

Douro reds

Port makes the headlines, but table wines make up the majority of this vast Portuguese region's output. Demand for the reds in particular is rising, says Sarah Ahmed

THE DOURO IS the world's largest mountain vineyard (45,221 hectares under vine) and thanks to Port, Portugal's premier wine region. In the past 25 years, it's seen more change than in its entire history – most obviously, a huge growth in table wines, which now make up more than half the Douro's output.

It's curious that it took so long, given the iconic status of pioneering Douro red Barca Velha. Remember, though, that when this wine was first made (1952), electricity hadn't arrived in this remote region. Port, fortified with brandy spirit, coped without temperature control better than table wines.

Even if producers didn't balk at this challenge, laws gave Port shippers a monopoly over sales. It was only broken in 1986 when Portugal joined the European Union, and EU funds backed vital investment in equipment and vineyards. The more dynamic of the Douro's 35,000 growers were emboldened to make single-quinta wines independently.

Spoiled for choice

Named after the river which runs through it, the Douro encompasses a 100km stretch of the Douro Valley split into three sub-regions. Described as 'nine months of winter, three months of hell,' its extreme continental climate means autumn temperatures can soar to 40°C.

From west to east, it's progressively warmer (rising from an average 18°C to 21°C) and much drier (the average annual rainfall plummeting from 900mm to 650mm).

Wines become correspondingly richer, darker, spicier and fuller-bodied, scented with bergamot rather than rose.

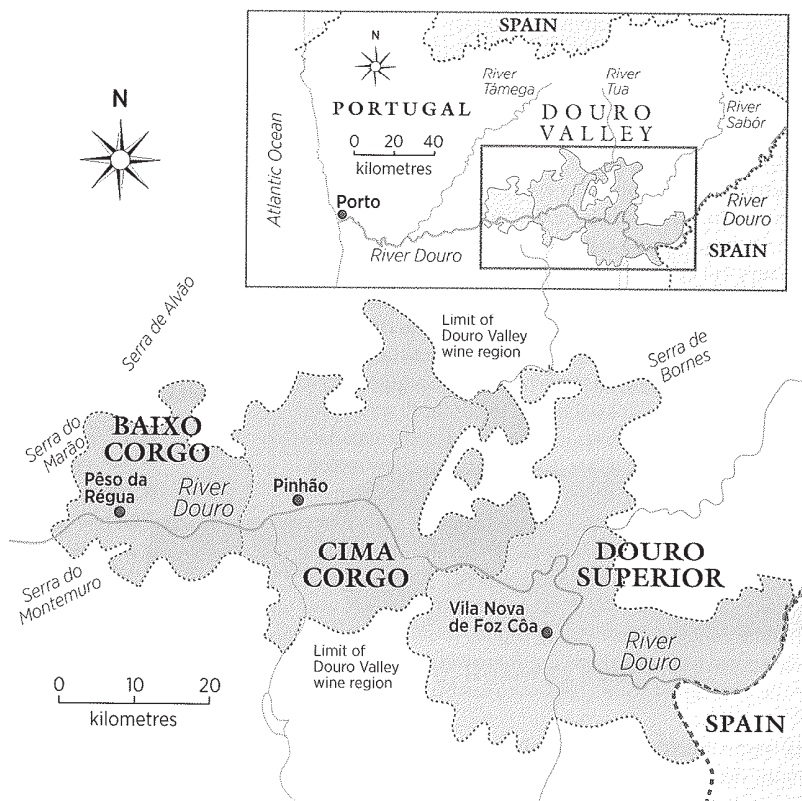
The westernmost Baixo Corgo and prized mid-section, the Cima Corgo, are almost uniformly steep, with schist soils. Towards the Spanish border, the Douro Superior's rolling landscape is less vertiginous, with more varied soils. It's even more complicated once you factor in the Douro's range of elevations (150m-900m above sea level) and aspects (including those of its offshoot valleys, such as the unusually cool Teja Valley). Niepoort's and Poeira's particularly elegant wines benefit from cooler, higher, north-facing sites dedicated to table wines, which also inform the freshness of a new breed of Douro Superior wines.

