

# Catch me

if you can





## The Douro's fortified producers have long enjoyed international success, but can winemakers from other regions follow in their footsteps, asks **Rebecca Gibb**

If you were asked to name a French winemaking region, your first answer might be Burgundy or Bordeaux, the Rhône or Champagne. Try it with Australia and most likely the Barossa, Hunter or Yarra Valley would spring to mind. Now try it with Portugal and if the Douro isn't your first answer, you are either a) a Portuguese wine importer, b) a pub quiz champion or c) Sir Cliff Richard. Here lies the problem.

When it comes to unfortified Portuguese wine, the Douro Valley has set the pace for other regions to follow. It has a clear advantage thanks to port. As one of the three oldest demarcated regions in the world, the region has the history and trading links other Portuguese producers surely envy. The existing distribution network of port companies has given the region an exporting edge. But João Vasconcelos, sales manager for Symington Family Estates, still claims Douro wines are a difficult sell. "Even having big port distribution doesn't mean we can sell the wines. It is incredibly difficult to sell Portuguese wines outside of Portugal."

Douro still wines certainly get plenty of column inches considering they accounted for just 18% of the region's sales in 2008. The region's natural beauty attracts plenty of attention with its vertiginous slopes and remote quintas of the Upper Douro. But its self-promotion has also put the Douro at the forefront of Portugal's export drive.

Since 2002, a group of five top producers have been working together to market their wines. The Douro boys have attracted international acclaim and Luis Seabra, winemaker at member winery Niepoort, says: "As five united producers, we can attend wine events as one body – it costs less and is a better way for us to communicate."

It has certainly given the region's table wines a boost and has inspired the creation of other groups such as the Independent Winegrowers Association (IWA). It was established in 2005 by six wineries, such as Luis Pato and Casa de Cello, and represents producers from several regions including Dão and Bairrada to the Douro and Vinho Verde. They are flying the Portugal banner but the Douro is still the dominant voice.

The recently launched Discover the Origin campaign

**Left: There's still scope on the horizon for the Douro's smaller producers to follow the big boys**

is yet another lift for the Douro. The EU has provided massive financial support to promote products from a designated origin. It is targeted at UK foodies aged between 30 and 45 years old, and involves the Port and Douro Wines Institute (IVDP), Burgundy Wines (BIVB) and the Parma Ham and Parmigiano-Reggiano Consortiums. The PR campaign aims to educate the trade through a three-year programme of activities, including trade exhibitions, master classes and competitions. How can the rest of Portugal be expected to compete?

### Next generation

In the Douro, exciting new winemakers are emerging, such as former model Sandra Tavares da Silva, who makes wine for several wineries including Wine & Soul and Quinta do Vale D Maria. Tiago Alves de Sousa is another exciting talent and might be Portugal's answer to Josko Gravner.

As well as making more mainstream Douro wines, his Reserva Pessoal 2003 is a bone dry, tangy white, made in an oxidative style with a lengthy 48 hours' skin contact. Most are graduates of Vila Real's winemaking school and are making still wines rather than port. Francisco "Vito" Javier de Olazabal, owner of Quinta do Vale Meão, and the oldest of the Douro boys, says: "We have a new generation emerging. They have new ideas and meet to discuss their wines, and have the technical and theoretical skills the older generation do not."

Wines are definitely improving. There are still over-extracted wines that lack balance, but overall the standard is high, particularly for Touriga Nacional. Jorge Moreira, winemaker at Quinta de la Rosa, admits: "At the beginning of the 2000s, we were making very powerful wines because we were using techniques that we used for port, with big extraction and lots of new oak. Now we are picking earlier, using less extraction, not lees stirring and using less oak to make more elegant styles."

### Regional efforts

Other regions including Dão, Alentejo and Vinho Verde are making massive strides, but are failing to attract attention. There are a handful of brilliant producers in the Dão such as Quinta dos Roques (also a member of the IWA) and Quinta da Pellada but there aren't enough to make any real impact on the international market. ▶

## PORTUGAL'S ANNUAL TASTING

It's Portugal's tasting extravaganza on March 10 at Lord's Cricket Ground, London, from 11am-8pm.

