

Douro: historic vineyards, World heritage site

We know very little about the first vines planted in the Douro region. However, certain remains discovered confirm the existence of vine husbandry during the time of the Roman occupation (137 BC).

Following the independence of Portugal, in the 12th century, viniculture became the most important agricultural activity. The population was at the time obliged to pay their taxes in wine, as certain community registers in the Douro indicate.

At the time, the wine was already similar to the wines of today as it was full and had aging potential, the result of a long food-trodden process, a traditional method still in use today in various wineries.

In 1756, following the Marquis de Pombal's royal decree, the *Companhia Geral da Agricultura das Vinhas do Alto Douro* is created. Its mission was to stimulate production, maintain prices and defend Port Wine's prestige abroad by regulating both the sector and the production and sale of Port.

The world's oldest demarcated and regulated AOC wine region was thus born.

In December 2001, part of the Douro region was classified by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site.



The culture of the Vine

Few people imagine the human toil that has gone into vine husbandry in the region. However, it is universally recognized that the Douro Valley produces one of the world's best wines: Port.

The Douro is a valley, a vineyard, a wine.

Sheltered from the Atlantic winds by the Marão and Montemuro mountain ranges, the region lies in North-Eastern Portugal, between Barqueiros and Mazouco, and the Spanish frontier.

“Nine months of winter and three months of hell”: the popular proverb describes the Douro climate.

In the Douro valley, as in all other mountain wine regions, the problems of planting vines on steep slopes had to be solved.

First the river, then human effort transformed the schist mountains of the Cambrian and Pre-Cambrian periods into walls and terraces, illustrating the collective achievement of various cultures: a lifetime task, a true human epic!

THE DOURO DEMARCATED REGION

The terraces! Stretching for as far as the eye can see, they give the region its unique contours. Seen from the air, they resemble a succession of Aztec pyramids.

The density of planting varies according to the layout of the vineyard: from 3000 (modern terracing) to 6000 vines per hectare (traditional plantings).

At present, the demarcated region covers 250000 hectares, accompanying the river Douro and its tributaries, of which 40000 are actually planted under vine.

The special features of the terrain, its physical-chemical characteristics, its climate and micro-climates, its grape varieties, come to the fore during the harvest in September. The pickers descend the slopes to work for a month in the vineyards, as well as transport the grapes to the wineries.



The art of the Wine

Port Wine

Port is a fortified wine from the Douro Demarcated Region that is made according to specific techniques shaped by natural and human factors, and with the use of traditional methods that include adding natural grape spirit to stop the must from fermenting (*benefício*), blending wines and ageing.

Port Wine's unique characteristics distinguish it from ordinary wines: an enormous variety of types that surprise us with the wealth and intensity of their incomparable aromas, highly persistent flavor and aroma, a high alcohol content (usually between 19 and 22%vol.), a vast range of degrees of sweetness and an assortment of colors. There is a set of styles that identify the different types of Port Wine.

Red Ports vary in color from deep purple to light gold, with a range of intermediary hues (tawny, golden tawny, golden and light gold). White Port comes in various shades (pale yellow, straw and golden white), all strictly related to the winemaking technique used. When aged in cask for many years, white wines acquire, through natural oxidation, a golden hue that is very similar to that of a very old Tawny wine.

THE DOURO DEMARCATED REGION

Port Wines can be divided into two major categories according to the manner they are aged: Ruby style and Tawny style.

Ruby wines are those in which the winemaker looks to restrain the evolution of their deep red color and maintain the fruit and strength of a young wine. The following wines are included in this category, in ascending order of quality: Ruby, Ruby Reserve, Late Bottled Vintage (LBV), and Vintage. The finer category wines, especially Vintage and – to a lesser degree – LBV, are ideal for storing as they age well in bottle.

Tawny wines are obtained from blends of various wines aged for different lengths of time in casks or vats. With age, the color of the wines slowly develops into tawny, medium tawny or light tawny, with a bouquet of dried fruits and wood: the older the wine, the stronger these aromas. The present categories in this style are: Tawny, Tawny Reserve, Tawny with an Indication of Age (10, 20, 30 and over 40 years old) and Colheitas, wines of a single year that are similar to an aged Tawny of the same age. These wines are ready to drink when they are bottled.

AOC Douro Still Wines

The vineyards that are the birthplace of Port Wine also produce dry wines, wines that are showing increasing promise: AOC Douro wines.

The AOC appellation was created in 1982 in recognition of the excellence of Port Wine, and the potential of the same region to produce still, or dry, wines from the same grape varieties. After 20 years, critics and experts alike are finally discovering and attesting to the special characteristics of these top quality wines, with their unique personality.

The white wines are generally fresh with fruity and floral aromas. They are intense wines and should be drunk whilst young. There are also whites that ferment or are aged in wood: these wines have complex aromas of tropical fruits, with a hint of butter and almonds. They are round, full wines with good ageing potential.

As for the reds, there are also young wines with aromas of cherry and raspberry, round and ready to drink once they are bottled. The Douro region is well suited to produce wines meant for ageing. When young, these are a deep purple color, with red fruit aromas, and hint of chocolate, violet and a touch of wood, according to the method of ageing chosen. These potent, full, well-round wines become increasingly complex and delicate when they reach their peak.

