



IBERIAN RENEWAL

Long famous for a legendary strong, sweet wine, Portugal is now producing a new generation of table wines made from the same grapes that produce port. These new wines have been riding a wave of recognition, says David Swartzentruber, and they are now appearing in Thailand

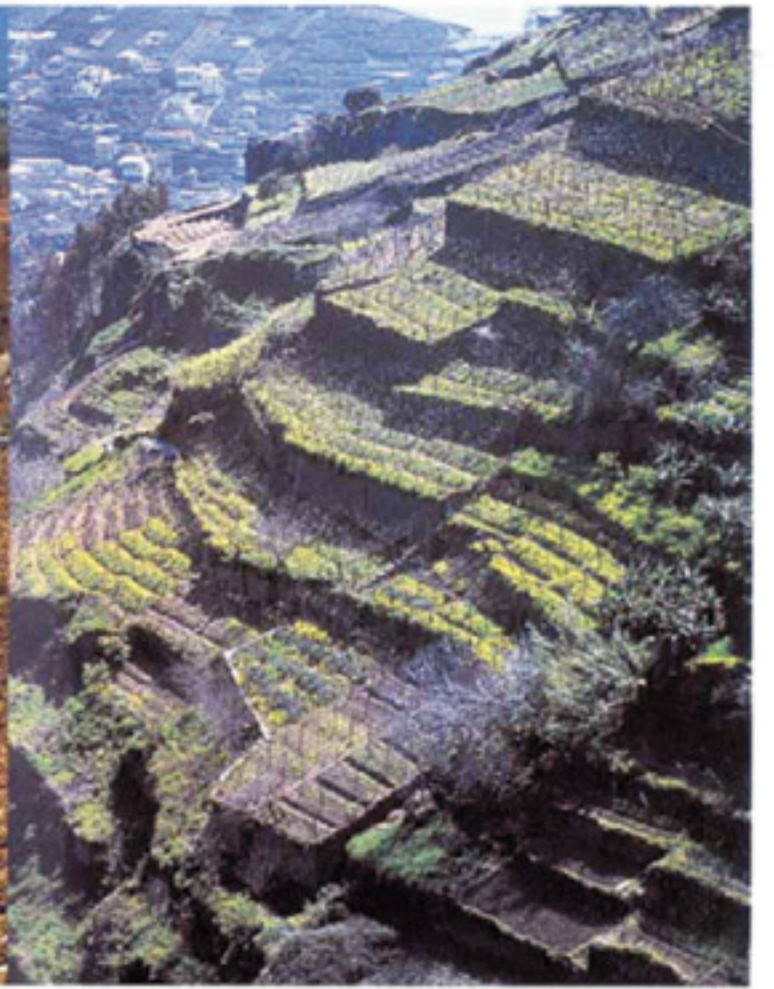
Whether one is a wine lover or not, knowledge of Portugal's fame as a producer of the fortified wines port and madeira is quite likely. Unfortunately for Portugal's wine industry on the whole, however, the market for these wines is small in comparison to the world's growing thirst for quality table wines, particularly red wines. True, in addition to port and madeira the country has been producing table wines for many years, a

notable example being Barca Velha originating in the Douro valley region by the firm Ferreira; yet the quality and success of the rest of the country's table wines have been, it can be admitted, lacklustre. Remember Mateus rosé? When a winemaker in California developed a new kind of rosé and called it white zinfandel, that effectively ended Mateus's appeal. Other Portuguese table wines of note are those from the Dao and Vinho Verde regions. You can track down some of these wines in Bangkok but they have never really developed a strong following.

"A new wine industry built on an old legacy" is how HE ambassador Joao Antonio Da Silveira De Lima Pimentel describes the new wines coming out of Portugal, and, in fact, the new table-wine industry in the country is but 20 years old. In the mid 1980s, when Portugal joined the European Union, the country embarked on a new vinous path. Generous subsidies from the EU and the World Bank led to existing wineries getting re-equipped and new vineyards getting planted. The grapes that Portuguese winemakers are utilising for their new generation of table wines are touriga nacional, tinta roriz and trincadeira, varieties that remain largely unknown outside of Portugal. Touriga nacional looks to be the great red hope of the Portuguese table-wine industry for now.

