

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 and 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 table 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. Both quintas feature soft yellow slate.

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 working with 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 Douro Superior. 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 of more than 100 years. 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.

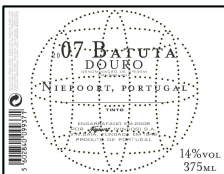
Niepoort 'Redoma' Douro



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.

Other Niepoort wines not currently imported by TSA

Niepoort 'Redoma' Reserva Branco

Redoma Branco comes from small and very old vineyards, with many different varieties, the most important are: Rabigato, Codega, Donzelinho, Viosinho and Arinto. These vineyards are planted at 700 metres in yellow schist and also granitic slate, on the right side of Douro river. And the wine? - both ripe and fresh/mineral, with concentration and complexity. As with the Redoma standard, it's rich pear with apple, sour herb, good levels of florality and spice, very clean and mineral at the back, long, mild and never more than mid-weight. A wonderful argument for the absence of malo from 'Burgundian'-styled wines.

Niepoort 'Tiara' Branco

Tiara is Niepoort's latest creation: a fresh, elegant white wine. Tiara's freshness and acidity is not typical for Douro white wines but the concentration of old vines is distinctively Douro. The slow fermentation (3 months) and the altitude of the vines give elegance and freshness and the age (average 60 years) of the vines are responsible for the concentration. Blend of 5 white varieties, based on 100 year old Codega vines grown at 600-800m. A clean, thrilling style with citric flesh, a touch of bitter herb and exceptional finesse. There's soft tannin/glyceric expression and texture mid-palate, and a lovely easy release, finishes gentle and complete.

Niepoort 'Charme'

Charme is all about elegance and balance, achieved by taking special attention to the smallest details during all the wine making process. Small, sheltered vineyards produce gentle and elegant fruit, with relatively low alcohol and high acidity - Charme is Dirk's attempt at "Douro Burgundy"! Its sourberry red fruits are spicy, pippy, gamey and earthy with wet stone/damp potting clay and a touch of confiture. There's great 'torque' on the palate due to finesse of tannins and crunchy/spicy/sour acid nerve running the entire length of the wine. Whole fruit with all stems is fermented first in lagares and finishes fermentation plus malo and ageing 16 months in Francois Freres French barriques. The only racking takes place after Malo. Field blend fruit leads with Touriga Franca, some Tinta Roriz and a little Tinta Amarela. The vineyard is North facing, hence cooler than many Douro sites, and is flattish and holds water.

Niepoort 'Robustus' Douro

Half Redoma-half Batuta fruit, aged 4 years in in 2 old Slovenian oak vats, one of 1,000 litres and another 2,000. Fruit is processed with 30% stems and spends 30 days on skins. Smooth, 'iron fist in a velvet glove' style with thick tannins and metal-earthy acid structure. Gamey and inky, it's somewhat 'Italianate' in palate effect, with creamy blue fruits, animal-gamey bits, graphite, Indian ink, cola, homemade blackberry/dark cherry conserve.

Niepoort 'Projectos' Pinot Noir

The project being to see if Pinot could succeed in the Douro. This is both flat-out varietal, and unmistakably Douro with a thread of that tobacco-and-soot earthy minerality lining the back half of otherwise regulation Pinot fruit. 12,000 plants/ha on a tiny 'secret' vineyard hidden out the back of Quinta do Carril, planted in 1999 at 250m altitude, north facing.

Niepoort-Telmo Rodriguez 'omleT' Douro

Niepoort has finally launched their wine produced in Portugal by Telmo Rodriguez ('omleT' is Telmo backwards!). It comes from two vineyards in the 'Covas do Douro' area. Made with great care, without extractions and remaining on skins for 15 days before going into new French oak barrels (500 l) for 20 months maturation. It is very expressive, fresh, aromatic and elegant with race and precise tannins, this wine is just fantastic and with a great future ahead. Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, Sousao and all the other varieties common in old vines.

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, which 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.

1986 Niepoort 'Colheita' Tawny Port

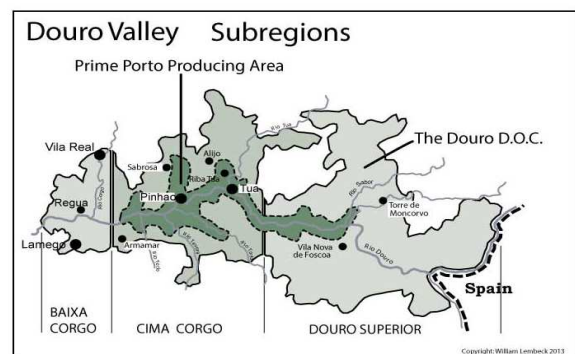
Colheitas are dated Tawnies aged in cask, with a minimum ageing requirement of 7 years, but the tradition is to age for longer in casks before bottling. Taking on a tawny hue, exaggerated wood and nutty tones are evident on the palate from slow ageing in old casks. Colheita Port does not need decanting.

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.

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, and there are three Douro sub-zones:

- Upstream towards the Spanish border, Douro Superior (near Vila Nova de Foz Cão) is the hottest, highest, 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 here (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 and yields 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, little place for roads, save for a narrow, treacherous flange carved above 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 Regua, Pinhão or further: 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, 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 mainly been grim stuff in the past, usually badly made from low quality grapes that were 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. Internationalist 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' (excess 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. Perhaps more important has been exploring 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, and tending to the heroic, monolithic.

[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.]

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 styles classified as 'bottle-matured' 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 historically ageing has taken place in Vila Nova de Gaia – the twin city of Porto on the southern bank of the Douro at the coast. Traditionally, the large Port houses based themselves in Gaia – a centre for ageing, blending, marketing and exportation. The old imagery of Port workers rolling barrels down the Douro river to Gaia are no longer exactly how it's done, however! Many of the newer, modern Single Quinta houses (such as the Douro boys) now do all of the cellar work on their estates up in the Douro itself. Some do both. Vila Nova de Gaia is a spectacular site for wine tourism, with the south bank of the Douro 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 is achieved by 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 SQOOPS 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 age 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-developed. 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.

BOTTLE-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 the '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. 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 varietal.

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. Forms the backbone of Noval's legendary and amazingly 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 a cooler climate 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, relatively low yield and low alcohol, it is a quality Douro varietal, albeit a delicate and tricky one.

Tinta Roriz (aka Tempranillo) 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 (it 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 more likely than not to be Franca).

Touriga Nacional Not necessarily 'Touriga' as we know it in Australia. Now considered by many the best of Portugal's native varieties; surprisingly only the 8th-most planted of Douro varieties. After the ravages of phylloxera, TN was less favoured in the replanting than may have been the case, on account of its uneconomic yields (a poor performer on rootstocks, with less than half the natural yield of Touriga Franca). Now, many Quintas are re-planting field blends to 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).

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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): typically found in the Beiras region, in Dão and Bairrada). In the Dão it is often called "Borrado das Moscas" (fly droppings) because of the 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). Can make wonderfully scented peachy, textured wines with crisp finishing acidity.

Cerceal: is grown across Portugal, under many 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 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. Naturally achieves excellent sugar-acid balance and ages well for 5 years or so. 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 terpene 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 throughout Vinho Verde regions, particularly in the far North. Yields natural alcohol well above the norm and has relatively low acid, therefore useful to fill out skinny Loureiros and Arintos.
