

LIVING THE DREAM, PART THREE: TRIUMPHS AND TEETHING TROUBLES

Wine writer Richard Mayson presents the latest installment of his Portuguese winemaking adventure, focusing this issue on completing the *adega*, battling the local council over land ownership, and finally bringing the wine to market

Like all farmers and growers, I have become preoccupied by the weather. I am a self-confessed climate-change skeptic, but 18 months into owning and running a vineyard, something seemed to be going awry. In August 2006, after a wet spring and early summer (compensating for the previous year's record drought), the vineyard was looking good, and we were well on course for our second harvest in mid-September. At the end of the month, the grapes having fleshed out nicely, we suffered a totally unexpected heat wave. Évora (capital of the Alentejo) is the hottest place in Europe, and with the thermometer at well over 104°F (40°C), it was not much cooler in the *serra*. The young vines—without well-developed root systems—do not stand up well to the heat, and the tetchy Trincadeira grapes started to shrivel before our eyes. We decided to advance picking by a week and started the harvest in extreme heat. Tempers frayed. Our vineyard manager was blamed for not turning on the irrigation at the right time, but in those conditions I don't think it would have made much difference. I talked on the phone to other growers in Portugal who told me of raisined grapes arriving at the winery at 20° Baumé (roughly the potential alcohol). After all the optimism a month earlier, there was a general air of resignation about the 2006 vintage.

The irregular weather pattern continued to hamper our plans into the autumn. On September 27, 2006, work started on the new *adega* (winery). The scheme included an underground cellar, which meant that we would have to dig into the hillside. At the outset, the architects and builders had no idea what to expect under the scrub, but with the locality known as Pedra Basta (Enough Stone), I had a pretty good idea. The man charged with digging the hole was known to everyone as Ricardo das Máquinas (Richard of

the Machines), and his giant excavator (Portuguese word *bulldozer*) quickly struck granite. He brought in explosives to blast away at the bedrock, sending a shower of granite boulders into the newly planted Touriga Nacional vineyard. The wires supporting the vines broke or sagged. October 2006 turned out to be the wettest October for 75 years. It was too wet for Ricardo das Máquinas to work on the *adega*, so I put him to work on the leaky *barragem* (dam). But alas too late! Within a week, it had filled up completely, so we had to wait until it emptied again the following summer to get (literally) to the bottom of the problem.

At the start of November, the rain still pouring, we received some much-needed good news. A letter arrived from the Brand Registry in Lisbon saying that the name Pedra Basta was now officially ours to use. Feeling rather bullish, we tried to register another brand (we would eventually need three), but half a dozen carefully thought-out names were *chumbado* (rejected) by the authorities. In the meantime, the newly christened Pedra Basta wine, still in cask, was showing rather well. In January 2007, we decided to pre-launch the 2005 at a dinner in Lisbon. The dinner was a sellout, and Pedra Basta more than held its own in a lineup of wines from the Alentejo, Dão, and Ribatejo. A little more fine-tuning of the final blend was required, but my business partner Rui Reguinga and I left the dinner feeling buoyed up that, despite all the odds, we had produced a good wine. Before sending out cask samples to some opinion-formers and potential distributors in the UK, we conducted our own in-house blind tastings of both Portuguese and international wines at similar price points. In the Portuguese lineup, Pedra Basta came top and fared nearly as well against wines from France, Spain, Italy, Chile, and Argentina. I took a bottle to lunch with Roy Richards,



co-owner of Richards Walford, who, it transpired, has a secret passion for venerable Portuguese reds. He dug out bottles of 1954 Collares from the now-defunct Visconde de Salreu and a 1955 Garrafeira from Carvalho, Ribeiro & Ferreira—both wines from another era that proved that Portugal has long been capable of making good, even great, wine. He rather liked our final blend of 2005 Pedra Basta, too, and by the end of lunch we had a gentleman's agreement that Richards Walford would represent us in the UK.

We couldn't really bottle the wine, however, until we had somewhere to store it, and work continued through the winter and into the spring on the new *adega* (pictured above). I turned up in December 2006 to find a crane standing in the hole left by the *bulldózer*, with the foundations being set in the granite. With all the rain of the previous autumn, we were running at least a month behind schedule. But by the end of January 2007, the first of the roof supports were being hoisted into place. Pruning was under way in the vineyard, and with a bitter wind blowing off the *serra*, I walked round the quinta surveying the damage from the winter rains. A number of deep erosion gullies had opened up in the midst of the vines, and I recalled the little that remained from my degree in geography (we spent a term on pedology, soil science) to plan some remedial measures for the spring. The natural silence of the *serra* was shattered by the sound of drills and hammers from the construction site, which felt rather like a violation.

