

A New Perspective on Wine

ABOVE SEA LEVEL

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Lines of the Douro

Photography by Lucy Murray Willis

The movement in the Douro landscape can be seen and felt at every turn. Vineyards zigzag their way across the vista, up, down and across; some tumbling down terraced slopes, others etched into the earth. It is a region defined not only by port production, nor by the exciting table wines now emerging from its vine-lined hills, but by its design – the sharp geometries and gentle curves of a land alive with possibility.





Nature's Way

Words by David Michon
Photography by Lucy Murray Willis



The rose-tinted vision of the small winemaker is that of a humble family tending to a generations-old vineyard, which they care for and continue out of a sense of duty and love, rather than commercial strategy. They possess a knowledge of the land and process that is beyond just intimate, it is second nature, lived and breathed. In the wine from these vineyards, we do not taste only the flavours of the land in which the grapes have been grown, but there's somehow an emotional terroir to them too.

We find all of this in Mateus Nicolau de Almeida – and more. Described as ‘wise’ and a ‘rebel’, he is both modest and hardworking, innovator and philosopher.

From his home and vineyard in the Douro, Mateus produces reds under the label Trans Douro Express, and

whites under Eremitas (Portuguese for ‘hermits’). He is the latest generation in his family’s 200-and-then-some years in the business. “I didn’t choose to do this,” he says; it was in his blood.

The Douro Valley is rugged and pastoral (as is Mateus – incredibly casual, with a flop of thick dark hair). Inland from Porto, the Douro’s rippling hills stretch up from the eponymous river, which originates in Spain. There’s a spirit of wilderness here – the identity of the valley is not as fixed as other notable wine regions around the world – and more than 100 grape varieties are grown.

In addition to his family’s instruction, Mateus studied in Bordeaux. In France, he explains, experimentation has been going on for centuries. The wine there, perhaps, is more resolved – fine-tuned, narrowed into



a few key exports. “In the Douro,” he goes on, “there’s still a lot to discover. We’ve been slower, shall we say.”

And experiment he does, seemingly doing his best to undo as much as possible of the effect that humans have on wine, letting nature do most of the work.

This plays out, in part, through his close friendship and collaboration with the Porto-based architecture practice, Skrei, run by long-time friends Pedro Jervell and Francisco Adão da Fonseca. Skrei vigorously research materiality: using kombucha scobys to replace insulation in buildings, and, in the case of winemaking, the mulch from crushed grapes (mixed with other ingredients) as render for the exterior surfaces of buildings. “We like to deal with what others see as a problematic,” explains Pedro.

Architecture, he says, “is present in many moments of winemaking; in the storage tanks, in the vats where it ferments – they are all material based.”

Skrei is, at the moment, excavating a storage tank for Mateus’ wine from the coarse-grained metamorphic rock, schist, on top of which his vineyard sits. Why? An admiration for nature, and the solutions it has ready-made for us. “When you look at nature,” says Mateus, “it is very, very organised – it is not wild and disorganised... What I do is not to transform agriculture with machines to produce grapes; so my vineyards are not as straight and controlled as others; I listen to what nature has to tell me.”

For Mateus, biodynamic or organic wines are not a trend, they are a kind of truth. It is why, in fact,





North / Douro

he prefers white wines over reds. "They are more delicate," he says, "the information from the earth is much cleaner – flavour, sensations, rememberings." Whites were the wines of kings, Mateus continues, precious and complicated.

"In my work, I study the climate, the soil and the human," he says. After the climate and the tapestry of soil conditions, it is the human that most affects a wine. Port, for example, is mostly a human wine, he explains, as it is blended with batches from previous years. In Burgundy, what matters most is the soil; wines are not blended and one can expect a nuanced character from the specific environment in which grapes grow. Skrei speaks the same language: "whatever work we generate, there is a certain proximity to the human body." The duo believe that our sensitivity to these materials changes the way we relate to the space around us, in a way that today's standards in architecture and design don't often allow.

Both Skrei and Mateus look to the past, at the boundless resourcefulness of nature, and the ways humans have worked with and alongside it, rather than against it. In this way, the murkiness of the Douro identity is an opportunity, and their version of its potential is something they aren't keeping to themselves.

Together, Skrei and Mateus have brought this take on winemaking out of the region, designing an exhibition in Bordeaux at the Cité du Vin. The display included images of his rock tanks, information about the 100-odd varieties of Douro wine from its monastic origins in Burgundy, and stories of the work of Baron de Forrester, the English wine merchant who first mapped the region.

At the end of the day, however, it's not just a fluffy matter of positioning. All of this reverence for nature is not for nothing; there's a compelling motivation behind it. Pedro sums it up quite simply: "it's better for the wine."