



A Portuguese SWANSONG

In his last *Decanter* article on Portuguese wine, RICHARD MAYSON looks back over 26 years in the trade and picks his favourite producers of yesteryear, today - and tomorrow



Richard Mayson is a world expert on port and Portuguese wine, and has written several books on the

subject. Having invested in his own vineyard last year, he will no longer be writing on the subject for *Decanter*, to avoid any conflict of interest. He will continue to write for us on other areas, however.

PORTUGAL FOSTERED MY sense of smell. As a child in the 1970s I was captivated by strange aromas emanating from every doorway: charcoal-grilled fish, the pungent smell of *bacalhau* (salt cod), fresh coriander, piri-piri, a peculiarly waxy floor polish and, at the right time of year, the heady whiff of fermenting grape must.

In those days Portugal's wine business was virtually a cottage industry. Apart from fizzy rosé, few wines left Portugal's shores. When I began to work with wine for the first time in 1979 (a gap-year job in a Portuguese restaurant) regions like

the Douro and Alentejo had yet to be recognised, their best wines ending up blended into mysterious proprietary brands labelled *garrafeira*.

The Portuguese have spent the best part of the last 30 years discovering their terroir. Helped enormously by entry into the EU, the Portuguese wine scene has been dramatically transformed. The big coops have lost much of their power (as well as their best grapes) to individual estates or quintas. Many traditional merchant firms have folded and those that remain have reinvented themselves, buying up land and planting their own



Left: the Douro is home to many of Portugal's great producers. Above Dirk Niepoort took over the family vineyards in the 1990s

Portugal, the hills above Portalegre in the Alto Alentejo. In order to avoid any future conflict of interest, this is my last article for *Decanter* on Portuguese wines. I make no apology for this indulgent run down of the 20 best wines and their producers that I have encountered since I first became involved with Portuguese wines. As a measure of the transformation that has taken place, I calculate that just six of these producers were in existence when I started out 26 years ago.

RICHARD MAYSON'S PICKS OF PORTUGAL

DOURO Barca Velha ★★★★★

Ferreira's Barca Velha is one Portuguese red that needs little or no introduction. Since it was first produced in 1952, just 13 vintages have been released. Six years ago I had the privilege to drink 1966 Barca Velha, which stands out in my mind as one of the finest red wines Portugal has ever produced. Given the circumstances in which it was made (a warm vintage with rudimentary temperature control), this is an extraordinary wine, upright, intensely concentrated, with a touch of cigar box and a long, powerful finish. The 1964 Barca Velha (apparently just as good) was recently given as a peace offering by Chelsea's José Mourinho to Manchester United's Alex Ferguson but history does not yet relate what he thought. After a dip in quality in the late 1970s/early 1980s, the most recent release,

Barca Velha 1995 (£44.99; BWC) is back on form, combining rich, polished fruit with dense, beautifully suave tannins.

Niepoort ★★★★★

The Niepoort family has been making port for five generations but it is only since Dirk Niepoort took control in the early 1990s that they turned to Douro reds. Inside a decade four wines, first Redoma, then Batuta, Vertente and now Charme have become the best of their genre. I favour Charme, Niepoort's attempt at making a Burgundian red from Douro fruit. From a challenging vintage, **Charme 2002** (£45; Bat, Ryn) with its gentle, open berry fruit and sinewy length of flavour has the finesse and, dare I say it, charm lacking in so many Douro wines.

Prats and Symington ★★★★★

Chryseia is the product of a Franco-Anglo-Portuguese partnership. Super-intense and hugely ripe, **Chryseia 2001** (N/A UK; +351 223 776 300) finds naturally rich, tannic Douro fruit tempered by well-mannered new oak. Like many new wave Douro reds it makes up in power what it lacks in elegance but I await French-influenced fine-tuning in future vintages.

Quinta do Crasto ★★★★★

Crasto is a spectacularly situated property that used to supply a large port shipper until the Roquette family decided to go it alone in the mid-1990s. Drafting in Australian help, they produced a series of single-quinta wines culminating in a pair of outstanding reds from the two oldest plots of vines: Maria Teresa and Vinha do Ponte. **Vinha do Ponte 2000** (£24.67; Adn) combines opulence with restraint without it being a contradiction in terms: well-integrated new French oak, fine-grained tannins and tight, taut yet succulent fruit. Look out for a new Douro red named Xisto, a Franco-Portuguese red made by the Roquette family in partnership with Bordeaux giant Jean-Michel Cazes.

