Heading north to discover the best wines of Portugal's Dão region
by Charles Metcalfe

Marvels of glittering purity and freshness, that's my judgement of the best wines of northern Portugal's Dão region. Great wines and wineries are numerous here nowadays, and multiplying. I can watch Dão grow, at spitting distance (though the wines are almost too good to spit), because I live here now, just a few kilometres from the region's southern border.

Over decades of writing books on the wines of Portugal, I had visited often as well as observing this forested region of granite hills and mountains from afar. The best wines have always been capable of ageing, some still delicious after 20, 30, even 50 years. In 2009, I was memorably privileged to taste 50 elderly wines gathered together by winemakers Álvaro de Castro and Dirk Niepoort. Reds and whites, almost all were still astonishingly, vibrantly drinkable.

Yet my early meetings with Dão wines of those same vintages imported to the UK in the 70s and 80s were nose-wrinklingly unmemorable. So many Dão reds tasted dusty and charmless, at best dull. Beginning to visit the region, I was perplexed. Tasted from barrel, the wines often brimmed with promise. What had gone wrong? Ageing for too long in old oak vats and barrels? Inadequate bottling lines?

Dão had been through difficult times in the 20th century. The decades-long Salazar dictatorship had obliged all Dão growers to deliver their grapes to cooperatives, who made the wines and sold them in bulk to private companies, who blended, bottled and marketed them. A measure intended to improve wine quality had precisely the opposite effect. The cooperatives were underfunded and badly run, and the reputation of Dão wine plummeted. Some somehow managed to triumph over circumstances.

In 1977, the rules in Dão changed. Portugal's application to join the European Community (later the EU) meant any whiff of monopoly was frowned upon. Suddenly, the Dão commercial landscape was transformed. Grape-growers started building new wineries. Sons and daughters of grape-growing families went off to study winemaking and viticulture. The big merchant companies bought their own vineyards.

Portugal's largest wine company, the family-owned Sogrape, had been ahead of the game. In the cooperative years, as early as 1957, they had rented space in a co-op, installed their own equipment and made wine there. It worked well, and Sogrape developed a successful brand, Grão Vasco. When, in 1988, competition was looming from newly resurgent privately-owned vineyards, Sogrape invested in its own 100-hectare estate, Quinta dos Carvalhais. They built a modern winery to process the grapes from other growers as well as their own. With replanting, Quinta dos Carvalhais now has 50 hectares of vineyard, and is planning 20 more. 'The goal is to show Dão as it is, with all its terroir and minerality,' says Beatriz Cabral de Almeida, the estate's winemaker. 'You smell eucalyptus, some nuttiness, forest scents. I changed the Quinta dos Carvalhais Colheita Tinto to a more traditional blend,' she continues. 'It was once only Touriga

Nacional but now also has Alfrocheiro and a field blend of old vines, because I felt it had lacked the identity of what Carvalhais is.'

Dão is renowned as the birthplace of Portugal's most famous black grape, Touriga Nacional, a grape now planted with enthusiasm in almost every Portuguese wine region, also travelling successfully as far as the vineyards of South Africa and Australia. Touriga Nacional is even one of six experimental grapes being trialled in Bordeaux vineyards to help address the warming climate.

The modern market for Dão wines favours the simpler offering of single-variety wines. Certainly, Touriga Nacional is the star red, but its sidekick Alfrocheiro is winning more acclaim every year, and there's a strong supporting cast of Tinta Roriz (known as Aragonez in the south of Portugal, Tempranillo in Spain), Jaen (Spain's Mencia) and several others. The oldest vineyards, as so often in Portugal, were of mixed vines. If one variety failed at harvest, others were there to give a crop. Likewise, the star white variety is Encruzado, supported by Cerceal, Bical, Malvasia Fina, and many others.

The question of whether to make Dão wines (white or red) as monovarietals or blends still exercises Dão producers. For Micael Batista of Quinta de Ramalhosa, the answer is clear: 'My objective is to put the field blend at the pinnacle,' he says. 'It has more complexity. My philosophy is all blends, not single variety Encruzado or Touriga Nacional. The market has so many varietal wines.' He adds: 'Next year I'm going to plant a vineyard with traditional mixed vines.'

