



Quinta da Côrte luxury, tradition and modernity

Since it was purchased in 2013 by French entrepreneur Philippe Austruy, Quinta da Côrte has focused on exclusive premium wines produced at vineyards around a luxury boutique guesthouse, where personalised service and rustic simplicity reign

TEXT CHRIS GRAEME
PHOTOS QUINTA DA CÔRTE

Quinta da Côrte, in Valença do Douro in the Upper Douro Valley, has a business strategy resting on three pillars: luxury, tradition and modernity. It belongs to French entrepreneur Philippe Austruy, who purchased his first vineyard in 2001 before assembling a group of wine-producing properties that showed potential, including Quinta da Côrte in 2013.

The farmhouse was restored and refurbished into a quality boutique guesthouse by architect Pierre Yovanovitch in 2018 with a clean, rustic simplicity and carefully selected designer furnishings.

“Wine tourism has been growing in recent years, particularly since Covid-19 when being in the countryside, away from the hustle and bustle of urban crowds, became more fashionable,” explains Marta Casanova, managing director and enologist at Quinta da Côrte, pointing out that 2022 has been “the best year ever, with a 90% occupation rate after good years in 2018 and 2019 [60%-70%], and a disappointing one in 2020, for obvious reasons”.

And Quinta da Côrte is certainly exclusive, with just eight guest rooms for visitors – four in the farmhouse and four in the outbuildings –, lending an intimate family feel to the farmhouse where attention to detail and a personalised but relaxed service is evident.

Portuguese food is prepared by chef Daniel Pinto, which is balanced by wines from the estate. The cost of rooms is reasonable for such secluded simplicity at €280-€320 per night in-season and €170-€200 off-season.

For wine-centric holidays, visitors can choose a programme of wine-related activities organised by Quinta da Côrte. For example, they can opt for a two-hour cruise down the Douro, or between the World Heritage Douro Region.

Quinta da Côrte also organises vineyard walks, picnics in hand-crafted baskets amongst the vines, beneath the orange and olive groves (it has 3,000 olive trees) or by the river, and even an all-day wine workshop where you get to step into the shoes of an enologist and create your own wine from different plots.

It can also organise tours lasting a morning, an afternoon or an entire day,

taking in the stunning landscapes of the Douro Valley and other places of cultural and religious interest, such as the local village Valença do Douro. All trips are tailored to individual tastes and interests.

WINE PRODUCTION

Wine production at Quinta da Côrte is based on the philosophy of the Vignobles Austruy group, which is all about respect. Each of the 28 plots is managed and monitored very carefully. The grow-

ing methods are highly sustainable, close to organic standards.

“Our preferred approach is to allow a progressive, natural balance to develop between the vines and their environment. Each of the 28 plots is treated differently, and indeed you could say that every plant in every plot is treated as an individual. In accordance with the philosophy of Vignobles Austruy, the sole purpose of any procedures we apply is to nurture the vine so that it can give its





best in a context that varies with each passing year,” says Marta Casanova, pointing out that 50% of the vineyards is non-mechanised.

“Some of our vines are 90 and 110 years old, and we have a duty to continue to conserve and preserve this rich historical heritage,” says Marta Casanova.

THE WINES

Quinta da Côrte has a strategy of producing premium red wines and fine Port wines, including grand reserves, 10, 20 and 30 years tawny Ports, and late-bottled vintage ports. If you are looking for inexpensive wines, this is not the place to get them. Port wines and reds cost around €55 and €25, respectively, while whites are more reasonably priced at around €16. All its reserves and vintages are for sale at the Quinta and its wine shop in the Valença do Douro village.

“We have positioned our wines at a level they deserve in terms of quality and quantity, and our pricing reflects the

value and quality of these wines,” says the enologist, who adds that wine production stands at around 50,000 bottles.

The winery’s main overseas markets that account for 50% of production are France, Belgium, Denmark, Scandinavia and increasingly the United States which, alongside France, also provides an increasing number of guests at the farmhouse.

Marta admits that the Covid-19 pandemic, followed by the war in Ukraine, the energy crisis and the consequent impact of increased costs and lack of availability of materials, particularly bottles, has affected the business.

“Prices will go up for bottles, wooden pallets, crates and even cardboard boxes from November. For example, each pallet used to cost €7.5 and has now gone up to €15. On top of rising prices is the lack of availability of bottles, which is made worse by high demand.”

Marta Casanova says that they did foresee problems and ordered well in

advance, but even then, given the demand and supply chain issues, the companies take six months to deliver these goods.

And there are other inherent costs. Quinta da Côrte, which employs a total of 20 full-time staff, prides itself on paying a fair wage because producing wine requires a good deal of skill and expertise, and obviously they want to retain good staff that otherwise are difficult to find with that level of experience.

In fact, the wine producer says that the company will increase salaries in 2023, but the problem is the taxes, which are high in terms of the contributions Quinta da Côrte has to pay. These discounts and taxes can cost as much as two-thirds of the cost of the employee.

“Our industry is about people, and Quinta da Côrte would be nothing without its team, which is why we insist on providing them with the best conditions possible.

“We will try and absorb some of the costs, but we can’t shoulder all of this

inflation alone and will have to pass on at least part of it,” says the wine producer.

CLIMATE CHANGE

As with so many aspects of agriculture, winemaking in Portugal is particularly vulnerable to the dramatic changes being seen as a result of climate change. One of the direct consequences is the lack of water caused by less precipitation in the summer months, drier winters, and when the rain does come, it is increasingly torrential.

And since wine grapes are an especially sensitive crop, boutique wine producers in Portugal, like Quinta da Côrte, are particularly vulnerable to the effects of unpredictable weather patterns.

Here too, Quinta da Côrte has had to adapt and prepare for the vagaries of inclement weather patterns.

In the Douro Valley region’s ‘golden triangle’, it is the south-facing vineyards,

particularly at lower levels, that are prized for Port, which requires very ripe grapes. But to produce fresh, unfortified reds and whites for which demand is growing worldwide, winemakers are looking for vineyards that face north, as well as those at higher elevations.

“I have noticed changes since I started working in the Douro, in 1999. Rainfall has been less reliable, and when it does come it has been more intense. This summer was very dry and we had some vines simply dying,” says Marta.

Quinta da Côrte has also had to invest in protecting grapes from the hotter and more intense afternoon sun in the longer, drier summers. So far, Quinta da Côrte’s efforts to deal with the increasing weather disruptions have paid off. This year’s grape harvest was good both in terms of quantity and quality.

“We have protected the soil from drying out with mulch made from the

by-products of cereals, using natural products of sun protection for the leaves and grapes since 2014,” explains Marta.

Marta Casanova knows her field. Since she completed a course in Agricultural Engineering at Vila Real University (UTAD), she has always worked with wines in the Douro region. “I focused on viticulture and enology and worked in relatively small companies, which has meant that I have learned all sides of the business, including accounts, sales and administration,” she says.

But does she think wine production is still a largely male-dominated world? “It was, when I started out in 1999 working in the Douro, but these days I’m seeing a lot more women at vineyards and wineries.”

“That said,” she adds, “I’ve never felt being a woman was a handicap and was never treated differently or looked down upon; quite the contrary.” ■

