

# BAIRRADA: THE BAGA BEYOND

For years, it was hidden away in blends in the remote and unheralded central Portuguese region of Bairrada. But with the formation of a club of leading winemakers devoted to extolling its enormous potential, Baga is finally coming in from the cold, says Sarah Ahmed

**B** is for Burgundy, Barolo, and Bairrada. Have you not heard of Bairrada? If Pinot Noir and Nebbiolo excite, it's time to meet another varietal diva: Baga. For in the right hands this, the principal red-wine grape of Portugal's Bairrada region, can scale similar heights. On its own, aria-style, too, which is unusual in a country with a tradition for blends.

Likened to Nebbiolo in its surly, tannic youth, with age Baga shrugs off its imposing cloak of tannins. Artfully combining the structure and charm (iron fist, velvet glove) of top Burgundy in great vintages, it develops a heady bouquet of incense and forest floor. Sweet yet precise red fruits come to the fore. With a sweep of fine but firm tannins, the finish builds inexorably in the mouth. All qualities that the eight producer members of its recently founded fan club, Baga

Friends, seek to promote. They are Filipa Pato (Filipa Pato Wines) and Mário Sérgio Nuno (Quinta das Bageiras), who founded Baga Friends in 2010, together with Filipa's father, Luis Pato (Luis Pato Wines), Paulo Sousa (Sidónio de Sousa Wines), António Rocha (Buçaco Wines), João Póvoa (Kompassus Wines), and incomers François Chasans (Quinta da Vacariça) and Dirk Niepoort (Quinta do Baixo). Yes, Dirk Niepoort of Port and Douro wine fame, who says, "I am more and more convinced that, with its soils and temperate Atlantic climate, Bairrada has Portugal's best terroir."

## A lack of ambition

So, why is Baga not on every connoisseur's lips? In fact, it's not inconceivable that Baga has passed your lips without your knowing. It is, after all, a key blending component of

Portugal's most successful brand, Mateus Rosé, which has sold over a billion bottles worldwide since its launch in 1942. Of Bairrada's 2,000 growers, some 900 sell the production from a full quarter of the region's Baga vineyards to Mateus Rosé's owner Sogrape. And who can blame them? Bairrada has a humid Atlantic climate, and by picking earlier for rosés than for red wines, growers of this thin-skinned, highly productive, late-ripening variety avoid the risk of harvesting during autumn showers. Still, it seems a cruel irony that, by reason of its great acidity and structure, a variety whose top red wines have invited comparisons with some of Italy's and France's finest is a prime candidate for rosé production.

The blame for Bairrada's historic lack of red-winemaking ambition cannot, however, be laid exclusively at Mateus Rosé's door. Until the market collapsed following Portugal's Carnation Revolution of 1974, Baga was the cannon fodder of cheap bulk wines that were sold to Portugal's African colonies by the *négociants* and cooperatives that dominated Bairrada's production. Quantity not quality ruled the day, and Baga was overcropped. With the exception of fearsomely tannic *garrafeira* wines (most famously Caves São João Frei João), which had to be bottle-aged for at least five years and might take another 15 years to come around, Baga wines were weedy and astringent.

Inevitably, the low prices associated with volume production provided little incentive for growers to invest in vineyards or to reduce yields to improve red-wine quality. According to Filipa Pato, the poor quality of Baga "destroyed the image of the region." Small wonder Bairrada was slow to be awarded Portugal's highest wine-certification status. Not until 1979 did it become a demarcated *Denominação de*

*Origem Controlada* region. This was some five years after the Carnation Revolution led to the restoration of democracy, an event that in turn paved the way for Portugal to join the European Community in 1986—a pivotal moment in the history of Portuguese wine.

## From Carnation Revolution to Baga revolution

Gone was the monopolistic legislation that unfairly benefited cooperatives; in came grants that enabled small estates to upgrade vineyards and wineries and launch their own labels (most had previously sold off grapes or wine). At last, the conditions were ripe for Baga to be taken seriously.

Moreover, as leading modernizer Luis Pato was to discover at a Bairrada tasting in London in 1984, because the region had only recently been demarcated, it was fashionable—at least for the short time until the Douro's and Alentejo's riper, smoother reds rose to prominence. Just as well, because the glowing feedback for his very first wine (the still-glorious Luis Pato Vinho Tinto 1980) propelled the chemistry graduate along the path to full-time winemaking the following year. At the vanguard of the Baga revolution, Pato has done more than anyone else to put Baga in the spotlight both at home and abroad. With a scientist's force of logic and great pluck and tenacity, the self-taught winemaker has cracked the Baga conundrum, slowly but surely unraveling the secret of consistently making great Baga, which, in days past, was possible perhaps only twice a decade. As he puts it, "It's an advantage not being qualified. You don't follow the rules—you have freedom to experiment."

