

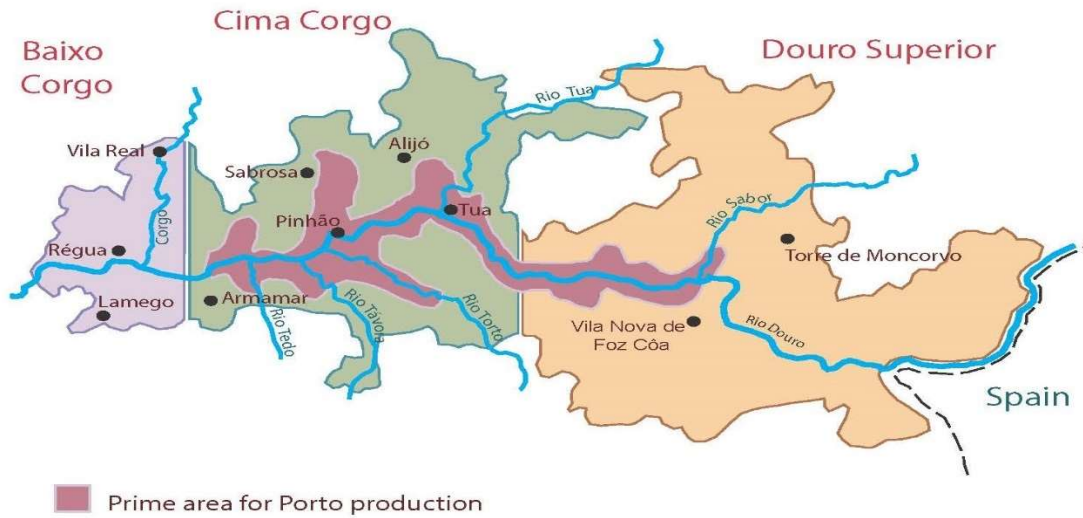
The Douro/Duero River Valley: A Wine Tour

John and Lúcia Redwood, December 2021



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Subregions of the Douro DOC



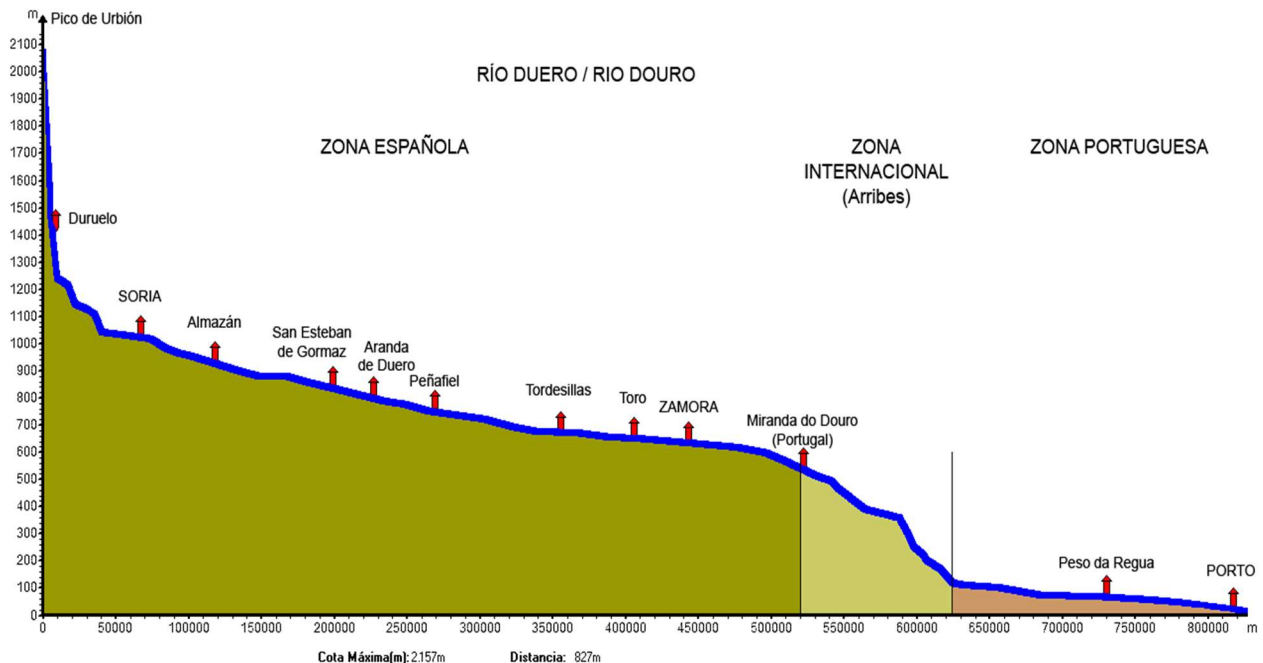
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The **Douro/Duero** is the highest-flow river of the Iberian Peninsula. It rises near Duruelo de la Sierra in Soria Province, central Spain, meanders south briefly then flows generally west through the north-west part of central Spain and into northern Portugal, to its mouth at Porto, the second largest city of Portugal, and flows into the Atlantic Ocean. Its total length is 897 kilometers (557 miles), of which only sections of the Portuguese section are naturally navigable by modest rivercraft.