Winemakers are also spoiled for choice when it comes to grape variety – 68 for red wines alone. Drawing on Port tradition, and because older vineyards (40 years plus) are a mix of 20 or more grape varieties, most Douro wines are blends (varietal, sometimes sub-regional too).

Following 1980s research, younger vineyards tend to focus on five varieties. Touriga Nacional (tannin structure) and Touriga Franca (freshness) provide the Douro's signature perfume (rose, violet, bergamot) and delicious fruit. Tinta Roriz (Spain's Tempranillo) brings flesh and length. Spicy Tinto Cão and sturdy, sweet Tinta Barroca are usually minor blend components.

Old-vine field blends can show intensity, complexity and, because deeper rooted, better balance in hotter years. But younger single-block plantings allow each variety to be picked at optimal ripeness and, in top years, stand on their own merit – varietal wines are a small but growing trend, especially Touriga Nacional. Higher-yielding younger vines have also enabled the Douro to make wines at lower prices.

Reflecting trends and high-extract Port production methods as well as their extreme climate, Douro reds used



Douro reds: vintages

2010 Hot, dry and higher yielding than 2009, with mixed results. Best wines not yet out.

2009 Hot, dry year. Powerful, muscular wines, the best, long-lived.

2008 Good winter rain, unusually cool conditions; refined, spicy, fresh wines.

2007 Good winter rain, mild autumn; floral, red fruited wines of great intensity and structure.

2006 Hot, humid, wet autumn; patchy quality, mid-weight, forward wines. Drink to 2015.

2005 Very hot, dry; powerful but balanced wines. Drink to 2020.

to be high in everything – ripe (often overripe) fruit, tannin and oak. Today, grapes are picked earlier and there's less gilding of the lily. The benefits of cooler ferments, gentler extraction and less oak is clear in years like 2007 and 2008, whose mild summers produced perfumed, elegant wines. In hotter vintages like 2009, weeding out overripe fruit on sorting tables led to brighter and better balanced wines.

Sarah Ahmed is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Portugal

Douro reds: the facts

Total plantings

45,221 hectares

Number of growers

34,576, with 632 of these owning more than 10ha and accounting for 35.33% of vineyards

Total production (2010)

130,807,262 litres,

of which: 59,051,504 litres are Port; 40,505,560 are DOC table wines; 2,419,248 are VR Duriense table wines; 24,737,069 are basic table wines and 3,772,392 are Vinho Moscatel

Most planted varieties:

Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, Touriga Nacional, Tinta Barroca, Tinta Amarela

The results

While the results seem initially positive, especially for blends and recent vintages, our experts bemoaned the inconsistent quality and the number of overoaked and overextracted wines. Mark O'Halleron reports

It's more than nine years since we held a tasting looking at Douro reds. What progress has the region made?

With fewer than 100 wines sampled then, against 226 submitted for this tasting, production has boomed, if not exploded – although not necessarily for the better according to Beverley Blanning MW: 'I was surprised by how many wines there were – I don't think I've ever done a Douro tasting with this many wines. But overall I thought the standard was fairly disappointing. I get the impression that a lot of people have just jumped on the bandwagon.' This was a point supported by Sarah Ahmed, the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Portugal, though she added the caveat that the Douro 'is a work in progress; very much a rough diamond'. Richard Mayson, DWWA Regional Chair for Port & Madeira, was similarly keen to highlight this issue: 'It's important to put these wines in a historical perspective because the Douro, demarcated in 1979 in terms of table wines, is actually a very new region, and it's only in the past decade that people have been taking these wines seriously.' Margaret Rand certainly noted a stylistic shift: 'Seldom at a *Decanter* tasting have I tasted through such a revolution in wine styles. If you look at the older vintages, even 2007, many were hugely dense, extracted and alcoholic – figgy, slightly raisiny wines that could come from anywhere. But there were some very nice 2009s that showed what the Douro can do.'

So, from a quality viewpoint, where would you say the Douro stands now with its table wines?