The past was mainly red, but white wines are the new gold in the region. João Pedro Formigal, new winemaker at the historic Condes de Anadia in the Dão town of Mangualde, explains how people were previously focussed on reds, undervaluing the white grapes. These were used to blend into the reds. Now 19 per cent of Dão wines are white, and rising. 'Everyone now has red grapes to sell,' says João Pedro, 'but white grapes are hard to find. White grapes are up at Alvarinho prices.' Encruzado works brilliantly, oak-fermented or crisply unoaked. Cerceal, too, has the acidity to emphasise freshness.

A style of pale red wine called palhete is also making a come-back. Micael Batista makes one in the traditional family style, light, fruity, appealing: 'Every vineyard had 15 per cent of white grapes. People used to prefer reds not too dark, and they drank them all day long in the vineyards, so they needed to be not too alcoholic, easy to drink.' At Casa de Mouraz, Antonio Lopes Ribeiro and Sara Dionisio like to serve their palhete with fish and salads. It's nearly rosé, smells and tastes of red and black boiled fruit sweets, but dry, quite scented, with a touch of tannin. 'It's the style of wine my father made before,' says Sara. 'The US, our second market, is looking for light reds such as this one with less alcohol.'

Along with the strong line-up of Iberian grapes, granite soils also make for quality. The mountains encircling the Dão region are mainly granite. Great blocks of the rock protrude from the earth, and unsurprisingly, this is the sturdy local building material. Over the millennia, the granite has weathered into the soils in which most Dão vines

grow. Patches of other soils are interspersed, schist and alluvial, but even the alluvial soils are mostly granitic in origin. According to the Dão regional wine authority, 97 per cent of all Dão vineyards have granite soils. These granite soils matter, bringing extra freshness and brightness. Dão wines have sometimes been compared to the wines of Burgundy in their freshness and elegance.

The six mountain ranges surrounding the Dão region also protect it from extremes of climate. Winters are cold and (usually) wet. Summers are hot and dry, but normally free from the vicious heat-spikes seen in the Douro and Alentejo. Vineyard altitudes vary from 150 metres above sea level to a lofty 800 metres in the foothills of those mountains.

That by itself gives flexibility to the region. In an epoch of warming climate, there are higher places where vineyards can be planted. Of course, the Dão region has its great estates, but it is not a region as closely tied to precise geographic locations as the *grands crus* of Burgundy or the top villages of Bordeaux.

However, there is one ever-present danger – fire. Dão's hills are planted with vines and with forests. Much of the forest is the fastest-growing cash crop for the paper industry, eucalyptus, and most of the rest is pine. In a warming climate, the risk of fire in a dry forest is huge. There are even suggestions some fires are deliberately started to collect insurance money.

In June 2017, 156 wild-fires swept through expanses of central Portugal, in particular the Dão region, engulfing forests, vines and buildings. Sixty-six people lost their lives, many were injured. Fire-fighters came from Spain, France, Italy and Morocco and from all around Portugal.

Several wine producers lost vineyards and wineries. Casa de Mouraz, one of the Dão's few producers of organic wines, lost three-quarters of their vines, as well as their warehouse and its stock. They crowdfunded, have replanted the vines, and are rebuilding the warehouse. At Quinta da Ramalhosa, Micael Batista had just taken over the family vineyard that year. He lost vineyards, farm machinery and 'a lot of bottles'. I recently tasted brilliant wines from Ramalhosa, as well as from Casa de Mouraz and Quinta dos Carvalhais, all from vineyards lost in the 2017 fires. Despite the threat of fire, the Dão is attracting new investors, and new vineyards are being planted.

Guided by leading winemaker Álvaro de Castro, in 2010, the dynamic Douro trio of Jorge Moreira, Francisco Olazabal and Jorge Borges bought an estate not far from de Castro's estate around the village of Pinhanços near the foothills of the Serra da Estrela, Portugal's highest mainland mountain. They named it M.O.B.. Dirk Niepoort, another Douro star, snapped up another nearby Dão estate in 2012. De Castro himself added 13 hectares of vineyard from nearby Casa da Passarella, whose family owners wanted to sell. In 2018, the family-owned Grupo Amorim, largest cork producers in the world, added the historic wine estate of Quinta da Taboadella to their collection of top wine estates. (They already owned Quinta Nova de Nossa Senhora de Carmo in the Douro, and Luisa Amorim has since bought an Alentejo estate, Aldeia de Cima.)

The modern wines of Dão are jewels of brilliance and precision, and there is no shortage of investors queueing up to buy Dão companies and estates. Most of the recent arrivals are already very successful winemakers elsewhere. Dão's future quality seems assured, and the ageability of their top wines better than ever.

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