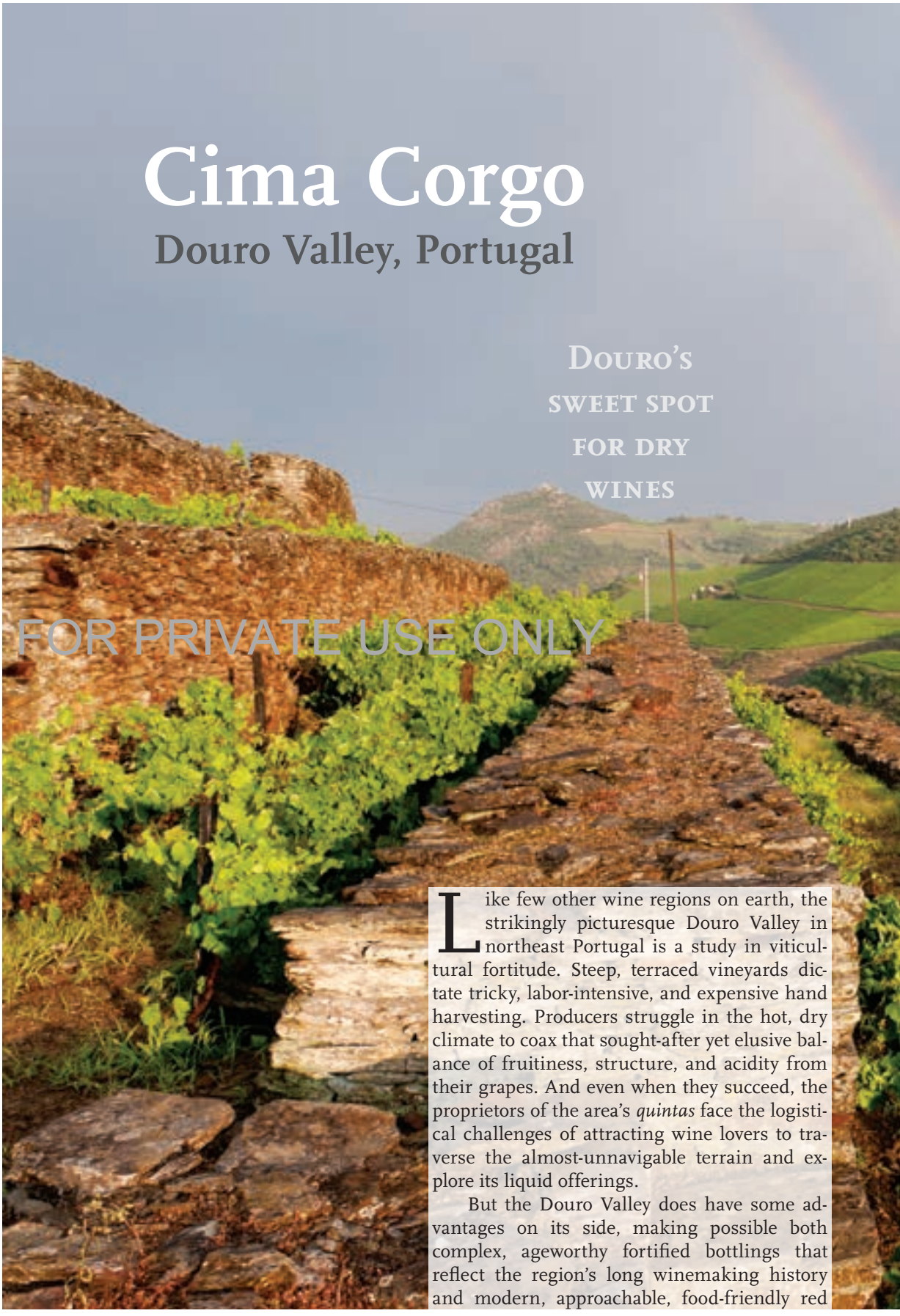
Cima Corgo

Douro Valley, Portugal

KELLY MAGYARICS, DWS

Kelly Magyarics is a wine and spirits writer and educator in the Washington, D.C., area. She can be reached via her website, www.kellymagyarics.com, or on Twitter @kmagyarics.

Douro's sweet spot for dry wines



Symington Family Estates' Quinta do Tua, which produces Graham's Port.

