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Douro 2011s



By Jancis Robinson

‘Ambassador de Vallera is proud of having converted the sommelier at a top Berlin restaurant to Portuguese wines’



João de Vallera, Portuguese ambassador to the UK, and a confirmed oenophile

Belgrave Square is one of London's smartest addresses, giving its name to Belgravia, the rich kernel of one of the world's richest cities. It is not the natural milieu of scruffy wine writers but, thanks to João de Vallera, the current, unusually wine-minded Portuguese ambassador to the Court of St James's, we have all been trotting along to number 12 Belgrave Square on a regular basis. The Portuguese embassy is the handsome three-storey stucco mansion on the square's northwestern corner (the Spanish ambassador lives on the southwestern corner) and so far, this year alone, it has been the setting for a Wine Society event showcasing the wines of Luis Pato; a Baga Friends celebration of the characteristic grape of the northern wine region of Bairrada; the 10th Wines of Portugal Awards dinner; and a presentation of the exciting table wines that the Douro Valley, home of port, is producing.

Tim Stanley-Clarke, wine trade veteran and UK representative of the Symington port family, says: "I would put João top of the vinous Richter scale of the Portuguese ambassadors I have known over the past 30 years. He really loves wine and knows quite a lot about it."



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Danny Cameron, the chairman of the association of Portuguese wine importers in the UK, is another fan. "He has a great sense of humour and a great sense of humanity. And, above all, he loves good wine. Whenever I have a meeting or telephone call with him, it's never completely about the next event, or whatever else, because he always slips in a comment about something he has tasted recently, or wants to discuss a particular vintage of something."

As I settled in to my seat next to de Vallera at the awards dinner in the frescoed dining room recently, he said with some pride that the room had recently housed a catwalk. "There are three areas I take a personal interest in," he confided. "Fashion and textiles, tourism, and wine. And I am particularly keen on combining the last two." He was then able to quote the number of hotel rooms occupied by Brits in Portugal last year and, almost, the number of glasses of wine they had drunk. But it is not as though wine is a particularly important export from Portugal. The ambassador reeled off statistics about the country's exports of machinery, oil, vehicles – all more vital to the [fragile Portuguese economy](#) than fermented grape juice.

However, his heart is clearly in wine. According to several independent reports, he even keeps a cutting from this newspaper in his breast pocket, which showed that my average red wine scores are higher for Portuguese wine than for any other country's. One of my informants adds: "It is really funny because it always takes him some time to find the photocopy among all the little papers he carries with him – but he shows it to literally hundreds of people."

Portuguese wine producer Dirk van der Niepoort describes the ambassador as "very special, intelligent and really wants to do things for Portugal. He does a lot more than is his duty." This is his third year in London and this will be his last post, after Dublin (1998-2000), Berlin (2002-2006) and Washington (2007-2010). In Berlin, de Vallera is proud of having converted the sommelier at one of the city's top restaurants to Portuguese wines, so that by the time he left there were 14 Douro wines on the list. He also religiously attended the Prowein wine trade fair in Düsseldorf. In Washington, he famously shipped the Douro red Quinta do Vale Meão 2004, disguised as olive oil, that was the first Portuguese table wine to feature in the Wine Spectator magazine's top 100. He was determined that arcane US prohibitions on moving alcohol from New York to the nation's capital would not rob him of an opportunity to show off this new Portuguese achievement.

De Vallera earned his ambassadorial status after toiling 16 hours a day at the Maastricht negotiations in Brussels. "Then, as a young diplomat, I was very interested to witness the revolution in Portuguese wine, to see all these new, young winemakers emerging. You used to have to search for good Portuguese wine but now it's difficult to find a bad one. And even the inexpensive ones are good," he says delightedly.

He has a particular fondness for the Douro because his maternal grandfather had a port wine quinta there, in the Távora side-valley, the grapes being sold to Barros. He and his family spent every summer there. He was born in Angola, now the second most important export market for Portuguese wine after France, which imports huge quantities of basic port. The youngest of five and seriously threatened by liver disease, he was shipped back to his grandmother in Lisbon at the age of two and hardly saw his parents again until he was six.

As an attendee of the recent New Douro tasting in the embassy, I was struck by the unusual warmth of the atmosphere. So often, a tasting of the wine trade can feel rather impersonal and routine. There are various settings, often used by a range of exhibitors, which have all the charm of the National Exhibition Centre. But in the Portuguese embassy we really felt, rightly, as though we had been invited into someone's home. The wines were truly exciting, not least because most of the reds were the products of the exceptional 2011 vintage in the Douro Valley. On these pages I have previously written that if you have reason to celebrate the year 2011, you might consider investing in 2011 vintage port. But the quantities made were very small and most of it has been squirrelled away in private collections by now. I would urge you to think seriously about the 2011 Douro red table wines too.

João de Vallera was very much in evidence at this Douro tasting, sauntering between the two handsome reception rooms with a smile framed by his neat, white naval beard, glass in hand and, often, with his beloved Olympus EPM2 round his neck. He even – and this is surely way beyond the call of diplomatic duty – emptied my spittoon.

Tasting notes on [Purple Pages of JancisRobinson.com](#). Stockists from [wine searcher.com](#)

Recommended Douro 2011s

These stunning top bottlings are only just making their way on to export markets.

- Quinta do Crasto, Touriga Nacional and Vinha Maria Teresa
- Quinta da Gaivosa, Abandonado and Vinha de Lordelo
- Lavradores de Feitoria, Três Bagos
- Quinta da Manoella, Quinta da Manoella and Vinhas Velhas
- Niepoort, Batuta and Charme
- Poeira
- Ramos Pinto, Duas Quintas Reserva
- Quinta de la Rosa, Quinta de la Rosa and douRosa
- Quinta da Touriga, Chã
- Quinta Vale D Maria
- Quinta do Vale Meão, Meandro
- Wine and Soul Pintas, Pintas Character

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Unlike most of the wines recommended, this Crasto Superior 2011 (£13.95, [Slurp.co.uk](#) and many others) is already in commercial circulation. The voluptuously exciting fruit was grown in the higher vineyards of Douro Superior.