

Calém Port Award Scholarship, October 2010

Understanding Port, from grape to glass

Justin Martindale

After the fantastic surprise of being offered one of the WSET's highly coveted scholarships, I was delighted to discover that the prize was to entail a three-day trip to the vineyards of the Douro, courtesy of the Sogevinus group and Calém Port.

Having studied the region as part of my exam, and spoken to people who had visited the area themselves, I had been forewarned of the rusticity of its vineyards; but nevertheless was surprised and amazed at just how rural, beautiful and difficult a place it is to grow grapes.

The Douro itself is a vast area, cut some 60 kilometres into Portugal's side from the Spanish border down to the town of Regua. Such is its beauty that the region is listed as one of UNESCO's world heritage sites; extraordinary considering that the area is completely manmade. The region is split into three distinct areas, the Baixa Corgo, Cima Corgo and Douro Superior. When making the journey by car from Porto, it was fabulous to travel through these different areas and the reasons for this delimitation became clear. The Baixa Corgo starts right after the Serro do Marão mountain range, where the road falls sharply in altitude and the vineyards begin to appear. This mountain has a vital affect on the climate of the Douro, stopping approaching rain clouds in their tracks and creating the near drought conditions that top quality port requires. Equally clear is why it is the Cima Corgo that is generally considered to make the best wines. Starting at the hydroelectric dam at Regua, the scene changes immediately: the vines become much more organised, the valley much steeper and the quintessential terraced vineyards begin in earnest.

Hospitality was provided at the wonderfully picturesque Quinta S. Luiz, where I was immediately thrown in to an afternoon of grape picking, and was to experience first hand what a phenomenally difficult place the Douro is to produce wine. However, I was not the only novice out on the slopes that day. Every year Calém gets all of its employees back into the vineyards, whatever their role in the company, they all go back to grape picking for two days a year. This is to ensure that they never lose that link with the grapes and the farming that facilitate their jobs in Calém's palatial offices at Vila Nova de Gaia. Eagerly anticipated by some, and dreaded by others, this link is vital, and epitomises the general ethos that I was to discover throughout my experiences in the industry on this trip.

There are many difficulties that have to be overcome growing grapes in the Douro. The steepness of the vineyards' slopes and the small distance between the vines mean that machine harvesting here is not and never will be possible. Hand harvesting is essential, difficult and at times dangerous. The

slopes are not soil, but loose schist, which has been blown out of the landscape by dynamite and is extremely treacherous underfoot. Care must be taken when traversing, especially when armed with a pair of secateurs! The weather too can be hazardous. When I was picking, the temperature was approaching 40°C, and there is precious little shade in the vineyards. Work is therefore necessarily slow, and labour is becoming increasingly difficult to find. The increasing amount of still wine that is made in this part of Portugal is obviously subject to the same problems, making it seem incredibly good value for money when compared with some other wine producing areas, which do not face such complications.

The ultimate destination for the port that these grapes go into making could be anywhere in the world, as the global market for port continues to expand. Nevertheless I was extremely surprised to discover that Calém's biggest markets are in Angola, Brazil, Mozambique and Denmark, with the UK down in 6th or 7th position. I asked David Betti, Calém's Export Development Manager and my guide for the trip, why this was and he told me that the UK market is very difficult to crack, with consumers only really interested in the traditional, and English names. 85% of the wine Calém produces is exported to one of their overseas markets. By all accounts, 2010 has been a difficult year for growers and highly unlikely to be declared a vintage, but as David Betti says, 'It's not good to have too many great vintages close together – vintage port should be something special.'

As the world combats the worst economic recession in living memory, and with Portugal struggling more than some, one wonders what the future might hold for this most ancient of wine industries. From what I have seen, the industry is thriving, having made the most of a great deal of external investment over recent years, with their temperature controlled fermentation vats, robotic lagares and pneumatic presses, the winemaking facilities are now as high tech and modernised as anywhere in Europe. Gone are the days of pressing by feet except in all but the most traditional quintas, and the pretty boats that once shipped the wine down river to Vila Nova de Gaia have not been used since 1962 and now sit moored by the river, sailed only once a year for the hotly contested Barco Rabelo race. At the Sogevinus vineyards a great deal of experimentation is happening too. On my visit to the highly regarded Arnozuelo estate, which borders the famous Vargellas, I saw vines being planted on granite, and in Calém's winery, interesting trials into the use of Portuguese oak and the production of more unusual port styles such as a colheita white. But perhaps the most exciting development is the global increase in interest in the Douro's still wines, some of which have already made quite a name for themselves and are commanding seriously high prices. I can vouch for the quality of all the still wines and ports that I was fortunate enough to try on this trip, and I can only hope that the wines produced in the Sogevinus fold will find their way to us in the UK, as I suspect they would be very well received.