Two significant departures from tradition—destemming and using French oak (650-liter [170-gallon]) barrels to ameliorate Baga's tannins—swiftly marked Pato out from his fellow new-wave Baga specialists, Sidónio de Sousa (established 1985) and Quinta das Bageiras (established 1989). But while they continued fermenting Baga on stems and aging the wines in *tonéis* (big old wooden vats), both followed Pato's lead when he started green-harvesting in 1995, as have the other Baga Friends since. By discarding grapes around veraison (when they start to change color) and reducing yields, they greatly improved the odds of ripening the remaining (more concentrated) grapes before the rainy weather set in. For Pato, tackling thus the twin evils of Baga's high productivity and late ripening cycle produced "the biggest jump in red-wine quality—a more expressive nose, less greenness, and softer tannins."

It was a big leap for mankind, too. Tellingly for a region steeped in a history of quantity over quality, Pato recounts how, "rolling their eyes heavenward," his workers initially refused to green-harvest "because it was against Nature." No doubt they are happier with the canny refinement he introduced from 2001, which is to pick 70 percent of the grapes for his sparkling wines at the beginning of September (when they retain high acidity), leaving the balance to get fully ripe for red wines. Ingeniously, Quinta das Bageiras does an additional, earlier cut for its renowned *aguardente* (brandy). As a result of this green-harvesting, it is not unusual for Baga Friends' red-wine yields to be around half of the maximum permitted (55hl/ha), and they are occasionally even lower.

Of course, another solution to lower yields is to source Baga from old vineyards, because, as Filipa Pato points out, planted at higher density (6,000–8,000 vines/ha [2,400–3,200 vines/acre]) compared with modern vineyards (3,000–3,500 vines/ha [1,200–1,400 vines/acre]), "the vine has a natural balance and naturally produces fewer bunches per vine." It's why she and her husband, Belgian sommelier William Wouters, have leased or bought all the good old vineyards they could find. In addition, Pato believes that vine age "has a big influence on the complexity of Baga," partly



All Baga Friends together, in front of one of the magnificent fireplaces at the Palace Hotel do Bussaco (left to right): Luis Pato (Luis Pato Wines), Filipa Pato (Filipa Pato Wines), Mário Sérgio Nuno (Quinta das Bageiras), Paulo Sousa (Sidónio de Sousa Wines), Alexandre de Almeida, grandson of the founder of the hotel (Buçaco Wines), Dirk Niepoort (Quinta do Baixo), François Chasans (Quinta da Vacariça), António Rocha (Buçaco Wines), and João Póvoa (Kompassus Wines)

because old field-blend vineyards include a random mix of 10–20 percent of other grapes, such as Bastardo, Piriquita, and the white grapes Maria Gomes (Fernão Pires), Bical, and Sercial. Preserving this "treasure" is what motivated Pato to co-found Baga Friends as she clocked the dramatic speed with which Bairrada's heritage of old, well-located Baga vineyards had been lost. Her father estimates that since its 19th-century peak, the proportion of land planted to Baga has plummeted from around 90 percent to 40 percent. Much was lost over the past decade following a change of rules in 2003 that permitted export-friendly international red grapes (such as Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and Syrah), as well as more popular Portuguese grapes, to be included in Bairrada's Denominação de Origem Controlada wines.

### A chorus of approval

Where Baga remains, the Baga Friends unanimously agree that the most critical success factor is soil type. Insisting that "the problem isn't the grape, but the man who planted Baga," Mário Sérgio Nuno (Quinta das Bageiras) says that soil type is "more important than vine age." Perhaps unsurprisingly for a grape that draws comparison with Pinot Noir, Baga flourishes in the chalky clay soils of Bairrada's rolling hills, which themselves bear no little resemblance to Burgundy.

It is why all but one of Pato's Baga reds come from chalky clay soils rather than the sandy soils he inherited at Quinta do Ribeirinho. (The exception is Quinta do Ribeirinho Pé Franco, from a small parcel that Pato imaginatively planted on yield-scything own roots in 1988. It produces a measly one bunch per vine, as opposed to the typical four or five from vines on chalky clay.) Explaining that even Baga wines from low (as opposed to ultra-low Pé Franco) yields on sandy soils tend to have a hollow mid-palate, Pato says "It must be compensated with some sweetness and softer tannins from, for example, Touriga Nacional."

