

## **Port, Part 2: The changing role of Vila Nova de Gaia, the shopfront of the Douro**

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Vila Nova de Gaia, opposite Oporto at the mouth of the 1000km Douro River, is the traditional home of Port in Portugal.

You might think that Oporto is its home, after all, the name originated from the English use of 'Porto Wine'. But Vila Nova was where the action was (Oporto was too congested, magnate house owners built their maturation cellars, or 'Lodges' on the opposite bank to the crowded mélange of Oporto).

The city was bustling, full of merchants, traditional Rabelos boats and schooners, waiting to take the wines to Northern Europe.

Now it bustles with tourists. It is a beautiful place, ancient, cobbled and haphazard. The fact that good transport links has seen visitors go direct to the source, 60+ Kilometres away up river has done little to diminish its attraction.

All along the charming riverfront are the Port Lodges, the sales fronts of the corporations and families that own the hundreds of Quintas further up river, originally the places where winemakers aged, blended and bottled - or sent in barrel - Ports all over the world. For some, that doesn't happen in Vila Nova anymore, and the Lodge space is filled with souvenirs, continuously playing videos of the 'ancient art of the Port', stylish tasting stations and tours in a myriad of languages. Grahams offer a choice of four tours, each matched to styles of wines.

Larger houses, such as Taylor's and Grahams, still use Vila Nova for some Port maturation beyond the first year or two, though Taylor's may only truck 10% to Vila Nova, that still amounts to millions of bottles and as only one-third is sold each year they need a lot of room for aging wine. One in three of every bottles of LBV sold in the world is made by Taylor's, who created the style in 1970.

Lodge tours take you through hushed avenues of old pipes (traditional barrels) of Tawny Port and larger vats of Ruby, Colheita, LBV and Vintage, several holding 73000L, even 100,000L of wine. Their logic remains that the humidity of Vila Nova makes it more suitable than the hot and dry Douro, they lose less wine to evaporation. Fernando Seixas at Taylor's says that after hundreds of years they know which vineyards, Quintas and vats will suit each style and confirm the potential quality of the wines on arrival at the Lodge. Selected pipes will be put aside for much longer than the two years total for Ruby (four for Reserve Ruby)

and Vintage, and will be held in larger vats and become LBV styles (normally bottled after four or five years) or basic Tawnys (seven or so years aging), dated Colheitas (single vintage Tawnys from special years) or 10, 20, 30 or 40 year old aged Tawnys.

Improved technology, cooling equipment and the increase in table wine production has meant that many Quintas can age their wines in the Douro, avoiding the need to move the wine to Gaia, an advantage with the high costs of storage space there. This has released the space in the Vila Nova Lodges to welcome visitors, Taylor's is building a huge 'World of Wine' experience for 2020.

Niepoort has carved its own niche in the Port world. Only since the '90's has it made the wine, previously buying it made, blending and maturing/labeling only, now it buys grapes from contracted growers and owned estates and has their own winemaker and fifth generation Master Blender. Dirk Niepoort has introduced red Douro table wines so successfully that not only is 70% of their production table wine, but the best-selling red wine in Germany is a Douro from Niepoort. The Ubuntu range and a collaboration with the Mosaic Restaurant in Pretoria will be familiar to South Africans. Its Ports are still central, though and the 10 year old White Port and Colheita 2005 show why.

Lodge visits are rather anonymous, yes, but lots of fun. Vila Nova is hip, average age must be mid-twenties, and night life resonates. The throng of tourists is catered for in a clustered, Roman era city that has, despite its toppling alleys and pavement cafés, an underground rail system, a funicular, a cable car system, and local rail service. Everything moves.

Port Lodges are slick, retain a semblance of the past wherever possible, many allow you to pass the ancient Tawnys sleeping in oak Pipes and view distant vintages, Grahams lets you lust after the four remaining bottles of the 1868 as you pass by and a similar Vintage is on show at Taylor's.

Cool people lounge on Pergola terraces overlooking the river and sip iced Port rosé, or Ruby with tonic and ice or white Port and passion fruit.

Vila Nova certainly attracts visitors, who attend the various lodges to experience what the wine is all about. Many will venture into the Douro hinterland and seek out the Quintas themselves, and many will take Port cruises in pseudo Rabelos. The train journey, I felt, has lost all its charm, impossible to take photos through sealed and grimy windows.

Is there a parallel with Cape Town and the Cape Winelands here?

Could there be a time when producers open outlets in the Mother City to catch those who hadn't intended or hadn't the time to visit the winelands? Could we see a Spier Wine Centre on the Waterfront? Or a KWV lodge in Green Point? A Graham Beck Champagne Village in Canal Walk? Why not? Such outlets would whet the appetites of visitors, could incite them to venture further, and showcase the wine estate which otherwise might be passed by. I spoke to visitors from South Korea who made plans to drive to the Douro after enjoying the Lodges

- something they previously had not intended to do as novice wine drinkers. A nice thought, anyway.