

(field graft)

LIVING THE DREAM

PART ONE:

THE SEARCH FOR A VINEYARD

In the first of a new series profiling producers who have been brave enough to enter the vineyard from another walk of life, wine writer **Richard Mayson** describes how the idea of having his own estate in Portugal gradually took hold, and how he set about putting his money where his mouth was

Where does an idea start? How does it ferment? I have been looking back, rather self-indulgently, to a time when Portugal was another country. Echoing the first line of LP Hartley's novel *The Go Between*, they did things differently there. Godot's was (and still is) a restaurant at Praia da Luz on the Algarve, established in the 1960s and so named because the American owners were waiting so long that they thought the building would never be finished. Fresh out of school, I took my first job there in the summer of 1979. There were peculiar smells that I still recall but are no longer there, now that the Algarve coast and much of Portugal has succumbed to globalization: a wonderfully waxy floor polish, bleached washing, squid being grilled over charcoal in the street, fresh *papo-secos* (bread rolls) from the village baker and rancid *bacalhau* (salt cod). Portugal had just come out of a revolution. The brilliant white walls were covered in blood-red graffiti. The economy was in tatters, the price of basic food items was government-controlled, and there were shortages of anything useful. Running a restaurant cannot have been easy with a frequent lack of butter, sugar, potatoes, milk, cigarettes, but no lack of power cuts invariably followed by an interruption in the water supply. No wonder the owners, a wonderful couple from Surrey called David and Edith Moseley, were frequently rowing, and you could sometimes cut the air with a knife. One stressful summer night they ejected Harold Pinter and Lady Antonia Fraser.

The one thing there was no shortage of was alcohol. A shot of gin (Blandy's Tower of London) was 20 escudos, the same price as a bottle of tonic. There was a dodgy brand of Portuguese whisky doing the rounds called Spey Queen, and a vodka so cheap that we used it to clean the stainless steel behind the bar. Much to my amazement, David and Edith gave me responsibility for the restaurant wine list. It involved restocking a limited range of exclusively Portuguese wines with then-unfamiliar names, like BSE, Periquita, Dão Terras Altas, and Topázio. This sent me in search of books on the subject, which I read on the beach on my afternoons off.

Wine left an indelible mark on me that summer. Traveling around Portugal during the autumn and winter,

I began visiting vineyards. I was particularly taken by the Douro (who isn't?), with those cascading terraces like hanging gardens. Through one of my father's English textile contacts, I found myself having lunch with Jorge Ferreira at the eponymous Port lodges in Vila Nova de Gaia. Looking out over the river with a glass of Ferreira's ethereal Duque de Bragança Tawny on hand (still one of my favorite 20 Year Olds), I remember thinking that it would be a good thing to pursue a professional interest in wine.

Longing for Portugal

Two years later I came to know the Douro quite well. I was studying geography at the University of Sheffield, and in the summer of 1982 I was given the free run of Ferreira's *quintas* for an undergraduate dissertation on the microclimate of Port vineyards. I knew the names of Touriga Nacional, Touriga Francesa, and Tinta Roriz long before I knew much about Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, or Pinot Noir. I redressed the balance on graduating a year later, taking a few months to visit the main wine regions of France before landing a job at The Wine Society in the UK. My job interview was with the Society's chairman, the late Edmund Penning-Rowell, who asked "do you prefer Claret or Burgundy?" My honest response at the time was Burgundy, to which EPR replied "we'll soon change you!" The Wine Society did change me. They taught me to taste and to recognize good wine from bad, no matter where it came from. But I still hankered after Portugal (*saudades* is the uniquely Portuguese expression). After five years selling, copy-writing, buying, tasting, and drinking on an industrial estate in Stevenage, I returned to Portugal with a book contract under my arm. Sebastian Payne MW, chief buyer for the Society until his retirement earlier this year, half-joked on my departure "you ought to buy a vineyard in Portugal and produce your own wine." Apart from Port and Madeira, there were only three Portuguese wines on the Society's list at the time—a Vinho Verde, Periquita, and Dão Terras Altas.

The vintage of 1989 was nothing special in the Douro and the wines have mostly been forgotten, but it was the year that I first met many of the leading lights in the Port trade. Bruce Guimareans was unforgettable, not merely for



Photography by Richard Mayson

The beautiful town of Castelo de Vide in Portalegre (Alentejo), where locals were able to testify to the potential of the vineyards in the parish of Reguengo

(field graft)



Castelo de Vide, known as the Sintra of the Alentejo, as seen from an outcrop of granite, one of the two dominant soil types in the region's vineyards

his girth and good humor, but for his love of the Douro and its vineyards. He had been on a buying spree, acquiring Quinta do Cruzeiro, Quinta do Panascal, and Quinta do Santo António for Fonseca in the 1970s. His pride and passion were infectious, and I remember asking him about the costs of buying and running a vineyard in the Douro. It was the first time that I really took Sebastian Payne's comment seriously.

But it took me another 16 years to find the right place. At the same time as researching and writing a number of books on Port, Madeira, and Portuguese wines, I always had it in the back of my mind that one day I would put my money where my mouth was. The potential for Portugal to produce good, and even great, wines grew clearer. There was already Vintage Port and Ferreira's Barca Velha from the Douro, but in the course of my travels I came across remarkable wines like Buçaco (a blend of Dão and Bairrada), Mouchão, Quinta do Carmo, and Tapada dos Chaves in the Alentejo. I had mistaken the latter for a good Châteuneuf in a blind tasting. At the time, in the early 1990s, these were still very much hit-and-miss affairs, good one year, often badly flawed the next. When I first visited in 1990, Mouchão still had no electricity, let alone stainless steel or temperature-control to ameliorate the heat of the Alentejo summer. Winemaking was still in the lap of the gods, with perfectly good grapes often ruined in the *adega* when fermentations ran out of control. Despite this, the potential was so clearly there—in the grape varieties, in the terroir, and in the Portuguese people. I kept saying so both to myself and to others in books and magazine articles. The idea of owning a vineyard in Portugal had already found its way into my heart, and now it was getting into my head.

