classical manner, albeit with appropriate contemporary technical assistance.

Niepoort 'Redoma' Branco



The vineyards for the Redoma White are from 400 to 800 metres altitude in the upper reaches of Cima Corgo. Here the schist is pale brown with mica. These are cooler soils (particularly at night), allowing longer ripening with retained acidity. The vineyards are over 60 years old, some more than 100. The main variety is Rabigato, with Codega and others. The wine is fermented then aged (without malo) for 8 months in French oak barrels. A 'Redoma' is a Cloche-glass dome, and the name (for both white and red) refers to the preciousness inside the glass, not what's projected from outside.

Redoma has a very fresh, delicate and mineral character, with apple-pear fruit marked by orange blossom. Harmonious oak gives a slightly creamy structure, held by persistent natural acidity through to a mineral, salty, long finish.

Niepoort 'Vertente'



Vertente means 'the slope of a hill' ... at which there are always several ways to look. The innovation alluded to is Dirk's use of temperature controlled stainless steel lagares, in which the wine is trodden and fermented before 16 months in oak – tradition both retained and tweaked. The extraction is gentle, to promote delicacy. The fruit is a selection of Tinta Roriz, Touriga Franca and Tinta Amarela from 60yo vines.

Vertente has red berry fruit run through by smoky-ashy Douro schist aromas. There's game, husky-nuttiness, and back notes of cola, cold tea and briar. The palate has good volume of sweet fleshy fruit and cleansing-dry tea-like fruit tannins. Very subtle oak is tucked well in. Overall, it's a lively, fresh wine of just about mid-weight - a calm, fine and refined expression of Douro red berry earthiness.

Niepoort 'Redoma' Douro



The fruit is from Quinta do Nápoles, with Tinta Amarela dominant in the field blend. Dirk is the Douro's principal defender of Amarela – a thin-skinned variety that is difficult to grow, but which can yield remarkably delicate, fine red wine. The fruit of Nápoles is open and earthy due to the yellow slate in the predominantly North-facing vineyards. Redoma is fermented with stalks in traditional stone lagares. The cool underground cellar and addition of water jacketing to the lagares for temperature control allows for a traditional expression minus heat or oxidative rusticity. Oak is lovely and very delicate (much of it is old, and 40% is big Italian-made foudre of Slovenian oak).

Open-hearted, earthy and dry, Redoma is deft and deceptively light at first. It fills quickly with the advent of air, revealing complex blue, black and red fruits with tobacco, charred meat, sweet and sour cherry, rock rose florals, wet stones and spicy, earthy minerals. Full tannins and fuzzy acidity are natural structural influences.

Niepoort 'Batuta'



Batuta is from Quinta do Carril, adjacent to Quinta do Nápoles. Like Redoma, it has Tinta Amarela as its basis in a field blend (south facing at around 200m) of 100 year-old vines. A high proportion of blue slate here gives focus and minerality. Fermented in stainless steel lagares. The name 'Batuta' means the orchestral conductor's baton, referring to the control and order resulting from blue slate and stainless steel.

Ethereally perfumed, with exquisite dark cherry cola/bitter chocolate fruit, mountain herbs, tobacco, soy and cool-but-spicy-ashy minerals. Mild, beautifully integrated, very fine.

NIEPOORT PORT WINES

Niepoort Dry White Port (aperitif style)

Made from white grapes (Malvasia, Viosinho and Gouveio). The juice is fermented as a white wine until the fermentation is stopped by the addition of grape spirit; aged in wood for 3 years. 43 g/l residual sugar.

Niepoort Ruby Port

Ruby Port is a young, ripping red berry fruit-earth-spice style, and is just delicious. It keeps well for several years, although the wine will not improve with age. No decanting is necessary as the wine contains no sediment (this is all deposited during its 3 years' ageing in large neutral oak). 100 g/l residual sugar.

Niepoort Late-Bottled Vintage Port 375ml

Late-bottled Vintage Port aged for 6 years in old oak casks. Unfiltered, will develop over several years.