Like few other wine regions on earth, the strikingly picturesque Douro Valley in northeast Portugal is a study in viticultural fortitude. Steep, terraced vineyards dictate tricky, labor-intensive, and expensive hand harvesting. Producers struggle in the hot, dry climate to coax that sought-after yet elusive balance of fruitiness, structure, and acidity from their grapes. And even when they succeed, the proprietors of the area's *quintas* face the logistical challenges of attracting wine lovers to traverse the almost-unnavigable terrain and explore its liquid offerings.

But the Douro Valley does have some advantages on its side, making possible both complex, ageworthy fortified bottlings that reflect the region's long winemaking history and modern, approachable, food-friendly red

Photo courtesy of Symington Family Estates

Symington Family Estates' Quinta do Bomfim, which produces Dow's Port (left), and joint managing director Rupert Symington (above).

OUTSTANDING RECENT RELEASES

Churchill's Estates Quinta da Gricha 2009 $55
A dry red field blend from old vineyards, aged 12 months in new French-oak casks. Concentrated aromas of citrus and wild violets are supported on the palate by solid structure, minerality, and charm.

Fonseca Quinta do Panascal Single Quinta Vintage Port 2008 $58
Intense, concentrated aromas of cassis and black cherry dominate, backed by hints of molasses and dark chocolate. On the palate, the flavor of damson plums is carried by well-integrated tannins, with a zesty freshness on the finish.

Prats & Symington Chryseia 2009 $48
A blend of 70% Touriga Nacional and 30% Touriga Franca, this wine is aged 13 months in new French oak. It displays the intense minerality of Cima Corgo's dry red blends, along with balanced, fresh black-plum notes and an elegant, clean finish.

and white table wines that often contain the same grapes found in Port. The area is sheltered from humid Atlantic winds by the Marão and Montemuro mountains, which foster a continental climate marked by cold winters as well as hot, dry summers. About 15% of the Douro is covered by vineyards, mainly located in deep valleys. According to Louisa Fry, marketing and communications director for the Instituto dos Vinhos do Douro e Porto (a promotional agency under Portugal's Ministry of Agriculture), about 33,000 Douro producers tend plots averaging about 2.5 acres each. Of the three subregions, Douro Superior ("Upper Douro") contains 25,120 vineyard acres, representing 23% of the region's total production; Baixo Corgo ("Lower Corgo") has 34,950 vineyard acres, yielding 31% of the wine; and Cima Corgo ("Upper Corgo") is the most fruitful, boasting 51,260 vineyard acres and 46% of Douro production.

Cima Corgo extends upstream from the spot where the Corgo and Temilobos rivers flow into the Douro, leading to the Cachão da Valeira gorge. Rupert Symington, joint managing director for Symington Family Estates, finds that it has the most favorable climate of the Douro subregions, due mainly to its 25-inch annual rainfall. "As rain is the most precious commodity in the region," he says, "this balance is critical in determining the yields of the vines. Too much rain and the wines are diluted; too little and productions are minimal and often uneconomical." The subregion is dominated by soils typical of the Douro—well-drained schist atop impervious granite, allowing winter rains to collect in underground pools that sustain the deep-rooted vines during summer droughts. "Grapes from vines that feed 20 feet deep show a distinct minerality that, combined with the concentration from the very low yields [less than 1 ton per acre], produces wines unlike any others in the world," says Symington, who adds that because summer temperatures rarely exceed 104°F here, the grapes ripen more evenly, without risk of dehydration or burning.

As in the rest of the Douro, five grapes are used to make most of Cima Corgo's dry and fortified wines. Symington points out that they are basically hybrids of the vines originally brought in by the Romans, which have evolved to be drought resistant, with small berries and thick skins. Touriga Nacional is considered the Douro's finest grape, providing full body and concentration; Touriga Franca adds body and aromatics; Tinta Roriz (the local name for Tempranillo) yields finesse; Tinta Cão provides structure; and Tinta Barroca adds softness and fruit. Because the Portuguese government controls the amount of Port that can legally be produced each year, resourceful winemakers are increasingly using their remaining grapes in dry red blends. And since the Douro Denominação de Origem Controlada was recognized in 1982, the production (as well as the

Photos courtesy of Symington Family Estates

Oscar Quevedo of Quevedo in San João da Pesqueira (left); Quevedo's Quinta Vale d'Agodinho (center).

reputation) of dry wines from Cima Corgo has grown steadily.

