

MATEUS NICOLAU DE ALMEIDA, "TRANS DOURO EXPRESS"

CIMA CORGO, DOURO VALLEY, PORTUGAL 2017



Winemaking in Portugal's Douro Valley dates back to Roman times, and of course the emergence of Port wine in the 16th century put this snaking, chiseled-from-schist river valley on the international wine map. Dry table wines from the region, however, are a more modern romance: They've long existed, but only recently has the broader wine world taken notice. —Ian Cauble, Master Sommelier

Tasting today's wine from Mateus Nicolau de Almeida time-warps me back to when I worked harvest at the Douro's Royal Oporto Wine Co. in 2003. On our lunch breaks, 25 of us would gather around a long table and wash down homemade sausages and cured meats with vibrant, quenching red wines. Crushed raspberries, red and black plums, and tangy red currants soared from the glass with hints of leather and crumbly, warm stones. It was simple and perfect, and while I wouldn't characterize today's "Trans Douro Express" as "simple," neither is it the kind of brooding powerhouse we see so often from the region. This wine writes a new and exciting chapter in the story of dry reds from the Douro—one that begins with Casa Ferreirinha, which became the first house in the region to dedicate its production to dry wine, releasing the first vintage (1952) of the internationally beloved "Barca Velha" in 1957. If Barca Velha was Portugal's winemaking deity of the 20th century, then Mateus Nicolau de Almeida is its 21st-century prophet, literally and figuratively. He is the grandson of the legendary Fernando Nicolau de Almeida, the mastermind behind the first vintages of Barca Velha, and today, is producing unconventional red wines that turn this climate upside-down. Irresistibly fresh and elegant, this isn't merely a sentimental pick for me: It's a game-changing bottle from a region we're all going to be hearing a lot more from!

The Douro Valley lives and breathes within Mateus Nicolau de Almeida: As he states, "I didn't choose to do this." His work comes from a sense of duty and homegrown love, buried in 200 years of family history. Fairly new to the American market, yet buzzing in the cutting-edge wine shops and bars of Lisbon, his red wine series is called the "Trans Douro Express." The name is a witty play on words—one part alluding to the German electronic music band Kraftwerk's sixth studio album, dubbed "The Trans-Europe Express," the other a metaphorical train moving west to east, through the three sub-regions of the Douro (the Baixo Corgo, the Cima Corgo, and the Douro Superior). Today's bottling is from the schist vineyards of the "Cima Corgo," the heart of the Douro Valley idolized for its warm climate, adequate rainfall, and extreme slopes.

When a sommelier first dives into the studies of the Douro Valley, one learns that the hot and drier Douro Superior region is the sensical, "historical" region for the production of dry red wines (i.e. Barca Velha), while the vineyards of the Cima Corgo are reserved for epic fortified wines like Vintage Port. But there has been a shift from east to west, as innovative winemakers, like Mateus, foresee a purity of fruit and terroir underneath the behemoth of fortification in the Cima Corgo. Admired by fellow winemakers as "wise" and a "rebel," Mateus has introduced tools and philosophies that synchronize more with Cru Beaujolais than with most Douro wine. In his cellar, you'll have a hard time finding oak and packets of chemicals. He farms organically, uses indigenous yeasts and old-school granite troughs for fermentation, and prefers cement or amphorae for aging. If you're looking for a glossy powerhouse, go elsewhere.

A blend of Touriga Franca, Touriga Nacional, Sousão, and Tinta Amarela, the fruit for today's 2017 comes from the intermediate terraces of the Cima Corgo. The climate is more Mediterranean than Continental, showing characteristics of *garrigue*: the scrub-brushy, savory floral tones. Fermentation and aging take place in concrete, a slightly more breathable vessel than steel, allowing some red fruit flavors to morph into darker ones. I would decant the wine for 15 minutes and serve it in a Bordeaux stem. It has enough weight to hold up to substantial dishes, but not the alcohol 'burn' often associated with warm-climate wines. In the glass, a medium-plus concentration of ruby-purple stretches into a pink-ruby rim; the wine is bright, showing signs of youth and buoyancy.

The palate exceeds expectations on the nose, finely threading cold fruits into warm earth. Structure is equally medium-plus between alcohol, acidity, and tannin, and the finish is impressively long, stretched forth by pure flavor, rather than influence of wood or unnecessary alcohol. It's rare that we find dry wines from the Douro that excite us like the "Trans Douro Express," so this is a golden moment to recommend one of my favorite traditional Portuguese dishes, Feijoada, a local bean stew made with beef or pork. Each region of Portugal has a unique *Feijoada* recipe, and in the Douro, it is made with various beans, rice, and pork sausages (sometimes adding whatever they have around like rabbit, chicken, etc.). The attached recipe is undoubtedly ambitious for the average home cook, but it is worth the culinary journey—and the

SOMM SELECT



COUNTRY
Portugal

REGION
Douro Valley

SUB-REGION
Cima Corgo

VARIETAL
Touriga Franca, Touriga Nacional, Sousão, Tinta Amarela

ALCOHOL
14%

OAK
None

SOIL
Schist

FARMING
Organic

SERVICE TEMPERATURE
60-65°F

GLASSWARE
Bordeaux Stem

DRINKING WINDOW
Now-2022

DECANTING
15-30 Minutes

PAIRING
Feijoada
(<https://www.196flavors.com/portugai-feijoada-transmontana/>).

unforgettable view on the Trans Douro Express!

"It's an exciting time to be making dry wines in the Douro Valley, especially if you are Mateus Nicolau de Almeida. He represents the new wave of winemaking in the Douro Valley by crafting wines of high-toned finesse, a far cry from the rugged wines of the old guard."