All over the place, it seems. 'My marks went from dire all the way to five stars,' confirmed Godfrey Spence. Chris Sherwood elaborated: 'There seems to be a lack of coherence in the region. As a merchant, it's quite hard to get consumers to try the Douro. It's fine when you work with a few importers who specialise in the region, as you know you can choose 20 to 40 top-quality wines from them which you will be enthusiastic about and therefore can more easily sell to consumers. But there is a sea of stuff that simply isn't good enough.' Ben Campbell-Johnston agreed, but offered a more positive slant: 'Yes, there was a huge variation in quality here, with standards ranging from quite poor to truly excellent. But if you looked at a similar range of red Douro table wines five years ago, I think you would have seen many more poor wines in the mix.'



“It's only in the past decade that people have been taking these wines seriously”

Richard Mayson

The scores

226 wines tasted

4



Decanter Award

33



Highly recommended

128



Recommended

45



Fair

12



Poor

4

Faulty

37

£ Good value
(under £15)

Let's look first at the positives. There are a lot of fans of Douro reds out there. Did this tasting show why?

Campbell-Johnston, along with Joanna Locke MW, extolled the quality of the tannins: 'Fine, grainy, dry tannins. Dry in the same way as Nebbiolo but not as chunky. This means Douro wines are perfect with food – fatty food especially, with the dryness cutting through the fat.' The purity and lift of many wines was commented on by the panel; Dirceu Vianna Junior MW praising their 'lovely vibrancy', while Rand picked up on the specifics of the varieties: 'Tinta Franca offered ripe, attractive citrus notes, while Tinta Roriz is Tempranillo, so on its own you get stewed strawberries and not much else. Touriga Nacional is a lovely grape – quite flashy and perhaps too much on its own – the wines I liked best were probably those where it formed one third of the blend.' Indeed, it was the famous field blends of the Douro which enjoyed the most praise, with Blanning also revealing her favourite wines were those with a 'good chunk' of Touriga Nacional.

And on the down side?

Alluding to Rand's earlier point, there still seems to be some clumsy winemaking in terms of overextraction or overripe fruit. 'The big problem for me,' declared Ahmed, 'was too much extraction or too much oak. Don't try to overpolish that rough diamond – let the fruit fly, let that terroir show!' Mayson was in firm agreement: 'These heavy-handed, soupy wines where oak is seen as a panacea were a real problem. Many Douro winemakers clearly need a lighter hand on the tiller to craft wines with more elegance and finesse. Those were the wines that I gave my highest marks to.'

There were also a high number of faulty bottles. Was there a common thread? [Second bottles were opened for many wines which showed faults in the first sample, and in four cases, both wines submitted were faulty.]

Vianna Jr noted plenty of reduction, while Locke bemoaned volatile acidity, 'a fair bit' of Brettanomyces and found the amount of corked wines 'surprising'. She added: 'Producers outside of Portugal might say, "Oh, they send us all the rubbish corks" – but clearly Portugal is keeping quite a few poor corks for themselves too!' Blanning said this issue 'must be an embarrassment to the country'.



“There was a huge variation in quality, with standards ranging from poor to truly excellent”

Ben Campbell-Johnston

The tasters

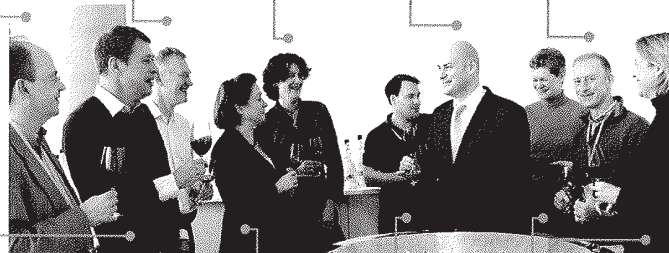
Godfrey Spence is a writer and author specialising in Portugal, and was a WSET senior lecturer for 16 years

Nick Room is a buyer at UK supermarket Waitrose, where his specialist areas include Portugal

Sarah Ahmed is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Portugal

Dirceu Vianna Jr MW is buying director for UK merchant Coe Vintners

Ben Campbell-Johnston is a freelance consultant, mainly for Portuguese and fortified wine producers