By March, the roof was on, and I spent a day with Rui, our two architects, a plumber, an electrician, the foreman, and a man responsible for installing the winemaking equipment. Although the sun was now shining outside, the interior of the winery was cold and clammy, with the wet winter seemingly stored inside the new *adega*. While

discussing the all-important positioning of taps and electrical sockets in relation to the vats, we found that one of the doorways was too low for a forklift truck and needed to be raised; another was too narrow for the forklift to reach the lift, but it was too late for this to be changed. Our foreman was called Dionísio (the Portuguese variant of Dionysus), which seemed all too appropriate.

At the same time as the building of the *adega* was under way, I received an email from the local *câmara* (council), telling me that they wanted to expropriate more than 18,000 sq ft (1,000 sq m) from me for road-widening. Before I even had the chance to agree or set out my terms, I received a letter acknowledging my donation! They wanted to build a traffic circle at the crossroads near the top entrance to the quinta—totally unnecessary on a rural road, in my view, but they had the funds from Brussels to do it. When I challenged the local councillor about this, he retorted, "Well, you have them in England, so we are only following your lead." I speculated on whether he had been on a fact-finding tour to Milton Keynes, where every junction is a traffic circle (or roundabout, as it is known there). Then, in March, without so much as a by-your-leave, I found that a *bulldózer* had carved away a large slice of land at the bottom of the quinta. No contact had been signed, no agreement reached, but my land had already been taken. I had to tread carefully here, given that the *câmara* gave us the nod to build the *adega* before planning permission had been granted, but when I confronted the local councillor again, he told me that the contractors had begun working in the wrong place! I suggested that since the land was still mine, I should charge a toll for the new stretch of road. To cut a long saga short, the *câmara* and I finally signed a legal contract for the expropriation five years later, during the 2012 vintage.

(field graft)



The heavy physical work of *pigeage* (punching down) atop stainless-steel tanks; the leaky reconditioned wooden vat, supposed to hold up to 4,000 liters of wine

In early May 2007, we made our first proper sale: 2,000 bottles of Pedra Basta 2005 to a major Portuguese wine club. The *adega* was nearing completion, and the delivery of our vats and cooling equipment was scheduled for early June. The building looked stunning, both inside and out, and the plans that we pored over the previous year looked just as good in reality as they did on paper. The 220lb (100kg) of explosives that we used the previous autumn had left us with a jagged underground wall of blue-gray granite that would become a symbol of our wines. Stone was now our theme, and it gave me a great deal of satisfaction when UK wine writer Charles Metcalfe described Pedra Basta 2005 as “red, dark, rich, and intense, with dense, stony tannins—real mountain wine.” It all seemed to fit.

It was over a year since we planted the new vineyard at Quinta do Centro and regrafted a corner of Cinsault to Grand Noir. There were a few *falhas* (failures), as you would expect (mostly among the Touriga Nacional vines), but the Syrah, Viognier, and Aragonez vines had all taken well. The regrafted Grand Noir was laden with nascent bunches, and it looked as though we would have to crop-thin the Alicante Bouschet, which seemed excessively productive.

June 5, 2007, was the day I had been waiting for, when the wine from our past two vintages arrived at the new *adega*. The shiny stainless-steel vats looked stunning against the freshly painted walls. We had two open-top fermenters that could be used as *lagares* for foot-treading, and three closed *tronconic* fermenters, which could also be used for storage. Built into the hillside, the winery is on two levels, like the traditional *adegas* in the Douro, to make the most of gravity. The architect delighted in telling me, “You have the best winery in Portalegre”—but I think it is the best in Portugal!

A month later, sitting in one of my favorite restaurants in Madeira (O Caroto, at Camacha), I had my first taste of Pedra Basta 2005, bottled and labeled. I decided to share it with close family and friends over a resolutely traditional Portuguese dinner of *bacalhau com natas* (a sort of fish pie made with salt cod) and *arroz de pato* (a dish that translates prosaically as “duck rice” but tastes much better than it sounds). The wine stood up rather well. Bottling is quite traumatic for a wine, and for some weeks afterward you can sense the shock. The 2005 had temporarily closed in on itself but retained its supple, ripe, fleshy fruit flavors. The bottle looked fantastic, and it gave me great pride to see our signatures on the capsule for the first time.