Niepoort Vintage Port

The magic of Vintage Port is that it is so different in every phase: as a young wine it's all power and youthful fruit characters; after 20 years, the effects of spirit maturation and integration are revealed; after decades really fine mature old spirit dominates the wine. VP is amazing in all three phases. Decant.

1986 Niepoort 'Colheita' Tawny Port

Colheitas are dated Tawnies aged in cask, with a minimum ageing requirement of 7 years, but the tradition is to age for longer in casks before bottling. Taking on a tawny hue, exaggerated wood and nutty tones are evident on the palate from slow ageing in old casks. Colheita Port does not need decanting.

1952 Niepoort 'Garrafeira'

Garrafeira Ports are a speciality of Niepoort. These VPs from a single year age for decades, not in wood but in special small glass 'demijons' (7 to 11 litre glass balloons in the form of old apothecary bottles). Demijons are no longer produced so at Niepoort 18th century glass is used and re-used.

A word on Port wine

Port wine, simply defined, is fortified wine from the Douro Valley, and is recorded as a commercial export from Porto since 1678. In truth, it's a wee bit more complicated than that!



For starters, fortification has only been the norm since early in the 19th century. The title of this section quotes the Scot, JJ Forrester whose 1844 book, "A Word or two about Port Wine" took aim at those who 'tampered' with natural (ie dry, unfortified) Port. Forrester died in a boating accident on the Douro (Adelaide Ferreira was his companion, but survived, as her giant hooped skirts trapped air and kept her afloat!). Anyway, Forrester perhaps anticipated in spirit the Single Quinta movement and the move to dry, elegant unfortified Douro wines. In the meantime, there is a 200 years-strong tradition of adding 'aguardente' to Port, in a 115-to-435 litre ratio to fill a standard 550 litre Port 'pipe' (wooden barrel). Port is roughly 1/5th of 77% abv spirit. This is erroneously termed 'brandy' in much writing about Port, a term which more properly refers to the 95% pure alcohol spirits added to Sherry, Madeira and Australian fortifieds.

Next, there are two distinct streams of Port:

- Ports matured to readiness in wood (all White, Ruby & Tawny, most Late-bottled Vintage Ports)
- Ports matured to readiness in bottle (all Vintage and some LBV Ports).

This distinction is in need of nuance: an LBV can be aged in cask for as much as 6 years and be classed as bottle-finished, whereas a Ruby could be bottled with only a year or so of cask maturation, yet be called a 'wood'-finished wine. The strength of definition comes from delineating how each wine gets to be "ready to drink": all those classified as 'wood' types are fully mature, stable and ready to drink when put into bottle,

whereas (even with significant wood maturation prior to bottling) Vintage Ports will continue to mature, hence the bottle is the origin of their ultimate state. Late-bottled Vintage Ports can be classified as either type (see definition below).

Port production commences with fruit sourcing and fermentation in the Douro Valley, of course, but ageing has historically taken place in Vila Nova de Gaia – the twin city of Porto on the south bank of the Douro at the coast. Traditionally, the large Port houses based themselves in Gaia – a centre for ageing, blending, marketing and exportation. Recall the old imagery of Port workers rolling barrels down the Douro river to Gaia? No longer exactly how it's done ...! Some of the newer Single Quinta houses (such as the Douro boys) now do all of the cellar work on their estates up in the Douro itself. Many continue to make their Ports in Gaia, and some do both. Vila Nova de Gaia is a spectacular site for wine tourism - the south bank of the Douro is festooned with giant Port house branding just before the river breaches into the Atlantic.

Traditional Douro grape-growing has been on terraces (Socalcos) carved out of the steep schist slopes rising up from the river. Vineyard work was done by man and mule, and planting density was very high – around 6,000 vines/hectare, reducing vine vigour and promoting quality. In the 70s, many vineyards were re-planted to broader ramps (Patamares) allowing small tractors access, at the cost of reducing densities to 3,500 vines/ha. Recently, plantings called Vinha ao Alto running upslope allowed mechanisation and density around 5,000 vines/ha. (The latter two are only possible on less steep slopes).