Quinta do Vale Meão ★★★★★

Once the seat of Barca Velha, this property in the Douro Superior has severed its connections and since 1999 has been making its own, almost-as-impressive reds. Made in the same stone *lagares* that produced the 13 Barca Velhas, **Quinta do Vale do Meão 2000** (£29; Ryn) is a fabulously →

vineyards. In the process a wealth of native grape varieties has been untangled, and new varietal wines, all but impossible 20 years ago, have emerged. There is still much to be done, but looking back at the transformation, I am reminded of the first line from LP Hartley's novel *The Go-Between*: 'The past is a foreign country. They do things differently there.'

After spending 16 years writing about Portuguese wines, I am moving on. A dream has become reality and I have acquired my own vineyard, Quinta do Centro, in one of my favourite parts of

rich, fleshy wine with fine, fragrant, floral fruit (violets) from Touriga Nacional, with beguilingly soft, ripe tannins.

Ramos Pinto ★★★★★

Son of the creator of Barca Velha, João Nicolau de Almeida has taken over where his father left off. His creation is Duas Quintas, a blend of wines from two very different estates at different altitudes. But **Duas Quintas Reserva Especial 2000** (€22; MMD) is the product of a plot of old, mixed vines at Quinta do Bom Retiro. Nicolau de Almeida explains that, having been foot-trodden in *lagar*, the wine spends 18 months in oak 'to let the fruit talk'. Actually it sings. With a rich, port-like nose, eucalyptus and velvety concentration, this is the very essence of the Douro.

DAO

Alvaro Castro ★★★★★

Alvaro Castro left a career in civil engineering to take charge of two family properties, Quinta de Saes and Quinta de Pellada. The best wines from the two estates come together to produce Pape, a bold statement of what this underrated region can produce. **Pape 2000** (N/A UK; +351 238 486 133) is fragrant and floral, with violet-like aromas from Touriga Nacional and polished, naturally spicy fruit, flattered by cedary new oak.

Quinta dos Roques ★★★★★

Set against Portugal's highest mountain range, Roques is divided into a number of plots of vines planted with Alfrocheiro, Tinta Roriz, Touriga Nacional and Tinto Cão. **Quinta dos Roques Reserva 2000** (€17; Ryn) combines these varieties as well as grapes from the old, mixed Vinha de Pessegeiro or peach tree vineyard. This is



Dão at its traditional best: restrained, with fine, firm, spicy berry fruit, judicious use of new oak and fresh, mineral acidity giving the wine balance and finesse.

BAIRRADA

Casa de Saima ★★★★★

Traditional Bairrada, foot-trodden in *lagar*, no destalking, aged in old wood, can be tough as old boots but in 1990 this modest property got the balance spectacularly right. **Casa de Saima 1990 Garrafeira** (€30; Ryn) is dense, well structured yet fleshy and wonderfully intense. It will last a lifetime.

Bussaco (Buçaco) ★★★★★

A hotel rather than a producer, Bussaco qualifies for the romance of the wine and the place. Attracted by the setting, solitude and old-fashioned service, this former royal palace has received heads of state and guests such as Agatha Christie, Cole Porter and Douglas Fairbanks. Part of the draw was the hotel's own wine, blended, depending on the year, from the best lots in neighbouring Bairrada and/or Dão. The **1962 Bussaco** (N/A UK; +351 231 937 970), favourite of the late President Americo Tomás (deposed in 1974), had fantastically fresh mulberry fruit aromas, and intense berry and cigar box flavours when I last tasted it in the early 1990s. Sadly the man behind the wines died in 1995 and the secret died with him. But there are some real treasures on the hotel wine list.

Luís Pato ★★★★★

An early, passionate advocate of terroir, Pato's two finest reds, Vinha Barrosa and Vinha Pan are from clearly identifiable plots. Really good vintages are fairly few and far between in Bairrada but 1995 was an outstanding year. Ten years on, **Vinha Pan 1995** (N/A UK; +351 231 596 432) is a beautiful wine: open, fragrant, wild berry fruit with finely poised chocolatey intensity and fine-grained tannins.

RIBATEJO

Casa Cadaval ★★★★★

This stately property on the banks of the Tagus was the first property in Portugal to plant commercial quantities of Cabernet Sauvignon (and, less successfully, Pinot Noir). Now under the tutelage of leading Portuguese winemaker Rui Reguina, Cadaval has produced the Ribatejo's first world-class red. Eschewing foreign grapes, **Marques de**



Below: Luís Pato, an early advocate of terroir. Above: Australian David Baverstock has transformed the wines of Esporão. Right: the stunning Bussaco hotel, once a royal palace

Cadaval 2003 (N/A UK; +351 243 588 040) is a tight-knit blend of Touriga Nacional (70%) and Trincadeira (30%), refined and elegant with the wonderful floral fruit that is the hallmark of Touriga Nacional.

