

FOOD AND DRINK

There's more to it than just Port



JANCIS ROBINSON

Last month I found myself being driven at high speed across Belgium towards an assignation in a brick-lined basement in Düsseldorf, a town where I knew no one, with a man I had never met. When I finally set eyes on the man, he did look a little messianic with a black beard and thick, black eyebrows that were permanently raised. He immediately delivered an impassioned explanation of his feelings (for Portugal). I even spotted a fold-up bed in one corner of the cellar. Was this where I would be expected to live for the rest of my days?

Perhaps I should have done more security checks before accepting this wine enthusiast's invitation to taste an unrivalled selection of Portuguese wines. But, as it turned out, in the late afternoon I and my blackened palate were free to go, even if not exactly with a spring in my step after a four-hour tasting of 88 relatively tannic, tart wines.

Carlos Quintas is a Portuguese economist married to a German journalist. Hence his Düsseldorf domicile, frequent trips back to Lisbon and passion for (some) Portuguese wines. His historic cellar in the oldest part of Düsseldorf was lined with cases of fine Portuguese reds, many of them far older than are normally found in commercial circulation. He sells loosely via gatherings of friends and acquaintances in this slightly kitschy 14,000-bottle cellar with its sofas, soft lighting and artworks.

He says he was initially inspired to collect fine Portuguese wine by a little book I wrote on the subject in 1999. This was based on an epic journey made

by the Portuguese publisher and his son over the Pyrenees when they drove two bottles each of about 200 Portuguese wines to our house in the Languedoc and I tasted my way through them systematically over the summer.

Now, eight years on, I was to be given a chance to revisit some wines and see how they had developed, as well as to acquaint myself with many younger vintages of the same wines.

Quintas had grouped them cleverly in flights of whites, assorted reds, and verticals (several different vintages) of some of the more famous wines – especially those from the regions in which he seems to take a particular interest, the neighbouring regions of Dão and Bairrada in the north of the country.

By the end of the tasting, however, the one wine that stood out was neither a Dão nor a Bairrada. It was, perhaps inevitably, the oldest, a bottle of the 1965 vintage of what was for decades Portugal's only famous fine table wine, Barca Velha, an unfortified wine from the Douro valley made by the house of Ferreira from port grapes traditionally grown mainly on the Quinta do Vale Meão. I must say that the 1999 vintage tasted alongside the hauntingly delicate 1965 seemed a very galumphing, ungracious beast. Perhaps it too will need 42 years to show its best?

There were many such instances of enormous differences between older and younger vintages with, in general, the young wines seeming much closer together in style to each other than the older ones, even if from quite different regions. This mirrors a phenomenon even more pronounced globally whereby

so many wines have been made sweet, concentrated and rather heavy. Overall, however, the average quality of Portugal's table wines continues to soar and there is much more fruit in wines made today than a decade or two ago. Furthermore, since the country has kept so many of its exciting arsenal of indigenous grape varieties in the ground, sensibly resisting the temptation to replace them all with Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, Portugal can offer really distinctive flavours and styles that cannot be found anywhere else.

The only slight problem is that the Portuguese have developed such a vibrant wine culture that wine guides have proliferated and demand for the

most garlanded wines has soared, along with their prices.

Quintas was particularly delighted to be able to see me re-taste and enjoy Santar's red 1997 Dão made from the Alfrocheiro Preto grape about which I had written "this is just the sort of wine that sells so well in British supermarkets", remarking on its "ultra-fruity, hyper-modern nose". I would not have thought it would still have such a haunting fragrance at 10 years old, and Quintas was quite right to point out that Santar's work in reviving this once-obscure Dão grape was fully vindicated by this bottle.

Several vintages of Quinta dos Roques' white Dão certainly vindicated

my initial enthusiasm for another local grape, Encruzado, which can make serious, dry, full bodied whites with every bit as much gravitas as fine white burgundy. The same property's varietal Touriga Nacional seemed just as good in 1996 as the 2005, and overall Quinta dos Roques' 1996s seemed to have lasted just a bit better than those from the other great Dão producer Quinta da Pellada.

Tasting several dozen wines from Bairrada showed that Luis Pato, who has left the official Bairrada appellation, still makes many of the best wines of the region. His reds have real nobility and great ageing potential but are not too austere in youth. Even his white Vinha Formal 1998 made from the local Bical grape (not tasted in 1999) was extremely impressive. The Bairradas of Sidónia de Sousa are highly regarded in Portugal but can seem hard on non-Portuguese palates although their 1990 Reserva and 1997 Garrafeira were pretty impressive.

Douro reds, made in the mould of Barca Velha, are now some of Portugal's most highly regarded. The 2004s are looking particularly exciting.

In the box (left) are some of my favourite current Portuguese wines, tasted variously in London and Düsseldorf. But on the basis of my Düsseldorf experience, I would expect them to be worth keeping longer than many of their counterparts made outside Portugal.

Next week – how are the 2006 bordeaux primeurs?

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Portuguese favourites

WHITES

- Quinta do Cardo Sírnia 2005 Beira Interior
- Quinta dos Roques Encruzado 2005 Dão
- Paulo Laureano Escolha 2005 Alentejo

REDS

- Erva Pata 2005 Estremadura
- Casa de Mouraz 2004 Dão
- Quinta dos Roques, Alfrocheiro Preto 2003 Dão
- Quinta dos Roques, Touriga Nacional 2005 Dão

- Quinta dos Roques, Reserva 2005 Dão
- Álvaro de Castro, PAPE (Baga + Touriga) 2005 Dão
- Dão Sul, Quinta de Cabriz Tinta Roriz 1999 Dão
- Luís Pato, Vinha Barrio 2001 Beiras
- Luís Pato, Vinha Pan, 2005 Beiras
- Luís Pato, Vinha Barrosa Vinhas Velhas 2005 Beiras
- Pintas 2005 Douro
- Quinta do Vallado Reserva 1999 and Old Vineyards 2005 Douro

- Quinta do Vale Dona Maria 2004 and 2005 Douro
- Lemos Van Zeller, Curriculum Vitae 2004 and 2005 Douro
- Jorge Moreira, Poeira 2004 Douro
- Quinta do Mouro 2004 Alentejano
- Mouchão, Tonel 3-4 1999 Alentejo

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