Richard Mayson is a writer and author specialising in Portugal. He owns Quinta do Centro in the Alentejo

Margaret Rand is a wine writer and judge, and general editor of *Hugh Johnson's Pocket Wine Book*

Chris Sherwood is manager at London merchant Bottle Apostle

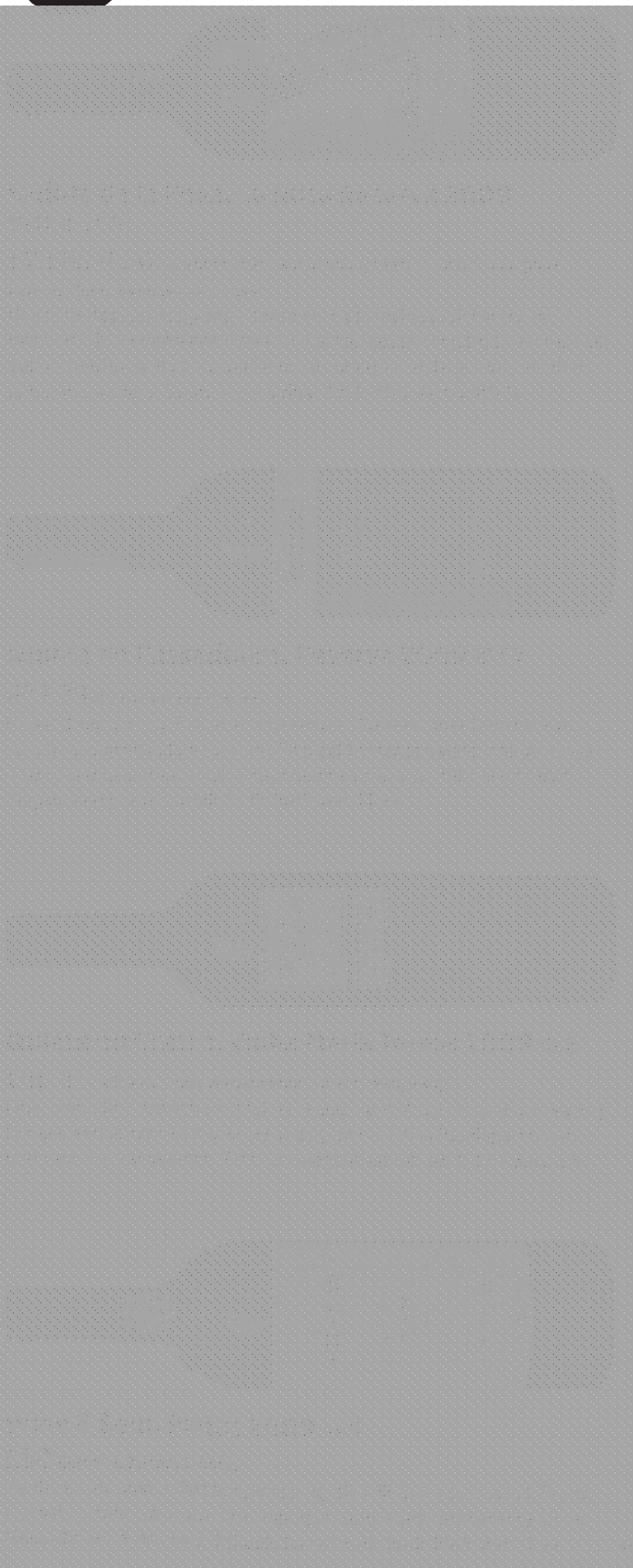
Jo Locke MW is a buyer at The Wine Society where her specialist areas include Portugal

Beverley Blanning MW is a wine writer, author and competition judge

ENTRY CRITERIA: producers were invited to submit samples of their latest-release DOC Douro red table wines



Decanter Award
18.5–20pts



So it seems our readers should stick with the blends, from more recent vintages. Any more pointers?