Prepared for disappointment

Now we had to sell it! This was a daunting task, with the wine writer, grape grower, and wine producer in me having to turn into a hard-nosed salesman. Fortunately, we were not targeting supermarkets, either in the UK or Portugal. Alan Cheesman, formerly buyer for Sainsbury’s supermarkets in the UK, warned in an interview of “prima donna supermarket buyers” who ask for everything then plunge you into “this Bermuda Triangle of emails from which nothing comes out.” I was fully expecting to be stonewalled selling Pedra Basta and prepared myself for disappointments. But it was well received by nearly everyone who tasted it, and a major UK independent retailer was showing an interest.

Before we had time to sell much of the 2005, we had another year’s grapes to harvest. Fortunately, 2007 was a more even growing season than the previous two. As always, Rui and I went through the vineyard tasting the grapes before picking, making sure that they were as ripe as we



Still more than enough rock in the barrel cellar: the dramatic, jagged wall of blue-gray granite left after the detonation of more than 220lb (100kg) of explosives

wanted. We started picking on a cold gray morning in mid-September, and the new *adega* whirled into action for the first time. I spent much of the first week running back and forth to the local *bricolage* store buying wellington boots, buckets, brushes, and shovels for the winery. (There is an unrequited market in Portugal for orange snow shovels for shoveling grape skins.) In between, I took great pride in welcoming a stream of visitors to see the winery, including (on the first day of vintage) the national broadcaster RTP, the president of the Regional Tourism Commission, and a parliamentary deputation of Social Democrats, Socialists, and Communists, two journalists, a photographer, and an Australian winemaker, as well as friends and neighbors. The vintage ran remarkably smoothly—apart from the fact that most of the regrafted vines turned out to be a white variety rather than the red Grand Noir that we were promised. We also had a problem with a leaky wooden *cuba* (a 4,000-liter vat supposedly reconditioned by Seguin Moreau), and we ran out of space in the *adega*. It seemed that the vintage had gone well throughout Portugal, and the Port shippers were talking about Vintage with a capital V.

The 2007 vintage was followed by a raft of positive news. First, we learned that the name of our prestige wine (a big brother for Pedra Basta) had been approved by the authorities in Lisbon. We had decided on the name Pedra e Alma meaning Stone and Soul, which I felt encapsulated our terroir (though someone back in England said, rather patronizingly, that it sounded like the Portuguese couple who come to look after your house—“he does the gardening and she does the cooking!”). Then we received a substantial order from our Portuguese distributors and another from The Wine Society in the UK. One of its buyers told me,

“We were all prepared not to like your wine, but we do.” And so Pedra Basta 2005 appeared in a Wine Society offer as a “buyer’s favorite,” no less: “ripe and satisfying, full of natural, rich, savory flavors of Portugal’s indigenous grapes.” The wine was also chosen for a tasting of “Fifty Great Portuguese Wines” to be held at the Portuguese Embassy in London. Many of the UK’s leading wine writers were at the tasting, and I received positive feedback from all of them. I couldn’t have wished for a better start.

By February 2008, we had no more wine to sell, so we turned our attention to the 2006, which was still in vat and cask. Rui and I spent a cold morning in the *adega* making up the final *lote* for bottling. Despite the unevenness of the growing season, the wines had plenty of fresh fruit character, but some vats lacked the structure of the 2005. By excluding some of the Trincadeira from the blend, we came up with a wine akin to the 2005 Pedra Basta: opulent (reflecting the warmth of the vintage), with plenty of vibrant spicy fruit tempered slightly by well-integrated new oak.

Everything seemed to be going remarkably well until, four months after the vintage, we received a call with the accusation that our new *fossa* (septic tank) had been leaking into a local spring. There were *fossas* closer to the spring than ours, but the telephone call was shortly followed by a letter threatening me with a fine of up to €70,000! This could break our fledgling business when it was barely off the ground. I didn’t believe that we were guilty of any environmental crime, but should I fight this tooth and nail, even taking it to the courts if need be? Or would the authorities ride roughshod over us, as they had already done without hesitation over the land expropriation for the pointless traffic circle? ■