Making Port starts with a relatively short, vigorous process of extraction and fermentation. Roga (gangs of foot-treaders) extract colour, flavour and tannin by treading grapes in shallow stone lagares before a short fermentation of just 2-3 days, after which fermentation is stopped by the addition of 77% a/v aguardente (fortifying spirit), leaving the requisite residual sugar in the wine. It is then racked to barrels and allowed to 'fall bright' over winter, with sediment and tartrates dropping into the bottom of the vat.



BOTTLE-MATURED PORT STYLES

Vintage Port is sort of a “that’s not a Wine, THIS is a Wine” opportunity!

VP is the finest quality level of Port, and heroically concentrated. It’s a red wine which finds balance and harmony at heightened levels of: picking ripeness, fruit richness, residual sugar, tannin formation, alcohol content and barrel influence. All that input aside, since they *do* in fact balance extremely well, VPs can be remarkably elegant and drinkable, and not just imposingly, demandingly concentrated. VPs are made from fruit entirely of a single harvest and are aged roughly two years in 550 litre wooden barrels known as Pipes. The wines do the majority of their maturation in glass - the classic thick, black port bottle.

Vintage Port may be bottled anytime until July 30th of the third year from harvest (ie, they can see up to 30 months in oak, roughly). Most VP need upwards of fifteen years before they are ready, and may last for decades more. It is important to note that VP suffers a flat spot about 5 years from harvest, and unlike other drinks which suffer similarly (Riesling, for one), the ‘dip’ period can be 10 years or more of surly adolescence. Drink them less than 5 or more than 15 years from harvest is a simple rule of thumb to observe.

A ‘declared vintage’, broadly interpreted, is one in which the majority of major houses release a VP. There is no ‘official’ process, nor existence of an objective list of declared vintages: releasing, or declaring a vintage is the purview of each shipper, and the ‘list’ is effectively retrospective, when it is clear that most producers have declared and successfully so. However, the whole process is changing very quickly, due to changed ideas and aspirations, particularly the advent of the Single Quinta of Origin Producers, such as The Douro Boys. Now, it will be common to see good-to-great VPs released most years, as these producers aim to reflect their estate’s vintage variation successfully and faithfully (albeit in tiny quantities compared to the ‘Big Houses’). However, the SQQOPS are not the only meaning of the Single Quinta term in Port wine

marketing. The Big Port Houses typically have several quintas in their ownership, and even more from whom they purchase fruit. These various quintas are typically blended to make Big Brand Name Vintage Ports, released in better years at significant asking cost. Big Port Houses use their Single Quinta proprietary names as second labels, and release SQ Vintages more cheaply in lesser years to preserve the 'brand'.

Garrafeira VPs: The so-called Garrafeira Vintages are a specialty of Niepoort. These ports from a single year age for decades, firstly in wood, then for a long time in special small glass 'demijons' (7 to 11 litre glass balloons in the form of old apothecary's bottles). These Demijons are no longer produced, so Niepoort use and re-use ancient glass in a secluded, very quiet cellar in Vila Nova de Gaia. Note, as with Madeiras and also Colheita Tawnies, the aged character of a Garrafeira VP is a function of both the year of harvest and the year of bottling. A given vintage aged in Garrafeira may well be bottled several times at different effective ages over many years as different demijons are decanted-and-bottled.

Late-bottled Vintage Port (LBV) is a VP-variant and also from a single year. The wine is aged longer though, spending 4-6 years in wood, and are more mature when bottled than regular VPs. LBVs are earlier, easier, cheaper VPs, typical, delicious, and really good value wines.

There are 2 distinct styles of LBV:

- LBVs bottled unfiltered (and relatively early at 4 years), will taste, feel and behave like a slightly forward VP. These are closed with a driven cork, will age in bottle and should be decanted. These are, of course, considered bottle-matured Ports.
- LBVs bottled later (towards 6 years), and filtered will be stable and fully-develop. Usually closed with a stopper, rather than driven cork, these are classified as wood-matured. Single Quinta producers such as the Douro Boys prefer the former, Big Port houses, favour the latter.