'Know your producer' – that old adage usually attached to our Burgundy or Rhône tastings – seems ever-pertinent here as well. 'Or know your merchant and their importer,' said Sherwood, reaffirming that 'there are exceptional wines in the Douro; there's a lot of value and a lot of skill. But when you look at the industry as a whole, it is still really only a handful of producers who are making good-value, exceptional wines.' Crucially, Vianna Jr added, 'And remember: value doesn't need to be £4, it could be £15 or more.' Speaking for our expert panel, he concluded by saying: 'The region has definitely turned a corner, but I think there's still a long way to go before a consumer can reach for a bottle of Douro table wine with confidence and know what to expect.'



“There's a way to go before consumers can reach for a Douro table wine with confidence”

Dirceu Vianna Jr



Highly recommended 16.5-18.49pts



**Sobredos, Aneto,
Grande Reserva 2009** 17.13

N/A UK www.aneto.com.pt

Fragrant, plump and charming, berry-scented fruit aroma. It has good concentration and a chunk of oak in there. Rich and dense but not hot; it has been softened by creamy new oak. Rich and fulfilling. **Drink:** 2012-2017. **Alc:** 14.5%



Highly recommended (continued) 16.5-18.49pts



Sobredos, Aneto 2009 ¹⁷

N/A UK www.aneto.com.pt

Lovely nose of fragrant, crunchy, creamy red and black fruit and violets. Tightly knit, silky palate with ripe, tarry, spicy and raisiny fruit. It has good integrity and elegant balance.

Well structured, lovely wine. **Drink:** 2013-2018.
Alc: 14.5%

Expert summary: Sarah Ahmed

A successful tasting for the Cima Corgo sub-region and those producers who, particularly in the hot, ripe 2009 vintage, achieved elegance from the powerful fruit



Sarah Ahmed is the Decanter World Wine Awards Regional Chair for Portugal. She was the Portuguese Annual Wine Awards Wine Writer of the Year in 2009

IMMEDIATELY STRIKING IS the high proportion of wines (73%) which achieved three stars or more. Lower-priced, bigger-production wines also impressed, notably Sainsbury's Taste the Difference own-label (£7.99; 16.67/20pts) as well as relative newcomers: Conceito, João Brito e Cunha, Sobredos, Quinta do Noval (all four stars).

The fact that all the Awards and most four-star wines hailed from the hot, dry 2009 vintage tells a story. It was a great year for Port, but more challenging for table wines. Recently, winemakers have paid more attention to balance and the panel rewarded their efforts to avoid overripeness and harness the Douro's exuberant fruit. Vintage isn't all that the five-star wines have in common. They're a ringing endorsement for the Cima Corgo sub-region and foot-trodden, old-vine field blends made from 20 or more traditional Douro varieties. It makes sense: the Cima Corgo is home to most leading estates and, in hot years like 2009, deep-rooted old vines cope better with water stress.

What's more, the Awards are all flagship, single-estate reds from among the region's most seasoned producers. Quinta de la Rosa and Crasto are pioneers of Douro table wine. Star performer Jorge Serôdio Borges, who made two five-stars and a four-star wine (Passadouro and Wine & Soul's pair), previously worked for another – Niepoort.

Reassuringly, four stars for Wine & Soul and Crasto's cheaper reds (including the Crasto-made Sainsbury's wine) show that great Douro wines from the best in the business are becoming more affordable. Accessible too, for these wines need not to be kept for year to show at their best.

Wines from cooler, higher, north-facing sites, especially Niepoort's Charme, Batuta and Redoma (all three stars), also Poeira (16.5pts), might have been expected to score better. Perhaps these elegant wines were just outgunned by the flamboyance and power of other 2009s. At any rate, both winemakers scored higher ratings with the more fruit overt Niepoort Vertente (16.83pts) and Quinta de la Rosa Reserva (our top scorer, made by Poeira's Jorge Moreira).

With the exception of Quinta do Crasto's Tinta Roriz (17.17pts), single-varietal wines also failed to shine, proving that the Douro's strength – blends – should not be ignored.

“Winemakers have paid more attention to balance and the panel rewarded their efforts to avoid overripeness”