

## The Rise of the Alentejo

There has been something of a 'buzz' surrounding the Alentejo in the UK wine trade over the past few years. Industry experts and press have been discussing the innovation and investment within the region, urging us to try its exciting wines. I was therefore thrilled to be given the opportunity by Viniportugal to witness this first hand during a four day visit to the region. This report seeks to explain what has been happening there to make it such a hot topic and how it seeks to increase international interest in the region and its wines.

In the 1950's the dictator Salazar realised his vision of making the Alentejo the 'barn' of Portugal. Vineyards disappeared in the wake of a cereal crop planting frenzy and it was not until the late 1980's/early 1990's that vines began to be re-planted. Statistics demonstrate this recent growth; in 1995 there were 45 producers with 13,500 hectares of vines whereas today 300 producers are active with 22,000 hectares. This increase reflects the belief in the region's potential and its ambitions to attract new markets. Currently domestic sales account for the majority with the Brazilian and Angolan markets unsurprisingly large. However producers repeatedly mentioned their desire to achieve success in new and big markets.

I visited a large variety of producers, ranging from traditional to ultra modern and from boutique to enormous. However something that was clear from all these visits was the scale of recent financial injection in the region. EU funding has certainly helped and continues to play a part, for example Herdade da Mingorra are waiting to hear if they will receive funds to enlarge the winery. Although the terracotta amphora and white balloon tanks are reminders of the past, money has been ploughed into the most modern winemaking equipment in many places. Carlos Queimado at the Cooperativa de Redondo proudly showed me their new 1 million Euro filtration machine, while Bernardo Cabril, oenologist at Casa de Santa Vitória, put the winery's initial investment figure at 6 million Euros. Serious money is also evident in the cellars, whether it is the temperature control/humidity systems or the barrels themselves. For example Esporão's cellar is home to around two thousand barrels, the majority of which are top quality French barriques. Unquestionably this acquirement of the latest and the best has played a huge part in improving wine quality as well ensuring the world starts to take the region seriously.

In the vineyards evidence of investment is also everywhere; the dams of water essential in this climate, the new plantings and methods of viticulture they now employ. The question of how best to spend this money has often been answered with foreign help, whether it be flying winemakers or the ease and popularity of travelling and studying in other parts of the world. An interesting example of this was shown to me by the German farm manager Dietmar Ochsenreiter at Herdade dos Lagos. They chose an Australian technique of training on high wires with one stem to reduce the risk of disease and make it easier for labour. All over the Alentejo one sees structured row planting which is a marked difference from the erratic and varietal-mixed planting of the past. Further modernity is evident in the now common practice of soil/variety/quality matching using infra red analysis to map out soil properties.

Like other Portuguese regions the Alentejo has a wealth of indigenous grape varieties. For the professional this diversity is extremely exciting, however the quantity and

reliance on blends of grapes which are difficult to pronounce could be a problem for the average consumer. There is realisation that using international varieties is a way of gaining interest and as such the well suited Syrah is now a common variety. They are not stopping there as I also came across Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc and even Pinot Noir. Most producers are still relying on traditional blends for their core wines, such as Trincadeira, Aragonez and Alicante Bouschet for the reds and Antão Vaz, Roupeiro and Arinto for the whites. However there is a rise in successful single varietal wines such as Touriga Nacional and Syrah. The acknowledgment that they must get their portfolio right to attract other markets is also reflected by the rise in plantings of white varieties. Traditionally the Alentejo has been famous for its reds (80% of production) but as popularity for white increases they are putting greater emphasis on making quality white wine. This is now possible thanks to the sophisticated temperature controlled equipment essential for producing fresh and fruity whites in a hot climate. Interestingly something we may see more of in the Alentejo is organic viticulture. Herdade dos Lagos feel the dry climate suits this and indeed they are nearing certification.

The current interest in the Alentejo is ultimately due to the wines they are making. I was hugely impressed by the overall quality and diversity at every price point. Stylistically they range from traditional/rustic to sophisticated/modern wines which are hard to place as Portuguese. The quality and the price are clearly there and many producers acknowledge they need to concentrate on every element of production to fulfil their ambitions, from the range of wines to the marketing of them. A conversation I had with a number of them concerned a desire to develop their wine tourism. One witnesses the potential success of such a venture at the popular Esporão estate with its wonderful restaurant and visitor facility. Sofia Uva at Mingorra cannot wait to get funding so they can enlarge their tasting room to cater for bus loads, while Monte Nove & Figueirinha plan to build a hotel and capitalise on their proximity to the airport. One outstanding memory of my visit was the incredible friendliness, relaxed and welcoming nature of everyone I met. They will have no trouble in looking after their tourists and ensuring the visit stays in their minds.

Although these are tough times, I feel the Alentejo has the quality and vision to continue its rise from relative obscurity in the international market. It will be interesting to watch its development over forthcoming years, particularly when the next generation take over the reigns. The Alentejo is a beautiful region with a special charm – I truly hope it fulfils its ambitions.