WOOD-MATURED PORT STYLES

Ruby Port is fresh, relatively young and fruity, bottled after 1 to 3 years ageing in 'bulk' (large concrete, wood or steel vats). The fruit is selected more for its soft red fruits than for tannin. It's an excellent value drinking style and much preferable to Tawnies without indication of age.

Tawny Ports are residually sweet Douro reds aged in oak for a long time, resulting in a faded tawny colour, reduced fruitiness and vinosity, with developed spirit. Affecting a deep, mutually-conditioned marriage of matured red wine and characterful spirit is the aim. This takes at least 10 years to begin, and 'completes' after 20 years. Tawnies labelled without indication of age, ie not declaring they are matured 10 years or more, are inferior to honest young Ruby Ports (even though these are less expensive).

Cask or barrel size is a variable in ageing Tawny, as is duration of maturation, and also location. Coastal cellars at Vila Nova de Gaia have moderate, stable temperature (thus less annual evaporation: 1-2%) compared to those up in the Douro. Douro-aged wines experience higher, more variable temperatures with more annual evaporation (3%). These exhibit more 'vinagrinho' (a volatile vinegar tickle), and what can be an attractively complexing 'Douro bake' character, if quality control is good. Many components of different age and origin are blended to construct house-style Tawnies of 10, 20, 30, even 40 years.

Colheita Tawny Ports are single year wines, bottled and labelled according to their 'Colheita', or year of harvest (avoid the word 'vintage' in this context!). The minimum age requirement is 7 years, with no maximum, but these wines mature more quickly and broadly than blended Tawnies. Also note that Colheita bottlings carry 2 dates: that of harvest and also the bottling date. It's possible for the same Colheita to be bottled with relatively little or comparatively great cask-aged development.

White port is made from white grapes: Malvasia, Viosinho and Gouveio most commonly. The juice is fermented as a white wine until fermentation is stopped by the addition of grape spirit. This allows for a range of resultant sweetness styles, depending on how far towards dryness the fermentation goes before being stopped. White Port is a relatively heavy aperitif wine, often lightly (and sometimes quite) sweet, with

a hint of oxidation. The worst are short-aged in epoxy-lined concrete, or stainless steel. Better wines spend time maturing in large wooden vats or even in proper Pipes (550 litre oak barrels).

Sugar (a final note): one of the truly fascinating things in wine is the relativity of sugar. To the 'average' palate, table wine is dry at 4 grams/litre residual sugar or less; fizz at 12 g/l or less, and Madeira at below 60 grams! What then is sugar in Port? Here are a few numbers: Niepoort's 'Dry' White Port, 43 grams/litre; Niepoort Ruby 103; Vallado Tawny 110, Niepoort LBV 100, Vale Dona Maria Vintage Port 100 g/l.

Portugal's main grape varieties

The list below is only of the most prominent and high quality varieties – there are dozens more. Also note that the list of names is not exhaustive, but to give all details would be exhausting. For example, in Extramadura, Tinta Roriz-Aragonez-Tempranillo is called Abundante; however in Alentejo, the name Abundante is used for Garnacha! The list of synonyms applied with no genetic consistency across dozens of appellations will easily do your head in ...

RED GRAPES

Alfrocheiro is native to Dão (locally called 'Pé de Rato, or mouse paw), but also grows in Bairrada, Alentejo and other parts. Its genetic origins are not clear, but there are strong links to the French variety Trousseau (also planted in small quantities as Bastardo on Madeira). Alfrocheiro is a high quality grape, but its small bunches of small berries are highly susceptible to rot and oidium. It yields well and ripens early, helping to avoid disease. Alfrocheiro gives bold-coloured wines of intense blackberry aroma and flavour, with spice-anise-mint relief. It has dense but sleek tannins and good acid freshness.