In its **Spanish** section, the Douro crosses the great Castilian *meseta* and meanders through five provinces of the autonomous community of Castile and León: Soria, Burgos, Valladolid, Zamora, and Salamanca, passing through the towns of Soria, Almazán, Aranda de Duero, Tordesillas, and Zamora. In **Portugal**, the Douro flows through the districts of Bragança, Guarda, Viseu, Vila Real, Aveiro and Porto

For 112 kilometres (70 mi), the river forms part of the national border line between Spain and Portugal, in a region of narrow canyons. It formed a historical barrier to invasions, **creating a cultural/linguistic divide**. In these isolated areas, in which the Aldeadávila Dam impounds the river, there are protected areas: the International Douro Natural Park (on the Portuguese side) and the Arribes del Duero Natural Park.



The wine-producing Douro region is the third oldest protected wine region in the world after the Tokaj-Hegyalja region in Hungary, established in 1730, and Chianti, in 1716. In 1756, during the rule of the Marquis of Pombal, the Companhia Geral da Agricultura das Vinhas do Alto Douro (C.G.A.V.A.D., also known as the General Company of Viticulture of the Upper Douro or Douro Wine Company), was founded to guarantee the quality of the product and fair pricing to the end consumer. The C.G.A.V.A.D. was also in charge of regulating which port wine would be for export or internal consumption and managing the protected geographic indication.

The Douro *vinhateiro* (vine-land) of the Douro Valley in Portugal, long devoted to vineyards, has been designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. The wine was taken downriver in flat-bottom boats called *rabelos*, to be stored in barrels in cellars in Vila Nova de Gaia, just across the river from Porto. Nowadays port is transported there in tanker trucks.

A Traditional *Rabelo* and Porto's Historic District



These reaches of the Douro have a [microclimate](#) allowing for cultivation of [olives](#), [almonds](#), and especially [grapes](#). The region around [Pinhão](#) and São João

da Pesqueira is considered to be the center of port, with its *quintas* (or farms/estates) that extend along the steep slopes of the river valleys. In the 21st century, many of these are owned by multinational, reputed wine companies.

The river reaches Portugal from Spain in a wilderness that has been accessible by road only since the late 1980s. The river has carved a titanic canyon through the layered rock uplands: the Douro Superior, the driest, flattest, least developed part of the Douro can, despite its continental climate produce some very fine grapes. Average annual rainfall varies from 500mm in Douro Superior to 650 mm in Cima Corgo – the principal Port producing subregion – and 900 mm in the heavily planted Baixo Corgo.

Vinho Verde

Vinho Verde is not a grape variety, but a DOC for the production of wine. While the name literally means “green wine,” it actually refers to “young wine” with the wine being released three to six months after the grapes are harvested. They may be red, white, or rosé and are usually consumed soon after bottling. A Vinho Verde can also be a sparkling, a Late Harvest, or even Brandy.

The region is characterized by many small growers, which numbered around 19,000 as of 2014. Many of these growers used to train their vines high off the ground, up trees, fences, and even telephone poles so that they could cultivate vegetable crops below the vines that their families could use as a food source.

The Vinho Verde DOC is divided into nine subregions, which may be indicated on the wine label together with the name of Vinho Verde, for example as Vinho Verde-Amarante. The subregions are: **Amarante**, Ave, **Baião**, **Basto**, Cávado, Lima, Monção e Melgaço, **Paiva**, and **Sousa**.

