

Portugal's Renaissance



Rick Staff
with a remit to sniff, taste,
and spit his way around Nanjing
and disseminate the drinkable.

POINT SYSTEM	
0-10	A WARNING
11-14	A Feasible Party Prop
15-17	Heartily Recommended
17-19	Exceptionally Good
20	The Apoogee Of
WINE EXPRESSION	



■ Nestled deep in the midst of Portugal's Douro valley one long night, I found myself with insurmountable insomnia. The taut awakes the result of something even more unnerving than being informed earlier that evening that former UK prime minister John Major had recently slept in the bed in which I now found myself. It was the silence. A still night had rendered the whole vast valley mute, save for the music in the rustle of a leaf when the wind chose to lightly ripple. Portugal's most famous wine region may be stunning to the eye, but is remote and improbably tough terrain for winemaking. The steep limestone slopes are lacerated by dynamite-blasted terraces to make agriculture possible, and these visited by viciously cold winters and searing hot summers with very little rain. The powder-dry schist soil thus requires very deep vinous roots indeed to reach water, valiantly extending as much as 20m to slake their thirst. Deep the metaphorical roots are too, in these difficult hills with evidence for winemaking traditions stretching back to the influence of the Western Roman Empire during the 3rd and 4th centuries. Though it was the British who took full advantage of the valley's only natural gift to winemakers during their long dust up with the French in the 17th and 18th centuries. This being the Douro River which runs from central Spain and ribbons right through the valley to the port of Oporto, the outlet to the sea and the rest of the world. The long river thus enabled a trade where Portugal's wines became synonymous with a sweet and warming accidental nectar (the fortified port style either nicked from a local or used for preserving the wines on a long sea voyage, take your pick) to partner gout and winter fireplaces with a somewhat upper crust tendency (a jarring anomaly being the assault from within the table-lamp friendly Mateus rose bottles which had their moment in the 80's and 90's). It's an image on which the now very international port wine market still thrives.

However, a more cranium friendly wine is emerging from beneath port's wings, with increasing accolade and success, in Portugal's long overlooked table wines (read "not port"), subject to a new Douro dynamism. Part of this redemption has been Portugal's relative isolation, being somewhat liberated by having less of the ubiquitous "international" grapes, Cabernet and Chardonnay, and thus preserving its unique character of grape and terroir; Tinta Roriz (Spain's Tempranillo) and the endemic Touriga Nacional are important red varietals; though the wine in the glass has reflected too much of that improbably tough terrain at times. One such protagonist of the newly tempered indigenous flavours are Symington Family Estates (who owe me a night's sleep) and their name adorns the label on the Altano 2008 (along with a plethora of well known ports). This is pushing the boat out a bit at ¥302 but cuts it at the price, with Tinta Roriz and the lighter Touriga Franca delivering a coppice of plum and dark cherries along with brighter aromas of damson; round and smooth to the touch, yet there's a complexity comprising hints of licorice, smoke, chocolate, and a touch of dry herbs (17 points). A very well made wine, but don't hang around as it's drinking perfectly now with, I would wager, a window of six months before beginning its descent from the apex, find it at Everwines on Changjiang Lu (next to the Six Dynasties museum).

The revolution does not stop with the illustrious Douro either; there's the "new Dao" to the south, shaking off its rustic tag of old with some polished performers that rival Spain's upper echelon, and for a very different terroir perspective, take in the view of the gently undulating wide open plains of Alentejo. Bordering Spain to the east and the Algarve in the south with a geography, flatter and warmer, the Alentejo is conducive to cork production in an industry increasingly challenged by the convenience of the screwcap closure. The area having long held a reputation for the cheerful cheapo, Alentejo's Insolito 2012 (Metro supermarket) is exactly that but certainly not in any pejorative sense. Cheerfully jostling Tinta Roriz (Aragonez as its locally known) and Touriga Nacional for just ¥79 this is a great value, aromatically fruity, but not frivolous, affair, showing a trace of chocolate for intrigue and enough easy-going charm to partner whatever festive bird you care to pluck (15.5 points). **NUK**