Analyzing why Baga works so well on chalky clay, retired eye surgeon João Póvoa (Kompassus Wines) observes that limestone speeds up the ripening process—chalky subsoils are well drained (wet soils retard ripening), while white calcareous surface rocks retain heat and reflect it back on to the vines. Luis Pato reckons grapes on chalky clay ripen a week before those on sand; and because clay, unlike sand, retains moisture throughout the hot summer months, irrigation is only rarely required. Another benefit, says Pato, is the tempering of Baga's high acidity, which

reduces faster in chalk than in sand. It's specially important, says Niepoort, where Baga's naturally high acidity increases the perception of its tannin.

For Póvoa, Filipa Pato, and Dirk Niepoort, however, the preponderance of limestone was not the only draw of Bairrada's most intensively planted area—the famous triangle of Cordinhã, Ourentã, and Cantanhede. It is warmer here, too, so grapes ripen perhaps a week earlier than in the limestone pockets of Óis de Bairro to the north (where both Patos grow Baga) or Ancas, which is farther north again. It explains why Nuno and Paulo Sousa (Sidónio de Sousa) favor Ancas's steeper, south-facing slopes, whose good drainage, breeziness, and sun exposure help reduce humidity. That said, the pair also value the shelter provided by the willowy pine and eucalyptus trees fringing their vineyards (Luis Pato's Barrosa vineyard near Aguim, too)—not only because it protects the vines from cold, northerly winds but also because eucalyptus and pine find subtle expression in their wines. Along with the smokiness that chalky clay soils impart, eucalyptus and pine are signature notes of Bairrada Baga.



François Chasans's choice of site—the Cardoso vineyard near Tamengos—was motivated by replicating the profile of a wine that entranced him at Lisbon's 1998 Universal Exhibition. The Parisian *caviste* says, "When I asked Claude Bourguignon [Burgundy's renowned soil guru] to analyze Bairrada's earth, the goal was to understand and confirm the consistency between the wines I'd tasted and their specific earth composition. I realized that the best wines matched perfectly with Cardoso's soils." In contrast with the other Baga Friends' warm, south-facing sites, Chasans's cooler vineyard is northeast-facing. Another point of difference is its blue schist-streaked chalky clay soils. Although Chasans, whose motto is "cultivate the difference in the pursuit of excellence," accepts that a north-facing site is more difficult to cultivate, he believes that the benefits of site and soil—"freshness and precision"—outweigh the disadvantages. His yet-to-be-released tightly coiled and taut maiden 2008 vintage certainly makes for an inkier, more densely structured *vin de garde* style compared with the more

approachable perfumed wines of the region's other new players, Filipa Pato Wines (established 2006) and Quinta do Baixo (which Niepoort acquired in 2012).

#### Cultivating difference in pursuit of excellence

Given his cooler site, Chasans harvests "as late as possible—always in the last week of October," and he reckons the best Bagas have at least 13% ABV. Until Anselmo Mendes assumed winemaking duties full time in 2012, João Póvoa (Kompassus) agreed because, says Mendes, "in the past few years, wine was usually made from high maturity [grapes] because winemakers and producers were so worried about the phenolic maturation." Póvoa's blockbuster wines regularly attained 15% ABV, and even 15.5%. Admitting that he prefers Mendes's earlier-picked, pared-back 2012 vintage, Póvoa explains he wanted to pursue this style a long time ago, "but the market didn't want it."

For Niepoort, the emphasis on ripeness, alcohol, and color is "a modern disease [...]. To get color and tannin you

The "neo-Manueline Gothic" Palace Hotel do Bussaco, where the owning de Almeida family long reserved its Buçaco Wines exclusively for the hotel's guests

have to pick very ripe, so that the wines become very jammy and overextracted." Instead, he's an advocate for making Baga "without thinking about the color," which, he explains, means "one ends up doing things very differently, and usually the resulting wines are much purer and finer." Referring to the ageworthy wines of Doris Simões and Gonçalves Faria (both now sadly defunct) he contends, "acidity is more important than concentration and alcohol [...]. It is possible to make great wines with only 12.5% to 13% ABV, which seem to be perfect for my taste." Warming to his theme, he concludes, "Acidity is the spine of a wine. If you don't have a strong spine, you will have problems with your back." Though the Baga wines that Niepoort has made since 2010 come from grapes that were harvested earlier than most, his idea is "go a step further—for more delicacy, finesse, more expression. The idea is lightness, but I hope my wines will still be fine in 30 or 40 years."