As João Roseira, proprietor of Quinta do Infantado, points out, "Cima Corgo is home to all styles: dry whites, rosés, and reds; sparklers; Moscatel, Port, and late-harvest wines. The five red grapes are not enough for the diversity we are used to in our wines, so we are now using other grapes, including Sousão, Tinta Amarela, and Bastardo." In general, says Quevedo marketing manager Oscar Quevedo, "Cima Corgo wines are as full bodied and lengthy as those produced in the Baixo Corgo, but not as intense, rich, or complex as those produced in the Douro Superior." In his view, local winemaking trends are in line with those of the Douro Valley as a whole, so that modern examples are more elegant and fruit driven rather than overextracted and high in alcohol.

Of course, Port production is still an important application for Cima Corgo grapes. "We are seeing more aged Tawnies and better non-vintage Ports being produced in this region, due to the growing popularity of 10-, 20-, 30- and 40-year old Tawnies and Late Bottled Vintages," says Robert Bower, sales

Fonseca wine director David Guimaraens (top right); The Fladgate Partnership sales and export manager Robert Bower (right); Fonseca cellar (below).

Photos courtesy of Quevedo (top left, top center), Fonseca Port (top right, middle, bottom)

KEY PRODUCERS

Churchill Graham Lda.
Rua da Fonte Nova, 5
4400-156 Vila Nova de Gaia
+351-223-703641
www.churchills-port.com
Importer: Frederick Wildman and Sons, Ltd.
frederickwildman.com

Fonseca
P.O. Box 1311
EC Santa Marinha
4401-501 Vila Nova de Gaia
+351-223-742800
www.fonseca.pt
Importer: Kobrand
www.kobrandwineandspirits.com

Quevedo
Quinta da Senhora do Rosário
5130-321 São João da Pesqueira
+351-254-484323
quevedoportwine.com
Importer: P.R. Grisley
prgrisley.com

Quinta do Infantado, Lda.
Gontelho
5085-217 Covas do Douro
+351-226-100865
www.quintadoinfantado.com
Importer: Louis/Dressner Selections
louisdressner.com

Symington Family Estates
Travessa Barão de Forrester, 86
Apartado 26
4431-901 Vila Nova de Gaia
+351-223-776300
www.symington.com
Importers: Premium Port Wines, Inc.
premiumport.com
Vineyard Brands
www.vineyardbrands.com

and export manager for The Fladgate Partnership. But he agrees with Quevedo that table-wine quality has improved as winemakers have turned away from such traditional practices as the use of *remontage* for pressing in favor of more modern tools like the piston fermenter—which was developed in the Douro by David Guimaraens, wine director at Fladgate's Fonseca subsidiary.

Mechanization in general has alleviated the difficulties of harvesting on precarious, stony hillside vineyards. Symington reports that extensive replanting over the past 20 or 30 years has reduced labor costs, since winemakers can make more use of small tractors. Of course, "given the extreme geography," he admits, "the main tasks of pruning and picking must still be done entirely by hand."

Roseira believes the future of winemaking in Cima Corgo (and the Douro in general) will involve hyperlocal viticulture: "These three regions are way too big—we need to focus on smaller areas." In 2001, the Douro Valley was awarded UNESCO World Heritage Site status; as Roseira puts it, "the need to preserve our land is crucial." Avoiding the use of pesticides, maintaining the fragile balance between production costs and revenue, attracting a younger generation of winemakers, and dealing with climate change are just a few of the challenges that he feels must be met if the historical value of the region is to be preserved.

Quinta do Infantado, Quevedo, and other producers including Prats & Symington—a joint venture of Symington Family Estates and Bruno Prats of Bordeaux's Cos d'Estournel—have led the drive for quality over quantity, with fewer grapes being grown for bulk sales and more retained for bottling as top-class dry wines. Utilizing modern technology and nontraditional varieties in new and exciting ways while preserving their legacy of classic Ports, Cima Corgo producers are straddling the past and the future. No matter the brix in the bottle, the region's potential remains sweet.

Churchill's Quinta da Gricha (top, below).

Photos © Churchill Graham