Portalegre pioneer

My first choice for setting up a vineyard was in the Douro. It was the region that I knew best, liked the most, and the place where I had most contacts. Over the course of the 1990s it began to prove that alongside Port, there was also Douro wine: powerful unfortified reds made from the same grapes as Port and which, with sensitive winemaking, could hint at finesse. A succession of estates came out with their own successful wines, until by the end of the decade some of the main Port shippers had begun to take notice and were producing their own Douro wines. Boosted by EU funds, winemaking was being transformed, and by the late 1990s vineyards were changing hands at high prices. I looked at a few run-down properties and realized that both the cost and the infrastructure needed to put them right was beyond me. At the same time, the Douro was becoming an increasingly costly place to grow grapes. Despite a 30-year program of mechanization, the Douro is one of the most expensive vine-growing regions in the world.

As the Douro became ever more crowded with wine producers doing much the same thing (and doing it increasingly well), I began looking elsewhere. It is no coincidence that some of the best wines on the Iberian Peninsula come from those places where the climate changes from mild maritime to more extreme continental. The Douro covers this space, as do Rioja, Ribera del Duero, and parts of Galicia in northern Spain. In Portugal this band curves down through the country, narrowing as it heads south. The Dão region, traditionally the source of some of Portugal's most impressive reds, falls on the line, as does Alenquer north of Lisbon and, helped by altitude, the

northern Alentejo, where I had tasted those remarkable reds two decades ago. I had a particularly soft spot for Portalegre ever since I first visited in the late 1980s. Although south of the River Tagus (Tejo) and officially part of the Alentejo, a vast province of rolling plains, cereals, and cork forests, Portalegre belongs as much to the north as it does to the south. There are mountains, rising to over 1,000m (3,000ft) on the Pico de São Mamede, and instead of the huge estates that cover most of the south of Portugal, Portalegre's hill farmers cultivate thousands of tiny plots. There is no shortage of water. Annual average rainfall, as low as 400mm (16 inches) in the Douro Superior and parts of the Alentejo, is a relatively generous 600mm (24 inches) in Portalegre. The Serra de São Mamede is made up of both schist and granite, the bedrock of the Douro and Dão respectively, and although the local architecture belongs to the Alentejo, the landscape does not. The town of Castelo de Vide, surely one of the most beautiful in Iberia if not in Europe, is known as the Sintra of the Alentejo, and is as worthy as the other Sintra (near Lisbon) of Lord Byron's description, "glorious Eden."

Unlike the Douro, in Portalegre I could be a pioneer. But I had no contacts and no way to get under the skin of the region—or so I thought until I got to know Rui Reguinga. I had met Rui briefly some years earlier, when he was working alongside consultant winemaker João Portugal Ramos, responsible for the wines at Tapada do Chaves and the local co-operative in Portalegre. Rui was now working on his own as a consultant winemaker, and a chance meeting in London led to a discussion about Portalegre. Rui Reguinga had the same positive hunch about Portalegre as I did, and having worked in the region, he knew something about the vineyards and the wines. He came to stay at my house in London, left a pair of boxer shorts behind, and from then on our vineyard project had the working title of Quinta das Cuecas (Knickers Quinta).

So near and so far

It still took a couple of years and a series of visits to find the right place. Portalegre is a small but complex region spreading up from the plains and over the Serra de São

Mamede to the Spanish border. I wanted to find an existing vineyard, perhaps something underperforming, where I could make my own mark either by improving or replanting some of the vines. Many of the properties that I saw were too small—half-hectare (one-acre) plots of old vines, red grape varieties interplanted with white. I wanted something that would be viable, not just for wine but possibly for tourism, given that the region is a National Park increasingly used by wealthier *Lisboaetas* (Lisbonites) for weekend visits. There had to be some potential for cellar-door sales. At the same time, I didn't want anything too big, something that was difficult to control. My plan was to produce three niche reds, international in style yet reflecting the terroir of the locality. An annual production of around 40,000–50,000 bottles would suffice.

On May 12, 2004 an email arrived with pictures of what might just be the property I had been waiting for: an estate, a little over 20ha (50 acres), with 12.5ha (30 acres) of vines. It was on the granite side of the mountain range, at 500–600m (1,600–2,000ft) above sea level, on the *meia encosta* (half way up the slope). It lay in the parish of Reguengo, and old farmers told us that this was where some of Portalegre's best wines were produced. Part of the vineyard was abandoned, but there was the all-important licence to replant, and at its core were some well-established 30-year-old vines. There was a small ruined *adega* and four small houses that would be perfect for tourism. Looking closely at the pictures, I realized that I had been to the property in 1989, when researching my first book, *Portugal's Wines and Wine Makers*. At that time it was being replanted by one of Portugal's leading wine companies, José Maria da Fonseca, for Jorge d'Avillez, and it had been the source of some excellent Garrafeiras in the mid-1980s. The problem was that the timing could not have been much worse. Our first son, Edward, had been born two months earlier, and my father was struggling at home with Alzheimer's. There was no way I could visit the property soon. But could I risk bidding for Quinta do Centro without going back to look it over more carefully? After 16 years of searching, could I risk the wait? ■



The tantalizing second glimpse of Quinta do Centro, but would it be the longed-for Quinta das Cuecas?