

### **The Douro Valley**

Thanks to a perfect climate, great port (Vintage, Tawny, LBV's, Sandman, Taylor's, Calem, Ramos Pinto, Burmester, Barros, Noval) and other wines derive from the Valley of the river Douro, which is crossed by a huge motorway bridge connecting Lisbon and Porto. Yet the emphasis of the article shall be on wines.

In 1986, wine-making was revolutionised in the Douro valley. Smaller wine-growing estates stopped selling their entire harvest to the great port wine houses and introduced a three-level quality grid instead. They now use their finest grapes for their home label (quinta) wine, the second quality bracket crop is used for their own vintages and LBV's, and only their weakest produce is sold to the great port houses. At the same time, the port houses have also started to use their best crops for their own quinta (estate) wines.

This has caused a certain amount of hustle and bustle on both the real estate market and the raw material market in the region, with buyers on the search for the best estates and the finest crop. Quite a novelty to a region whose only renowned wine up to then had been the Barca Velha, which today is produced using bought grapes in contrast to the estate-grown grapes of earlier days.

Another aspect of the revolution is the change that has taken place in planting strategies. Earlier, the finest grapes, Tinta Roriz, Touriga Francesca, Tinto Baroca, for instance, were planted in the higher regions of the valley, whereas "poorer" grapes were grown in a wild mix, so that one type would ripen optimally independent of the weather a season produced. Today, more wine-growers use different methods to estimate which grape will thrive best, where.

The fine Grapes grown in addition to the 3 mentioned are Touriga Nacional and Tinto Cao, yet in recent years, the bold have started to grow Syrah due to the "Australian" conditions in the Valley.

Although the lion's share of wine and port is still pressed by foot, a tendency towards robots and machines is recognisable. Somewhere around 50% of the wine from the region is fermented in barriques and another large portion in steel tanks.

Younger wine-makers have started to work in teams, helping each other out both in everyday affairs and on the international market. Headed by Dirk Nieport, the "quinta quintett" is arguably the most successful of these teams.

In spite of his young age of 40, Dirk is well known to the Danes, as his family has been in the port trade for 5 generations in Vila Nova de Gaia on the bank of the river Douro. An adherent of the "natural method", Dirk and his staff of wine specialists have done some research into the history of wine making methods in the region and have been buying new estates together with investors. The fine wines produced under the aegis of Dirk are Redoma Tinto, Redorra Branco, Batuta, Charme and Quinta de Napoles.

Another member of the "quinta quintett" is Christiano van Zeller, who runs Quinto do Vale Donna Maria and concentrates not only on wine but also on port wine.

Guilherme Alvares Ribeiro, third member of the five, has handed over the active business of running the quinta to his nephews, Franciso Ferreira and Francisco Olazabal. PR is run by van Zeller. It is here that the most intense efforts are being made to introduce Syrah. The quinta also produces substantial amounts of port wine.

Francisco Javier Olazabal, who is responsible for Quinta do Vale Meao, is one of the pioneers of robot pressing. He concentrates on the "noble five" grapes mentioned earlier, and fermentation takes place in steel tanks.

Tomás and Miguel Roquette have been running Quinta do Crasto since independence from the port houses in 1994, and produce a wine wildly popular in the US.