

WEST SURREY WINE SOCIETY AUGUST MEETING

A Portuguese Taste-Off - The Wines of the Douro v the Alentejo

Robert Boufflower, lived up to his reputation as one of West Surrey Wine Society's most popular speakers, attracting nearly 50 members and guests to its September meeting. Robert is Tanners of Shrewsbury's Private Sales Director and his portfolio includes Portugal. He is a great supporter of Portuguese wines and had chosen to present a comparison of wines from two contrasting regions – the Douro Valley and the Alentejo.

Portugal, said Robert, has the perfect climate for wine with heat from inland Spain and cooling winds from the Atlantic: "you can find brilliant wines from all regions – even in the Algarve where Cliff Richard's estate is producing some excellent wines" - though generally quality improves as you move north up the country. He had chosen to compare the wines of the Douro, a region that is famous for port but has had a mixed reputation for table wines, with the Alentejo which lies north of Lisbon. The Douro Valley is narrow and steep-sided and gets extremely hot in summer – this plus the fact that grape varieties are limited to those that can tolerate intense heat makes quality wine production very challenging. In contrast the more open countryside of the Alentejo and less extreme climate make wine production much easier.

Both regions mainly use local indigenous grape varieties and the wines tasted were blends of up to five or six varieties. "Big blends" said Robert "make it more difficult to produce consistent quality". This probably contributed to the Douro's reputation for rather heavy reds often with noticeably 'porty' flavours, so it was interesting to see how the skill of its winemakers are now enabling it to produce wines of consistent quality comparable to the Alentejo. The Douro renaissance has been spearheaded by the well known Dirk Niepoort who led the way growing vines at the cooler valley summits. The four white wines – two from each region – reflected the grape varieties used and whether or not they had spent any time in oak barrels rather than intrinsic differences. The main variety in the two Douro whites was Rabigato which tolerates high heat and included wine from grapes grown on the highest terraces where temperatures are cooler. Both compared favourably with the Alentejo wines.

Of the four red wines the two from the Douro were based on port varieties, especially Touriga Nacional and Touriga Franca, and successfully avoided the 'porty' overtones of the past. Robert commented that the Tons de Duorum is a great example of how much the wines have improved – despite coming from the hottest part of the very hot valley the wine was surprisingly fresh and well balanced. However the popular vote for the wine of the evening went to the snappily named Smart Dog from the Alentejo – easy drinking with lots of red berry flavours. Replying to several questions on alcohol levels Robert explained that balance in a wine is its most important feature, along with "yes I want another glass", - if the wine is balanced you will not notice the alcohol level he said.

Although the Douro is now producing wines every bit as good as those of the Alentejo the costs of doing so have to be significantly higher in such difficult conditions. The Douro wines tasted were generally slightly more expensive but not by much, and they are able to compete on price because the high returns for producing port allows growers to 'subsidise' their table wines – which is good news for us consumers if probably rather irritating to the Alentejo!