Portuguese specialists Simon Woods and Charles Metcalfe will be leading 30-minute themed wine walks. There's the up-and-coming regional tour at 11.30am or, an hour later, the Alentejo. There is also a Touriga

Nacional walk at 3pm, finishing with the Douro at 4pm. You don't have to book, just wait at reception.

There will be more than 500 wines to taste from 80 producers this year include sparkling wines, organic wines and light wines under 11.5% alcohol.

Register at [viniportugal.pt](http://viniportugal.pt)

EXHIBITOR HIGHLIGHTS

**New era for Passadouro**

This quinta's port was originally shipped and labelled under the Niepoort umbrella, but in 2004 was licensed to release port under its own quinta label. It will show the first Quinta do Passadouro LBV - from the 2004 Vintage at the March 10 London tasting.

**Altano goes organic**

Symington Family Estates will launch its new addition to the Altano range, Altano Biológica, sourced from organically farmed grapes in the remote Vilariga Valley.

**Heading west**

10 International is launching a new blend of Alvarinho/Chardonnay under its Point West label from the Lisboa region, the new name for Estremadura. It will also be showing a new wine from Lisboa-based DFJ Vinhos. The 2008 Stork's Landing is a blend of Touriga Nacional with a dash of Cabernet Sauvignon.

**Left: Porto, Portugal's second city and the gateway to the Douro Valley**



**João Vasconcelos claims Portuguese wines are a difficult sell outside of Portugal**

Danny Cameron of Portuguese specialist Raymond Reynolds argues: "Some of the regions like Bairrada and Dão, whose potential for great wine is huge, lack a critical mass of good producers to give the market confidence. It's left up to a handful of producers who make wonderful wine and communicate to the market to do PR work for their regions. That alone is not enough."

The Alentejo region in the south has a huge commercial potential. Its wines represent more than 40% of all domestic sales, but its export success has been limited. Let's face it, most people don't know where Alentejo is, but its regional commission plans to increase its marketing activities in the UK and others with a view to increasing exports by 10%-15% in the next two years.

Vito Olazabal claims the Alentejo is more consistent than the Douro. "Most owners in the Douro have less than a hectare so they don't care about quality. The average size of vineyard in the Alentejo is bigger and they have planted vineyards in the past 20 years choosing the right variety and training systems and restricting yields," he says.

Nevertheless, the top wines of the Douro are still the jewel in Portugal's crown, attracting top international winemakers like Jean-Michel Cazes and the Lurton brothers.

**All together now**

But should each Portuguese region be going it alone? On one hand, they should be making themselves heard, particularly with new EU funding for regional promotion. However, if regional commissions start clamouring for international recognition outside of the ViniPortugal

realm it could create an almighty din. Portuguese specialist Nick Oakley and chair of the APWI says: "The number of breakaways has reduced considerably. They were created because of a frustration that the national campaign lacked direction, but this has changed and improved."

As you might expect, ViniPortugal claims regions will have more success as part of a united front. Area manager Ana Sofia de Oliveira says: "We do promote regions but always as part of the Portugal brand." This year's Portuguese tasting is a clear example of this strategy, with themed wine walks. The Alentejo and Douro will have their own tour as well as up-and-coming regions."

Portugal's generic body has improved its marketing efforts since ditching the dreadful Secret Potion campaign. In the UK, the APWI meets regularly with ViniPortugal to decide on strategies for the local market, a strategy other generics should consider. Although it has no permanent UK figurehead since Filipe Neves left, Oliveira is looking after the market with Judy Kendrick marketing the official headquarters for ViniPortugal in the UK. Activity is increasing with promotional bursaries available to both the on and off-trade.

Clearly, Portuguese regions have a lot to do if they are to reach the heady heights of the Douro. A collective effort is needed if the country is ever to fulfil its billing as the next big thing. At the same time, regions need to work harder to promote themselves so that our awareness of Portugal goes beyond the Douro. It's all very well for Dão or Alentejo to have recognition from Portuguese wine importers, pub quiz champions and ageing singers but it is crucial to reach a wider audience. ■