

Quinta do Vale Dona Maria (by Cristiano van Zeller)

DOC Douro/DOC Porto

Dona Maria is the property of Cristiano van Zeller, former owner of legendary Port house, Noval. After his family sold Noval, Cristiano set out to promote and foster a certain attitude and marketing thrust in the Douro: the specialist, small-volume, vineyard-based Quinta. Cristiano is the driving force behind 'The Douro Boys' – a collection of great Quinta-based producers. As well as Vale Dona Maria, these include Niepoort, Vallado, Meão, and the wines of Cristiano's head winemaker, Sandra Tavares (albeit not very much of a Boy at all!). These quintas have co-operated (under Cristiano's leadership) for 20 years, slowly achieving elegance and finesse in full-flavoured Douro table wines. Each is family-owned and quinta-based.



Vale Dona Maria is situated in the (relatively cool) valley of a tributary to the Douro, Rio Torto. It's a property long held in ownership by Cristiano's wife Joana's family. There are 16 hectares of very old field blend vineyards (50 years+), 10 hectares of younger vines planted in 2004 and 5 hectares of vineyards under management. Orientation is a cool north/north-west. A considerable amount of time, energy, planning and expense has gone into re-vivifying vineyards. These, and the physical plant of the estate, were run down and neglected when Cristiano and Joana took over the property. During their first years at Dona Maria, about 70% of the production was port wines, and just 30% table wines. Now the balance has reversed. Like the vineyards, the winery needed renovation, and a new cellar was constructed. Modern temperature-controlled granite lagares were installed, coupled with stainless steel tanks and clean newish oak.

Vale Dona Maria Tinto

Bottled without any fining or filtration after 18 months ageing in French oak casks, Quinta Vale Dona Maria Douro is foot-trodden in lagares for 12 to 24 hours and are then fermented in temperature-controlled oak vats with manual pigeage before malo and ageing in barrique.



Small goods meatiness, pippy spice, raspberry high notes and fabulous dark depths on the nose. The wine opens to coal-tar, black earth and mace perfumes floating up off terroir tells of mineral-stone-licorice. Gamey-savoury and plush; very high quality red-black fruit mid-palate, and terrific underlying tannin structure. A long, dark, very spicy finish. Oak is fine and deft, sitting inside and structuring the fruit.

Vale Dona Maria Ports

The Ports from Torto river valley are full-bodied, well structured, with a deep purple, dark red colour, and concentrated aromas of mature fruits - blackberries, black cherries, red plums. Tannins are ripe and soft and the wines have a very long finish. All Ports are foot trodden in lagares throughout the fermentation. Half the eventual spirit of the Port is added early in the fermentation to slow and cool this phase, before the balance is added to stop fermentation and fix sugar at the desired level.

Vale Dona Maria LBV (Late-bottled Vintage) Port, 375ml

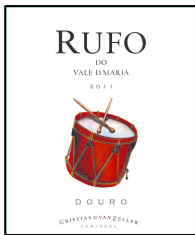
Unfiltered, having spent just under four years maturing in cask, this is very elegant vintage port material. The blue-note, sarsaparilla fruit has lovely tannin definition, and is genuinely great value.

Vale Dona Maria Vintage Port



A blend of 25 traditional Douro grape varieties. Grapes are foot-trodden, together with 15% of the total spirit which would be added to the final Port (more is added once fermentation starts). The must and spirit stays in the lagar for a few days, with a short 10 minute treading twice a day. It's then racked to vat together with the pressings (from traditional basket presses). The wines age in ancient (over 100 years old) oak and chestnut casks for 18 months.

RUFO do Vale Dona Maria



Rufo was born during an after-dinner talk with some friends, while elaborating about how to better our agricultural practices to improve the environment and increase the Aleactoris Ruffa's population in Vale D. Maria (Aleactoris Ruffa being the scientific name for the red-legged partridge). We agreed that the word Rufo, meaning red in Latin, would be a good name for a Douro red wine. But Rufo in Portuguese also means the sound of a drum, so when designing the new label, the drum quickly became the choice for the symbol of the new Rufo do Vale D. Maria, our entry level wine, and the one that announces and sets the beginning, the rhythm for our range of Vale D. Maria wines.

RUFO TINTO

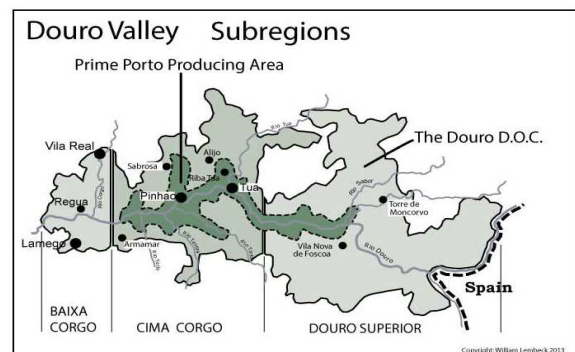
Because this is the wine that "sets the rhythm" for our range, we decided to concentrate on fewer grape varieties than those used for the rest of our Red wines, growing in diversity of grape varieties and complexity of the wines as we "grow" within the range. Rufo Douro Red is based on Touriga Franca and Touriga Nacional, with a minimum of at least 90% of the blend. A blend of 2 grape varieties from 5 year old to 35 year old vineyards situated in the area of Loureiro (Baixo Corgo), rio Pinhão valley and rio Torto valley (Cima Corgo). These are Touriga Franca (60%) and Touriga Nacional (40%). Fermentation takes place in stainless steel for 7 to 12 days at temperatures between 22°C and 27°C. Ageing in one, two, three and four year old French oak barriques for 12 to 24 months.

Rufo Tinto

Fresh, aromatic, elegant, velvety with nice balancing acidity. Douro slate with a nice warm baking spice aspect, red fruit laced with country herb and a touch of leather. This is an appealing and expressive wine at the price, nicely trimmed with a cool edge and touch of sourberry. Juicy in the mid, skins and stone ripple the fruit along with nutty tannin and a gentle acid full stop.

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-develop. 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).

WHITE GRAPES

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.