At a recent wine dinner hosted by the Portuguese ambassador and the wine firm take-fin, the country's new wave of wines left no doubt that, in spite of their short history, they will make a significant impression. Most of the wines tasted during this fine dinner at Cy'an at The Metropolitan were from the outstanding 2000 vintage, which, incidentally, was not only outstanding in Portugal but throughout Europe. The 2001 vintage in Portugal was excellent as well.

Surprisingly, the first wine on the table was a white wine from the Douro valley, a 2000 Tres Bagos sauvignon blanc produced by Lavradores de Feitoria. This project began in August 2000 and is a joint venture between 15 quality-conscious growers. And what a revelation this wine was, its quality at the level of some of the best



Above left: A typical Portuguese countryside filled with vineyards Above right: Terraced vineyards on the island of Madeira Left: Verdelho grapes, a variety native to Portugal Opposite page: A Douro valley vineyard

distinct blueberry character on the palate was especially noteworthy. Moving on, a highly rated 2000 vintage Douro Tinto Reserva was served with a 2001 Vertente Tinto Douro by Niepoort. The house of Niepoort has long been famous in port wine circles, but under the leadership of Dirk van der Niepoort it has of late inserted itself into the table-wine sector with outstanding results. Ace wine critic Hugh Johnson has even remarked that the quality of Niepoort's table wines surpasses its legendary ports. The 2001 vintage Vertente Tinto Douro was juicy, succulent, exhibited a good deal of anise character and proved a good match to another Cy'an entree of Australian grain-fed sirloin.

An event's highlight often occurs at its end and that was the case with this evening's splendid wine dinner. The two final wines were both 2000 vintage, Tres Bagos's Grande Escolha Douro Tinto and Niepoort's Douro Redoma. The Tres Bagos showed great depth of flavour and was almost port-like, a characteristic that perhaps should come as no great surprise. The Niepoort Douro Redoma has already established a good track record in the wine ratings game; the vintage received a 92 out of a possible 100 in a recent Wine Spectator rating. The wine releases spicy and smoky aromas and imparts dark-plum and cherry flavours.

It is said that the world's wine lovers are increasingly fond of deep-flavoured wines

made from high-quality grapes. If that is indeed a fact, I can assure readers that the Portuguese table wines described here deliver the goods. Furthermore, these wines are not mere attempts at copying the wines of other regions but are instead fully realised creations that take advantage of Portugal's particular terrain and climate. They're true originals, and are now available for the first time in the Thailand market. Readers can investigate them by browsing to www.take-fin.com. □

Portugal Particulars

■ The Upper Douro valley is a spectacular place where grapevines cling precariously to steep hillsides. The sight can evoke visual comparisons to northern Thailand where other crops are grown on similar steep terraces.

■ The east-west situated Douro valley eventually empties into the Atlantic Ocean at the city of Porto, which gives its name to the famous fortified sweet wine, port.

■ Port grapes are grown in a region within the Upper Douro, and this was in fact the world's first wine appellation to have its boundaries officially recognised back in 1756. Now in the same region many sumptuous dry red table wines are emerging to complement the traditional port production.



New Zealand sauvignon blancs, possessing good acidity and redolent of classy melon notes. The Tres Bagos label is used for blended wines that must pass the scrutiny of a tasting panel.

Then a parade of outstanding red wines began, served in pairs. Appearing first were a 2000 Douro Tinto DO from the acclaimed estate Quinta do Crasto (*quinta* is Portuguese for estate), which has been producing wines since 1615, and a 2001 Tres Bagos Douro Tinto. These wines were paired with a fine Cy'an creation of seared ocean trout wrapped in prosciutto with white asparagus risotto cake and red-wine butter sauce. The reds were well suited to the dish and provided an apt taste-bridge to this particular trout preparation. The 2001 Tres Bagos with its good bouquet and

Photos courtesy of Embassy of Portugal