

Geography and ‘terroir’

The Port vineyards are located in the north east of Portugal in the mountainous upper reaches of the Douro River Valley.

This region lies about 130 kilometres inland and is protected from the influence of the Atlantic Ocean by the Marão mountains. The vineyard area is hot and dry in summer and cold in winter, excellent conditions for producing the concentrated and powerful wines needed to make port. The coastal area is humid and temperate, providing the ideal conditions in which to age the wine.

The grapes are grown and turned into wine in the vineyards of the Douro Valley. In the spring following the harvest, the wine is brought down to the coast to be aged in the warehouses of the Port houses, known as ‘lodges’. The ‘lodges’ are located in Vila Nova de Gaia, a town located on the south bank of the River Douro facing the old city of Oporto. Until about sixty years ago, the wine was brought down the river from the vineyards to the coast in traditional boats called ‘barcos rabelos’.

Most of the vineyards are planted on the steep hillsides of the Douro River valley and those of its tributaries, such as the Corgo, the Távora and the Pinhão. The oldest vineyards are planted on ancient walled terraces, some made over two hundred years ago. These have been classified as a UNESCO World Heritage site. The Douro Valley is considered to be one of the most beautiful and spectacular vineyard areas in the world.

The soil of the Douro Valley is very stony and is made up of schist, a kind of volcanic rock. The soil does not retain much water and the vines have to push their roots deep into the hillsides to find water. The vines have low yields and the wine is therefore very concentrated.

About thirty different grape varieties can be used to make Port. Among the best red grape varieties are the Touriga Nacional, Touriga Francesa (sometimes called Touriga Franca), Tinta Roriz, Tinta Barroca, Tinta Amarela and Tinta Cão. Port is always made from several different grape varieties and this is one of the reasons why it is so complex in aroma and flavour. Different port houses may favour different grape varieties, according to their specific house style.

The estates on which the vines are grown are known as ‘quintas’. They are the equivalent of the ‘châteaux’ in Bordeaux. The ‘quintas’ of the top Port houses are among the most prestigious and the famous wine estates in the world.