The white Vinho Verde is very fresh, due to its natural acidity, with fruity and floral aromas that depend on the grape variety. The white wines are lemon- or straw-colored, around 8.5 to 11% alcohol, and are made from local grape varieties Loureiro, Arinto, Trajadura, Avesso, and Azal. **Vinho Alvarinho** is made from Alvarinho grapes, from a designated subregion of Monção and Melgaço. It has more alcohol (11.5 to 14%) and ripe tropical aromas. The reds are deep red and

tannic, and are mostly made from Vinhão, Borraçal and Amaral grapes. The rosés are very fresh and fruity, usually made from Espadeiro and Padeiro grapes.

The grape varieties recommended or permitted for the DOC are as follows:

- Recommended white grapes: Alvarinho, Arinto, Avesso, Azal, Batoca, Loureiro, and Trajadura.
- Permitted white grapes: Branco-Escola, Cainho de Moreira, Cascal, Douradinha, Esganinho, Esganoso de Castelo de Paiva, Esganoso de Lima, Fernão Pires, Lameiro, Rabigato, S. Mamaede and Semilão.



The two most successful white wine varieties are Alvarinho and Loureiro. Alvarinho tends to produce low yields and can reach much higher alcohol levels. The grape is widely planted in the northern Minho between the Lima Valley and Spanish border. Loureiro produces higher yields but very aromatic wines. The most successful red wine grape has been Vinhão, followed by Amaral/Azal Tinto and Espadeiro. These grapes can produce wines with deep purple coloring and peppery notes.

Vinho Verde Traditional Harvest Using Ladders



Douro Valley

Grape Growing Region in the Douro Valley (Quinta das Carvalhas)



Wines will be nearly opaque in color with aromas of blueberry, black currant, violet, vanilla, and subtle notes of roasted meat and freshly wetted concrete. The wines are big and bold with a smooth finish. Vineyards primarily consisting of decomposing schist are found in the steep valley of the Douro River, and do not receive irrigation. Thus, they produce small, highly concentrated wines.

Principal Grape Varieties in the Douro Valley:

- Touriga Franca
- Tinta Roriz (Tempranillo)
- Touriga Nacional
- Tinta Barroca
- Tinta Amarela

Because orientations and altitudes vary so dramatically, the character of wine produced even in neighboring vineyards can be quite different. Higher vineyards wherever they tend to ripen later and produce lighter wines, while those that face south and/or west attract the most sunlight and produce the strongest musts.

Ribera del Duero

Has been called the “modern red wine miracle” of northern Spain. Barely known in the 1980s, located in Castilla y Leon in northern Spain, it now rivals Rioja as the country’s foremost red wine region. Its reputation is largely due to the high-quality of its red wines made mainly from Tempranillo grapes. Its Unico wine is generally regarded as Spain’s greatest and is served at royal functions. Vega Sicilia was founded in 1864, as the pioneering estate in the area. Tinto Pesqueira is another renowned brand, created by the region’s best-known winemaker.

At 850 meters the nights are remarkably cool. In the growing season, the high daytime temperatures are combined with considerable cooler nights. This assists in the optimum accumulation of aromas and other chemical compounds (phenolics) in the grapes. Soils here are credited with adding complexity and character to the wines. Alternating layers of limestone, marl, and chalk sit under silt and clay topsoil.

This wide high plateau has seen quite a remarkable transformation of land previously devoted to cereals and sugar beets. Today it has more than 20,00 ha (49.400 acres). There were just 24 bodegas when the DO was created in 1982. In 2012 there were more than 200.

Terraced Vineyards near Penafiel, Valladolid



Grapes are routinely picked in late October. The light and air have a high-altitude dryness and brightness about them as do the wines, which have a particularly lively acidity thanks to those cool nights. These are concentrated reds of remarkably intense color, fruit, and savor – quite different from the typical produce of Rioja less than 100 km to the northeast.

Principal Grape Varieties:

- Tinto Fino
- Tinto del País (Tempranillo)

These varieties produce wines that are deeply colored with a firm tannin structure and complex aromas of dark fruit. Most of the top examples age gracefully for years.

According to DO regulations, Tempranillo must make up a minimum of 75% of all *vinos tintos*. The balance is usually made up of Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Malbec. These are all varieties that were introduced by Vega Sicilia more than a century ago. Up to 5% of Albillo or Granacha is also permitted.

The aging requirements used are similar to those for the Rioja denomination. Crianza red wines must be matured for at least 2 years, with 12 months in oak. Reserva wines are aged for at least 3 years, with one in oak. Gran Reserva wines must be aged for five years before release, two of which must be spent in oak.

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