Alicante Bouschet is pink-fleshed as well as pink skinned, of bold flavour and structure. Best as blending material to provide oomph, it's naturally rustic and fairly soupy in terms of tannin structure.

Baga is a small berried, late-ripening red variety grown in Bairrada, with plantings also in Dão, Estramadura and Ribatejo. When goblet trained (bush vines) and grown in well-drained soils with good sun exposure Baga can produce dark, lusciously perfumed wines capable of bottle ageing. Wines from fertile soils tend towards being lighter in alcohol and have a harder acid structure. With a high skin-to-juice content, managing the fierce tannins of Baga is the key, as the wines can be green and astringent, and de-stemming is essential.

Bastardo is found in many old vintages of Port wine. Known as Trousseau in France and Cabernet Gros in Australia, it contributes a full-bodied wine with sweet, date-like aromas. Pale in colour and fades quickly to onion skin - hence a useful contributor to Tawny Port styles. Also a rare Madeiran variety.

Jaen thrives in the cold granite soil of the Dão region (this grape is the same as Spain's low acid Mencía). It adds sweet fragrance and good balance to some blends, but is rarely noble.

Sousão is a red-fleshed grape, now at home in the Douro. It forms the backbone of Noval's legendary and expensive ungrafted single vineyard VP, Nacional. Mainly useful for colour, it has a tendency towards rasping astringency.

Tinta Amarela Also known in Portugal as Trincadeira (and as Espadaira in Alentejo), it is a Niepoort specialty. With its susceptibility to disease (it rots at a glance when in contact with humidity), and ability to "go from green to gone" in no time at all, it is "worse than Pinot to grow" according to former Niepoort winemaker Luis Seabra. Only Niepoort take it seriously and are committed to retaining it in the forefront of the blend for Batuta and Redoma, as it is the predominant variety in the field blends of Quinta do Carril. On exposed, dry soils it yields fine, poised, fragrant wine of great balance.

Tinta Barroca is a popular Douro variety. Thin-skinned and prone to shrivel and raisining, Tinta Barroca responds best to cooler situations and brings good yields of fragrant cherry-plum wine to fill and soften Port blends.

Tinta Cão - the Red Dog is not widely grown, but graces some Port wine blends with its wildflower aromas and bilberry fruit. Late ripening, of relatively low yield and low alcohol, it is a quality Douro varietal, albeit a delicate and tricky one.

Tinta Roriz (aka Tempranillo) is common in most Port/Douro blends, enriching both with dark, softly tannic fruit. In the South, its name changes to Aragonez, but in regions such as Alentejo it suffers from the heat and fails to attain the nobility it achieves in the blends of the Douro. Well-suited to the climatic cycles of the Douro, Tinta Roriz flowers late to avoid Spring frosts, and ripens early to avoid Autumn rain.

Touriga Franca (aka Touriga Francesa): there is speculation that Franca is either a recent mutation of Nacional, or the result of a varietal cross with Nacional (Franca is not recorded pre-phylloxera). It brings violet florals, wild herbs and red fruit to many Port wines. It's the most heavily planted variety in Douro Port vineyards. Touriga Franca flourishes in the warmer Douro sites and south-facing slopes. High yielding and able to produce full sugars, deep colour and supple structure. TF has a marked earthy-rustic tendency, hence it remains a blender, virtually never bottled alone. (Elsewhere in the world, including Australia, wherever a variety called 'Touriga' is grown, it's equally likely to be Franca or Nacional).

Touriga Nacional is now considered by many the best of Portugal's native varieties. Surprisingly, it's only the 8th-most planted of Douro varieties. After the ravages of phylloxera, TN was less favoured during replanting than may have been the case, on account of its uneconomic yields: it's a poor performer on rootstocks, with less than half the natural yield of Touriga Franca. Now, many Quintas are re-planting old field blends as mono-varietal stands of Touriga Nacional. Its rich-coloured wines are intensely fruity and tannic, but velvety, and age very well. Floral aromatics of violet/bergamot can be haunting. Despite these positives, it produces texturally boring wines as a straight varietal, especially in a modernist regime (high and even levels of ripening, temperature-controlled stainless steel fermentation and ageing in new small barrels).

