



## Douro Harvest Report 2015

*'The Franca lagares have been spectacular'\**

\*Charles Symington, 5<sup>th</sup> October 2015

An exceptional viticultural year is coming to a close in the Douro with farmers and winemakers pleased that a year's work has resulted in some very good Ports and Douro wines.

The rainfall figures for the viticultural year show a reduction of 44% on the 21 year average, with just 359 mm registered at Quinta do Bomfim, in the heart of the Alto Douro, for the 11 months to the end September 2015. This level of rainfall would cause serious concern in many wine areas, but does not in the Douro where the indigenous vines are superbly adapted to be able to mature fruit in dry conditions, albeit resulting in the very low yields which are so characteristic of the region.

The geography of the Douro and its schistous soils has an amazing ability to retain the winter rain and this is evidenced by the springs that continue to supply the Quintas and the villages scattered across the hillsides even after 8 or 10 weeks without any meaningful rainfall. Dry farming has recently become a fashionable topic in the world of wine but this subject causes wry amusement in the Douro where farmers have been 'dry farming' for centuries and irrigation only covers a tiny percentage of the vineyards.

The little rain that did fall this year in the Douro was nicely timed in May and June and was of 'the right sort', being steady and prolonged. This is important as short spells of very heavy rain will simply run off the Douro's terraces, bringing little benefit and can cause serious erosion. Hence the fact that Douro wine makers never give full credence to the published rainfall figures, knowing that very heavy rain does not always reach the vines and often just ends up in the river.

The period between March and June this year was simultaneously the hottest and driest period for 36 years and flowering and veraison took place between 8 and 10 days earlier than normal, as expected given these conditions. However, July and August were cooler than average and this was of extraordinary benefit to the vines. If the normal heat of August had occurred, dehydration and raisining would certainly have followed, given the dry conditions, and the vines would have been forced to shed their lower leaves, reducing vital shade cover. The grape bunches were in really excellent condition by early September and have seldom looked so fantastic. The cool night-time temperatures had done wonders for the natural acidity in the berries.

The harvest started earlier than normal and the quality of the grapes was immediately apparent. Our sorting tables were seeing hugely reduced rejection levels to the delight of our farm managers and

our winery teams. Heavy rain fell on Tuesday 15<sup>th</sup> September and on the morning of the 16<sup>th</sup>, but this was followed by a strong wind that very satisfactorily dried the grapes. After 10 weeks with no meaningful rain, the vines greedily absorbed the water and dilution in the berries inevitably followed. This was the critical moment of this year's harvest and Charles immediately called a halt to picking in our best vineyards. This is never an easy decision given the unsettled weather that often comes towards the end of this month. Picking in our vineyards only resumed on 21<sup>st</sup> September and Charles said a few days later: *'It is amazing how much difference 4 or 5 days can make'*. Without this rain the final phase of maturation of the Touriga Nacional and especially the Touriga Franca would not have been ideal, as dehydration would certainly have occurred after such a prolonged period with no rain. In the circumstances the steady rain of 15<sup>th</sup> and morning of 16<sup>th</sup> September (77mm at Quinta da Cavadinha, 52mm at Quinta do Bomfim, 63mm at Quinta dos Malvedos and 27mm at Quinta do Vesuvio) was absolutely perfect, provided picking was suspended for a few days. The Nacional and Franca picked during the week of the 21<sup>st</sup> and that of 28<sup>th</sup> September were of simply extraordinary quality, as were some of the old mixed plantings picked during this period. The rain softened the skins, allowing the colour and flavours to merge superbly into the wine.

Yields were somewhat below the already small average in the Douro, and Charles recorded 25% less Franca at Quinta do Bomfim this year with just 1.05Kg per vine, but with a perfect level of ripeness.

Only on Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> October (General Election day in Portugal) did the weather break and by then our very best grapes were safely in our wineries. Courage was needed to suspend picking in mid-September, but the days that followed the resumption of the vintage were beautifully sunny and calm: the risk was well worth taking and paid off handsomely. These 13 days, from 21<sup>st</sup> September to 4<sup>th</sup> October will come to be seen as the key to the great Ports and Douro wines made this year, we have no doubt.

Paul Symington.  
Douro, Portugal  
7<sup>th</sup> October 2015



*A Symington family vineyard of Touriga Nacional in perfect condition and nearly ready on 22<sup>nd</sup> August 2015*