

## Douro Harvest Report

2016

### **A year with a special rhythm**

This was the year to really know your vineyard in the Douro; each location and each variety developed at its own individual rhythm and winemakers had to be constantly in the vineyards. Deciding to harvest on a hunch or following fashion was definitely not a good idea in this special year. Intimate knowledge of the vineyards combined with patience has delivered the just reward of some beautiful Ports and Douro wines.



The viticultural year started well with a good wet winter, bringing more than double the rainfall of the previous 2014/15 winter and some 80 mm more than the average of the last 30 years. Warmer than usual temperatures advanced the vegetative cycle by 10 days in most areas. However, the challenge came when unexpectedly the wet weather continued into April and May, with three times the average rainfall for these two months. Locals were presented with the extraordinary site of the Douro in full spring flood. This made the river unnavigable and all boat traffic was stopped, resulting in countless tourists being unable to board their hotel-boats and cruise up the valley to Spain.

The wet and cool April and May made it absolutely necessary to work intensively to protect the vines. The Douro is not well suited to such a challenge, with its incredibly steep vineyards and its highly fragmented land ownership. The largest area of mountain vineyard on earth has 17,000 farmers owning less than one hectare of heavily inclined hill-side vines. Many are elderly and have neither the time nor the resources to undertake the necessary measures to protect the vines in such conditions, and it is estimated that the Douro will have produced at least 25% less wine than in a normal year. Those that were able to care for their vines during this period, emerged with a fine and healthy crop of grapes, although the lower temperatures slowed development.

June and July brought a return to more normal weather but August was unusually hot and this further slowed the maturation and put considerable strain on the vines. The miraculous, rare, and much-desired August rainfall fell on the 24th and 26th August, but was localized with little evident in the Pinhão valley. Useful amounts fell at Malvedos (18mm), Vesuvio (7mm) and Ataíde (12mm), exactly where it was most needed.

September started with an intense heat wave and a high of 43.0 °C on Tuesday 6th measured at Quinta do Bomfim. The Douro has become very busy with tourists this year and they could be seen crowding into the few air-conditioned locations to escape the heat, mixing with worried looking farmers in the cafés of Pinhão, Pesqueira and Tua. The stress on the younger vines, with their less developed root systems, was clear. However, the older vines were coping well, with fine green leaves and healthy looking fruit, their deep roots drawing on the humidity from the wet winter and spring. But ripeness for the vines was still some way off as they coped with the special conditions of 2016, and it was clear that a late harvest was desirable in order to bring the vines to optimal maturity. A hasty rush to harvest early for those who were not aware of what was really happening in the vineyard following weeks of intense heat, would be to miss a golden opportunity.

From 7th September the temperatures began to reduce and after weeks of careful monitoring of the vines, using modern analytical methods but also the ancient but utterly reliable method of tasting berries in each vineyard, Charles Symington set the picking dates for the 15th for some of our more easterly Quintas, and the 19th for the others. On the 12th and 13th rain fell across the entire Douro region, with 18mm at Cavadinha, 16mm at Bomfim, 20mm at Malvedos, 15mm at Canais, 12mm at Vesuvio and 13mm at Ataíde. Charles suspended picking of the best varieties, either sending the pickers home, or switching them to the younger or less important varieties. Following this well timed rainfall, the harvest resumed on our vineyards on Monday 19th once the vines had accommodated these refreshing showers and had adequate time to rebalance. Charles took another important decision on the 22nd September and delayed picking the Touriga Nacional until the 26th, as the vines were taking their own time to reach maturity. Since then the vintage has proceeded with perfect weather and cool nights. It is rare to be finishing the Douro harvest during the week of the 10th October having had four perfect picking weeks under blue skies.

With this year's special conditions, the vines chose their own rhythm and it was absolutely necessary to understand what was happening in the vineyard after the hot summer. There is no doubt that this year the vines took far longer to regain their all-important balance. This knowledge could only be acquired by many hours of careful analysis amongst the vines. It is only necessary to see the lagares of Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca and of old mixed Douro vines, currently ending their fermentations, to see what an exceptional result awaited those who did the essential work and had the necessary patience.

## **Paul Symington**

**12-10-16**

**Charles Symington** at Pinhão on Monday 10th October:

*“The weather throughout the vintage has been exceptionally good and this has allowed for maturations to develop perfectly. We have been able to decide when to pick without the concern of the weather changing, having stopped the vintage at different properties to allow for ideal ripening to be achieved when necessary. The lagares have been giving balanced Baumés and exceptional colour and the Touriga Franca may well be the best wine of the vintage. The wines have wonderful freshness and elegance as well as structure.”*