WHITE GRAPES

Alvarinho (aka Albariño in Spain) offers wines with a fruity essence and well-balanced flavours. Virtually only grown in the far north of Portugal, just below the River Minho (the border with its Spanish home). Alvarinho grapes have a high pip ratio giving texture to fruit accented with apple, jasmine, orange blossom aromatics.

Arinto (aka Padernã) makes a fresh, steely white – sometimes overly so in Vinho Verde, where it can retain formidable levels of natural acidity and is prone to expressing in a highly vegetal register. Most often blended with Loureiro and Trajadura to make balanced Vinho Verde.

Bical (bee-kahl) is typically found in the Beiras region, in Dão and Bairrada. In the Dão it is called "Borrado das Moscas" (fly droppings) because of small specks on the skin. An early ripener, Bical has naturally high acidity; it is also rot resistant, but is very sensitive to powdery mildew). Bical can make wonderfully scented peachy, textured wines with crisp finishing acidity.

Cerceal: is grown across Portugal, under several guises: Cercial (or Esgana de Cão) in Douro and Dão, Cerceal in Bairrada, but it is not the same as Sercial on Madeira. Cerceal is characterised by delicate aroma and good acidity, yet as a mono-varietal wine it can be lacking and is usually blended with other white varieties such as Bical, Malvasia Fina and Sercialinho (a cross of Sercial from Madeira with Alvarinho, bred to improve acidity.)

Códega is the most-planted white in the Douro, and also goes by the names of Síria, Castelo Rodrigo or Alvadurão elsewhere in Portugal (and is the same as Spain's Doña Blanca). Light-skinned, and aromatic, Códega yields well and produces soft, low acid fruit, delicate and elegant melon/peach in tone.

Encruzado is at home in the Dão, and is a promising variety of the future. As with Albariño, changing philosophy and the advent of appropriate technology is helping to develop new possibilities for flavoursome, balanced, stylish wine. Encruzado naturally achieves excellent sugar-acid balance and ages well for 5 years or so. It also responds well to barrel fermentation.

Esgana Cão - don't let the translated name "dog strangler" swear you off this grape. It's an important acidic addition to white Port blends.

Gouveio as it is called in the Douro (elsewhere in Portugal it is referred to as Verdelho), is probably Godello, just to confuse things! With good ageing potential and yields, Gouveio produces wines characterised by their excellent structure, intense aromas and balanced acidity.

Loureiro "loo-ray-ro": Literally, "smelling Louro-ish" – Louro being the Atlantic coastal name for the Laurel, or Bay tree. Loureiro wines are floral and smell deeply of lemon and bay. The basic characteristic is a linear, racy and acid wine with low levels of both grape sugar and phenolic material. Loureiro differs significantly from Albariño (with which it is often blended) in its terpene character (the same compounds which inform the aromatics of Riesling and Semillon). When young, the nose presents a complex bouquet of lemon aromatics (leaf, pith, juice and flower) with laurel (bay leaf) florality. With age, complex toasty aromas (similar to developed Eden Valley Riesling and Hunter Semillon) also become apparent. Loureiro ages really well. It is occasionally referred to as Dourada – the golden one.

Malvasia Fina (Boal on Madeira) is one of the oldest white wine grape varieties and delivers full-bodied dry to sweet wines, ripe, honeyed and nutty, perhaps somewhat shapeless. Malvasia Fina is most commonly blended with other white grapes to produce white Ports but can be found in Douro and Dão table wines.

Rabigato At home in the Douro, the 'cat's tail' has elongated bunches, hence the name, and yields well with good acidity at higher altitudes. Mainly used in white table blends, Rabigato adds subtle floral, vegetal and mineral aromas.

Trajadura (aka Treixadura in Rías Baixas, Spain) is popular in Vinho Verde, particularly in the far North. Trajadura yields natural alcohol well above the norm and has relatively low acid, therefore is useful to fill out skinny Loureiros and Arintos.