

Souzão, and indeed Sousão, grapes

3 Sep 2008 by JR

David Churchill, Toronto :

I was recently reading about Allesverloren's - momentary sidebar: this has got to be my favourite winery name in the world, as it means "all is lost" - port. In the blend, they make reference to a grape called Souzau. I can find few if any references to this grape outside of this winery and Ficklin in California . What is it?

me:

It's a traditional port grape, innit? And therefore Souzão or Sousão rather than Souzau. I sent out a couple of requests for information to Oporto and here's what came back, much appreciated in the middle of harvest and surely just about all one could want to know - although I will check the Noval/ Souzão connection (see Christian Seely below).

Paul Symington, Oporto :

Souzão has not been widely planted in the Douro over the last 20 years as people have concentrated on the so called 'classics', Touriga Franca, Touriga Nacional, Roriz [Tempranillo] and Barroca. But it can be found in the old mixed vineyards which are still fairly widespread.

However we [in the Symington group including Dow, Graham and Warre] have some interest in Souzão for various reasons:

- It has very high natural acidity, a very useful trait in the Douro where the wines often have relatively low acidity due to the soil and the excellent hot ripening conditions. In fact our regular maturation studies done last week (to fix our picking dates) showed Souzão giving double the acidity of the mainstream varieties.

- Souzão has massive colour. As the grape ripens, the skin colour actually turns the pulp a reddish colour. This colour is very useful. Some say that the colour drops out of the wine quite quickly, but we are not sure that this is actually true.

We have 7,200 Souzão vines at Vesuvio. At Quinta de Roriz (which we jointly own with João van Zeller), we have 4,070 Souzão vines.

At the Warre Quinta da Cavadinha, we prepared earlier this year 1.7 ha of experimental vineyard which will, next January, be planted with various lesser well known varieties, including Souzão.

Richard Mayson in his book on Portuguese wines says that Souzão is the same as Vinhão, a variety widely planted in the Minho for red Vinho Verde, a wine you would not want to drink unless forced to do so at gun point.

Hope this is useful.

Miles Edelmann adds:

As a member of the Symington viticultural team, I received your forwarded email about Souzão from Paul. I apologise for the delay in replying, but as you can imagine we are fairly busy at this time of year! From our experience in the Douro , I can give you the following information:

The grape has two major characteristics: massive acidity and very good colour. Other than this, the flavour is really pretty neutral so it is definitely a blending grape. It also has a thick skin but the tannins are relatively soft - it is astringent but not aggressive. The tough skin also gives it good disease resistance, obviously. The most curious characteristic about the grape is the skin/ pulp interface which appears to be very weak. This means that the skin slips off the rest of the berry very easily, but in doing so this interface is invariably damaged, releasing considerable colour. Thus, although the pulp itself is not coloured, it appears to be so as splitting a berry inevitably involves pigment release from the skin. The ease of colour extraction makes very dark wines. Curiously, some dark, pigmented veins are present in the pulp, and there is also some slight red pigment accumulation around the seeds, which themselves have bright red speckled patches. The leaves also show bright red pigmentation much early on in the season than would be suggested by senescence. It is comparable with Alicante Bouschet in this respect, but the colour scheme is slightly different: whereas Alicante gives the impression of purple patches on dark green leaves, the Souzão leaves are a paler, yellowy green and the red a much more vivid colour.

The bunches are compact and roughly conical, although a fair percentage are winged on one side at the shoulder. Bunch size is small to medium, and the berries are small. Visually, the bunch looks much like Touriga Nacional.

Souzão (or Sousão) yields can range from a little on the low side to moderately healthy by Douro standards as, in spite of the small bunch size, it appears to be relatively fertile. This year we are expecting in the region of 1.2 - 1.5 kg per vine.

Ripening is probably on the late side of average, and comparable to Touriga Nacional in terms of sugar accumulation. Recent maturation study data (early September) gives the following range of values for the principal characteristics:

Bé 11.45 - 12.10
pH 3.14 - 3.25
TA 7.05 - 10.35

Note that equivalent TA values for the other varieties range around 4.5 - 5.5 at the moment and its oenological value becomes apparent.

In terms of area under vine, I'm afraid I have very little concrete information. I understand that some exists in California and South Africa, used primarily for port- style wines in both cases I think. In the Douro I would suggest that it is enjoying a resurgence in popularity because of its obvious contribution as a component of port. This is coupled with the general enthusiasm that several of the port companies have to investigate more closely the potential of some of the classic Douro varieties which have existed for hundreds of years in the old mixed plantings, but have rarely been grown in block plantings or afforded the thorough evaluation they deserve. As such, Souzão is currently undergoing a kind of 'rediscovery'. Nevertheless, it remains without a doubt a minor player when compared to the better known port grapes.

I hope this information is useful.

David Guimaraens of the Fladgate Partnership adds:

Souzão is an old variety in the region that up until recently I only came across mixed in old vineyards, except for a batch planting in Nuriootpa, Australia where I made a trial port at college, and at Quinta do Cotto (Miguel Champalimaud) where I once drank a magnificent 1970 table wine made from Souzão.

The variety has since come back into fashion, probably due to its link with the Noval Nacional vineyards where I think(????) it comes in the mix.

Yesterday I was speaking to Francisco Olazabal who has planted some and has just finished making a small trial batch.

As you probably know it is a variety which has a very red pulp, and I believe this is one of the reasons why it has come back into fashion.

I do not like it. However to be fair, you should not go by my judgement as this is only my feeling, and I cannot honestly say that I have trialled it enough to commit to a valid judgement.

We are having a tough start to the vintage, however not all is lost yet. It is all dependent on us having dry weather for the next few weeks.

Christian Seely of AXA/ Noval adds:

Sousão is grape variety that has the reputation in the Douro for giving a lot of colour to a blend at the beginning and then fading away somewhat with age.

We have a small parcel (around 1/2 hectare) at Noval, and it gives good results, though it hardly ever gets into the Quinta do Noval vintage port. There was 0% [?] in 1994 and 2000, a little less than 5% in 1997. This not because of any principle, but because we make the assemblage based on a blind tasting and the Sousão we have from the parcel we have doesn't usually have what it takes to make it into Quinta do Noval Vintage. This of course might just as easily be the parcel of land as the variety.

As for the perception that Sousão does not make for long lasting wines, Noval vinified some small quantities of Sousão separately and aged them separately in barrels from 82/83/83/87/89/90/92/94. We were able to follow their evolution and although the wines lost their colour in the normal way in barrel, they remained of very good quality and we were able to use them in the Noval Old Tawny blends. So I think that it is probably a rather more interesting variety than most people give it credit for.

me:

Well I think we must surely have covered this subject by now - except for failing to agree whether it's spelt Souzão or Sousão.

