A guide to the new Douro

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For tasting notes, scores and suggested drinking windows for more than 60 Douro table wines, see purple pages.

Unknown to the rest of the world, wine has become a consuming interest in Portugal. Wine guides proliferate in Lisbon and Oporto. Any Portuguese businessman worth his salt (and British crooner Cliff Richard) has been investing in vineyards or developing his own wine label. The most lauded bottlings sell out as soon as they are released in Portugal.

Meanwhile outside Portugal, most wine buyers, both professional and amateur, are rather snooty about Portuguese wine. Those who import it into the UK complain that they are unable to interest the major retailers in any bottle that would sell for more than £5.

This is a great shame as Portugal is one of the world's most distinctive wine producers, with a host of native grape varieties and, now, some accomplished winemakers well capable of transforming them into thoroughly modern, fruit- filled wines quite unlike the rustic, astringent ferments of old.

The wine region most likely to change perceptions of Portuguese wine quality is the rugged, under- populated Douro valley between Oporto and the Spanish border, famous for port for centuries but now also making increasing quantities of seriously interesting table wine (and some that is much less interesting).

Visitors to the port farms, or quintas, have long been beguiled by the local unfortified wines served there before the serious business of port drinking. Barca Velha, launched by the Ferreira family way back in 1952, existed in splendid isolation as the one famous Douro table until an explosion of interest in the 1990s. Ramos Pinto's Duas Quintas table wine has been around for longer than most (though seems to have been definitively overtaken in terms of quality, despite being part of the Louis Roederer champagne empire). The Bergqvists at Quinta de la Rosa were some of the first of the new wave producers to take table wine as seriously as port. And the restlessness of Dirk van der Niepoort of the eponymous port house has also been a huge fillip to the development of the Douro as a table wine region. His Batuta, Charme, Vertente and Redoma, unusually available in pink and white versions too, have shown just what can be done with will and imagination.

For a surprisingly long time the best- known port producers refused to countenance this 'waste of good port grapes', and the Taylors group,aka The Fladgate Partnership, is yet to take the plunge and claim they never will, despite having an Australian- trained winemaker in charge. Their great rivals the Symington Family finally embraced Douro table wine in 1998 when they entered into a joint venture with Bruno Prats who had just sold Ch Cos d'Estournel in Bordeaux. Chryseia is the result, and it sells rather grandly alongside France's classed growths on the Bordeaux *place*.

The Symingtons also make the relatively inexpensive (and unexciting) Altano blend and the much more ambitious Quinta do Roriz table wine in a joint venture with João van Zeller. His cousin Cristiano, who managed Quinta do Noval for the van Zeller family before it was sold to AXA in 1994, has fingers in even more Douro table wine pies in the form of his own Quinta do Vale Dona Maria, responsibility for exporting one of the older table wine names Quinta do Vallado, and the joint venture Domini with the Soares Franco brothers. Their cousin Jose Maria is chief winemaker of Sogrape, the Mateus rose firm which now owns the Barca Velha brand and the Quinta de Leda wine farm. Basically, everyone in Douro wine is related to everyone else.

The most talented winemakers also tend to spread their tentacles wide. Sandra Tavares da Silva makes the table wine for both Domini and Quinta do Vale Dona Maria as well as having established her own Pintas label with her husband Jorge Serodio Borges who made wine at Dirk Niepoort's Quinta de Passadouro until April 2004. Quinta de la Rosa's winemaker also has his own Quinta da Terra Feita de Cima and makes quite a different style of Douro, crisper than most, under his label Poeria.

A tasting of nearly 70 current examples included some of the most intriguingly successful reds I have seen in months, some reminders of the tough old days, some bland liquids that could have been made anywhere, the usual over- oaked specimens and the odd wine that could hardly decide whether it was a Douro wine or a bordeaux.

Since so much effort is now being put in to making table wine from the very wide range of climates, soils and expositions that exist within the Douro, it would be a mistake to expect them all to conform to a single style. But I must admit that I am looking for some suggestion of the intensity of flavour of a port, but with less alcohol and virtually no sweetness. Grapes grown in this very dry region are typically high in tannin and flavour, Sophisticated management of the tannins is therefore essential, acidification is often necessary and there is no need for extended maceration to extract colour and other phenolics.

Touriga Nacional is the most famous Douro grape, and virtually all the 2003 cask samples I tasted of this grape were the most flagrantly, fragrantly floral wines I can ever remember encountering as a group. Dirk Niepoort is a particular fan of Tinta Amarela for table wines. Others treasure the structure offered by the grape now called Touriga Franca (once Francesa), or Tinto Cão for its perfume, while the Symingtons include some Barroca in Altano.

Of recent vintages, 2002 was notably less successful than the others and was often consigned to a second label such as Chryseia's Post Scriptum, Domini's straight Domini (rather than the more usual Domini Plus) and Quinta do Vale Meão's Meandro. The finest 21st century examples I have tasted are listed here with relevant UK merchant and approximate price but, thanks to demand from those Portuguese wine fanatics, they are rarely cheap. They do offer the discerning wine drinker a whole new range of flavours however.

For detailed tasting notes and scores on more than 60 Douro table wines see the purple pages of www.jancisrobinson.com

Favourite Douro table wines

Pintas 2003, Wine & Soul (Corney & Barrow, London E1 eventually)
Pintas 2001, Wine & Soul (Corney & Barrow, London E1)
Charme 2002, Niepoort (www.winesfromportugal.com)

Quinta do Crasto, Vinha Maria Teresa 2001 (Adnams of Southwold)

Batuta 2001, Niepoort (www.winesfromportugal.com)

Chryseia 2003, Prats & Symington (fine wine traders)
Quinta do Vale Meão 2001 (www.winesfromportugal.com)
Quinta de la Rosa Reserve 2003 (Berry Bros & Rudd, London SW1 eventually)

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