

Tiny Tavora e Varosa turning out top sparklers

Posted on December 7, 2018December 7, 2018 by Neil Fairlamb

Neil Fairlamb goes off the Portuguese piste and uncovers a bijou gem of a predominantly sparkling wine region, wedged between the Douro and Dão. He also takes in the 2018 edition of the ExpoDemo Fair.

The very small region of Tavora e Varosa is sandwiched between the two famous regions of Douro and Dão with the large area of Beira Interior to the southeast. It is possibly the least-well known wine region of Portugal, certainly in the UK, hence the interest of my visit (the only UK journalist) as part of the recent FIJEV tour. In Portugal, it is much better-known for the excellent sparkling wines of Murganheira and Raposeira, and the cooperative in Moimenta da Beira, which are overall the best sparkling wines of the country.

Climbing up from Peso da Régua in the Douro Valley, with heat so stifling it is sometimes difficult to breathe, the landscape changes from the steeply-terraced vineyards to higher ground of 600-800 metres, rolling hilly landscapes, a sparser population (and the younger generation is moving away), and a continental climate of severe winters and hot summer days but cooler nights. This small region is immediately different. Just two hours from Oporto and one is in an enclosed, self-contained region, which has defined its identity in a global market for two products: apples and sparkling wines. It was amazing to visit the Adega Cooperativa Tavora e Varosa with its president, João Silva, and see the hugely impressive cellars for the sparkling wine; tremendous blocks of granite set in place at a huge labour effort, and the vast storage capacity for the Terras do Demo range, the basis of the regionals wine economy.

Then we went across the site to visit to visit the apple packing centre rivers of apples being washed (not primarily for cleaning but in preparation for transportation across the world). How strange to taste a perfectly crisp Granny Smith and a superb Gala apple in such a remote, mountainous region. The cooler balance of the long growing season suits the apple here, so often a dull, soft-textured product from hotter Mediterranean climates. This success with apples is a clue to the success of sparkling wine here freshness and acidity, and why this was the first region to be demarcated for Portuguese sparkling wines, in 1989.

The cooperative, with over 1,000 members cultivating 1,300 hectares (keeping every grower happy must be a problem), is clearly the economic lynchpin of the community around Moimenta da Beira. This is a charming small town in the midst of a region where wine visits can form part of a Cistercian tourist trail of monasteries, like Santa Maria de Salzedas, and an old sparkling wine house and museum at Dalvaes. Terras do Demo is the sparkling wine brand. Chardonnay and Pinot Noir are used, but very interesting single-grape sparkling wines are made from Malvasia Fina (full-flavoured and rounded) and Verdelho (definitely a food wine with structure and depth), and Touriga Nacional is used to good effect for the rose, slightly less dry. The cooperative also makes pleasant white wine and more substantial reds, the Touriga Nacional and Touriga Franca reservas of 2011 being impressively solid and good value at ,6. Ripening of these varieties can be an autumn challenge; the very cool summer this year means late-September picking.

This cooperative began and ended our tastings, as at the ExpoDemo Fair for the region (with other regions represented) we had a fascinating tasting of mature Terras do Demo wines going back to 1980, with Portuguese winemaker of the year, Pedro Nunes from Casa de Passarella in DC#o, presenting the tasting and commenting helpfully on what had never been attempted before bll a tasting of aged garrafeiras and reservas from the cooperative cellars. The tasting was a brilliant success, with the acidity of this higher altitude region with cool nights keeping the wines alive, the bouquet of fading rose petals giving way to smooth textures of flavour with a vital fresh finish preserving the flavours. 1992 was my favourite. What a treat!



Fungus in the sparkling wine cellars of Portugal, Neil Fairlamb

Murganheira is perhaps the top name in Portuguese sparkling wine and has been since it was founded over 30 years ago; Raposeira at Lamego, nearer the Douro, is the slightly less prestigious winery under the same ownership. The Murganheira winery at Ucanha was certainly vastly impressive as is the attention to style and presentation. The cellars are dug out of blue granite. It is very much a family business, the winemaker being Marta LourenC'o, who communicates enthusiasm and total commitment; it wasn't easy for a woman to be accepted as a winemaker in a traditional culture. The estate owns about 30ha and buys in from growers from over 1,000ha of surrounding vineyards. The large array of sparkling wines, ten in the Prestige category, is formidable and, at the top, quite expensive for Portugal (b ,25+) but fully worthy of international comparison. We tasted just a few wines; I greatly liked the 2008 Chardonnay, with its developed flavours but still projecting a strong assertive profile. However, the fabulous wine that lingers in my memory was a vintage disgorged wine but one that was kept in the cellars for further maturation for over 12 years as a complete finished wine. It combined maturity and freshness ideally. I also liked the still wines of which they seem to make little fuss. The red blend of Touriga varietals was a very pleasant b ,4.20 worth.

Small growers were well represented at the ExpoDemo fair, which was held 13th-15th September and, before that, a delightful vineyard tasting of Quinta das Cepas wines was organised among the vines at Fonte Arcada, just above a reservoir lake; these were good value wines, sold very inexpensively for about £5 in El Corte Ingles, the luxury store in Oporto and Lisbon. Then, at the fair, we had four small producers with varied ideas. Casa de Vinhago had an attractive white from Malvasia, Sercial and Arinto, combining citrus flavours with the structure given by Arinto. The Poiesis reserve Red 2015 from Touriga Nacional was traditionally made from foot-trodden grapes with half the wine in oak for six months, and combined fresh blackberry flavours to balance the 14.5% alcohol. José Viseu Carvalho had an excellent Santa Eufémia 2011 sparkling wine with the 20% of Gouveia mixed with 80% Malvasia, giving fresh acidity to balance the depth of ripened Malvasia flavours.

Marcos Hehn Pinto da Silva won my heart when he announced his addiction to acidity; hence his interest, besides his family origins, in growing Riesling on schist and granite; the 2016 with 4g/l of residual was perfumed, fresh with a lovely middle palate, and quite a surprise from this rugged terrain. The sparkling wines from 2011 and 2012 showed well-developed, soft flavours emphasising the elegance and textured, fruity mouthfeel that comes from gentle handling. Carlos Caixas at Faia had an appetising Tempo Largo red 2016 from Touriga Franca and Tinta Roriz, a subtle blend with a perfumed freshness. I hope we see some of these individual wines in UK.

This region keeps a great pride in its individuality and its wines deserve to be better known. The wine tourism attractions are unspoilt and well worth discovering. And between tastings the apples will cleanse the palate effectively! Our very grateful thanks to our hosts and the town of Moimenta de Beira for the hospitality and to Lisete OsC3rio (whose family make wines nearby in the Douro) for all coordination.

By Neil Fairlamb