ESTREMADURA

Quinta do Monte d'Oiro ★★★★★

With a passion for the northern Rhône, José Bento dos Santos began planting Syrah and Viognier in the early 1990s. Both varieties have adapted well to the calcareous soils and maritime climate of Alenquer near Lisbon, producing spicy-peppery reds with great purity of fruit. With 4% Viognier **Quinta do Monte d'Oiro Reserva 2000** (N/A UK; +351 263 766 060) is emphatically Syrah with fine, focused peppery fruit and smoky new oak.

SETUBAL PENINSULA Bacalhoa Vinhos ★★★★★

The new name for JP Vinhos (alias João Pires), Bacalhoa now produces wines on the Setúbal Peninsula and in the Alentejo, and it is the Alentejano red that grabs my attention. Tinto da Anfora has long been a ripe, leathery red that, despite its relatively modest price, has shown itself capable of a decade or more of bottle age. In 2001 it was joined by big brother **Tinto de Anfora Grande Escolha** (€12.99; Har). Sharing the same spicy-leathery hallmark, this wine packs in huge power, depth and concentration as well.

José Maria da Fonseca

★★★★

Producer of two of Portugal's best-known, long-established brands, Lancer's



and Periquita, José Maria da Fonseca's large and amorphous family of wines includes some real finds. **Periquita Classico 1995** (N/A UK; +351 212 191 500) harks back to the days when straight Castelão (nicknamed Periquita) itself was a full-flavoured, full-bodied red, aged in oak until the raspberry freshness takes on overtones of tar and leather.

Pegos Claros ★★★★★

The Castelão grape is planted throughout central-southern Portugal but nowhere seems to suit it better than the sandy soils around Pegões. Provided yields are kept under control, it produces wines with body and finesse. Foot treading and ageing in Portuguese oak give this wine extra charisma. Although standards have slipped in recent years **Pegos Claros Reserva 1996** (N/A UK; +351 265 896 221) is still one of the best manifestations of the quixotic Castelão grape.

ALENTEJO

Esporão ★★★★★

With the largest swathe of vineyard in Portugal, in just over a decade Esporão has emerged from obscurity to be one of the country's most impressive producers. David Baverstock has brought Australian

influence to bear on Portuguese varieties, and bottles benchmark reds from Touriga Nacional, Trincadeira, Alicante Bouschet and Aragonês. **Esporão Garrafeira 2001** (£21.99; You) is a blend of all four: super-ripe, a touch minty, big and broad with powerful spicy fruit and savoury oak.

Mouchão ★★★★★

This isolated, family-owned property encapsulates all that is unique about the Alentejo. Situated in a hollow (susceptible to frosts) in the midst of ancient cork groves, this old established vineyard is mostly planted with Alicante Bouschet. In 1996 two outstanding *cubas* (cuvées) were blended together and bottled, after spending between three and four years in vat, as **Mouchão Tonel 3-4 1996** (N/A UK; +351 251 652 167). With wild aromas of eucalyptus and mint, and powerful, focused, bittersweet fruit, this is nonetheless a wine which is refined and elegant, making it the most impressive Alentejano red I have ever tasted.

Quinta do Carmo ★★★★★

Quinta do Carmo belonged to the Bastos family until its vineyards were partly sold off to the Rothschilds in 1992. Wines which were typically solid,

powerful and foursquare in the late 1980s have lost much of their rustic, regional charm since old Alicante Bouschet vineyards were grubbed up, largely in favour of Cabernet Sauvignon and Syrah. Although individual bottles are alarmingly variable, **Quinta do Carmo's** fine, sinewy, leathery **1987 Garrafeira** (N/A UK; +351 268 337 320) is a thrilling traditional red. I still have one bottle in my cellar and I am dreading pulling the cork to find a volatile relic.

Quinta do Mouro ★★★★★

Belonging to local dentist Miguel Louro, Quinta do Mouro has been restored to become the standard bearer of tradition in the Alentejo. The vineyard is dry-farmed which keeps yields low. Aragonês, Trincadeira, Alicante Bouschet and a small amount of Cabernet Sauvignon combine to produce wonderfully dense, concentrated wines that gain a leathery quality with age in bottle. **Quinta do Mouro 1998** (N/A UK; +351 268 332 259) which I first drank on the night I got engaged, is one of my most memorable Portuguese reds for all the right reasons. The understated label says it all. **D**

For a full list of UK stockists see p107.

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