Photography courtesy of Bussaco

Similarly in search of elegant, ageworthy wines, Filipa Pato aims to pick for around 13% ABV, though she explains, "I think elegance is about many details: terroir, date of the harvest, and vinification method." Using her father's "amazing" 1980 Vinho Tinto as the ultimate example, she points out conditions were far from ideal. The grapes came in at 16% potential alcohol and had to be watered down because people were not available to harvest earlier. The wine wasn't destemmed and, because Pato Senior had no money for oak casks, was left for five years in tank until he could afford to bottle it. She concludes, "I don't think there is a formula to make a top Baga." And while she observes, "Baga is the only grape that can express all the terroirs of Bairrada," Baga Friends have an enviable palette from which to draw.

#### A taste of history

For three generations, however, the de Almeida family of Buçaco Wines has spread the net further. Long made



The atmospheric cellar of the Palace Hotel do Bussaco, where its wines age gracefully over many years and available vintages stretch back as far as the 1940s

exclusively for the guests of the neo-Manueline Gothic confection of the Palace Hotel do Bussaco (they now have some distribution more widely), the wines are unique in the Baga Friends' portfolio. First, because they are sourced not only from Bairrada but from the neighboring Dão region. And second, because they blend Baga with Touriga Nacional, accounting for Buçaco Wines' come-hither, violet perfume.

Still, there's no getting away from Baga's prodigious backbone of tannin. The hotel's wine list features vintages from the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s, 1980s, and 2000s. In the crypt-like cellar of the building that founder Alexandre de Almeida called "a cathedral of wine" lie 60,000 bottles, the oldest from 1920. Buçaco Wines offers a taste of history, and it remains the guiding principle today. There is no hurry to release these handsome, old-fashioned wines that, until this century, were aged in large Brazilian oak, chestnut, and mahogany *tonéis*. Though wines now spend only a year or so in new and used 300-liter French oak barrels (the *tonéis* were too difficult to maintain), in other respects the winemaking process has barely changed. The wines are fermented on stems, foot-trodden in stone *lagares* (shallow, open fermenters), and released four years after bottling unfiltered. Patience is key.

### *Tonéis, or not tonéis*

Buçaco Wines and other Baga Friends may have abandoned *tonéis*, but Sidónio de Sousa and Quinta das Bageiras still

follow the tradition for their top wines, which are fermented and foot-trodden (for gentle tannin extraction) in *lagares*. Aging his top Garrafeira in old 4,000-liter (1,057-gallon) *tonéis* for 18 months, Sousa explains, "It's more important to taste the wine, rather than the wood." With a very gentle microoxygenation in *tonéis*, both producers' top wines (especially Sousa's firmer style) are unapologetically built for the long haul.

In pursuit of a modern, suppler style and because he believes that "Baga needs some sweetness—the same touch as Burgundy needs," Luis Pato pioneered the use of French oak barrels. Quick to point out that he hasn't thrown the baby out with the bathwater, Pato equally believes, "We don't need to copy the French; the Portuguese tradition is cask aging!" He matures Baga in 650- and 500-liter (170- and 130-gallon) barrels, mostly used. Cut from the same cloth, his daughter, another innovator, not only uses 500-liter barrels but also looks to the microoxygenation properties of wood during ferment, for which she uses bespoke wooden *lagares*.

Confessing that he is still getting to grips with the vineyards (Quinta do Baixo owns seven parcels and buys in fruit from another 25), clones, and winemaking approach, Niepoort is vinifying in small batches to see what works best. Some wines have been fermented in *lagares*, others in closed stainless-steel vats (which allow for longer skin contact); some aged in *tonéis*, others in barrel or stainless

steel. It's interesting to contrast the precision and fluidity of a sample aged in *tonéis* with a denser barrique-aged Baga, while Niepoort himself is entranced with a very delicate old-vine field blend that was fermented then kept on skins for four to five weeks in a closed stainless-steel tank.

Since Póvoa reined in his oak regimen, the better to complement his new, pared-back style, Chasans alone uses barriques (new 228-liter Burgundy barrels) "for more sophistication, suppleness, and elegance," but even then in combination initially with *tonéis*, and now with 500-liter barrels. For everyone, barrel toast is negligible: It's neither necessary nor desirable, since, as Filipa Pato points out, "the smoke in all good Bagas comes from calcareous soils."

### **For every action, there is a reaction**

Opinions are more divided when it comes to whether grapes should be whole-bunch fermented (with stems/stalks intact) or destemmed. It's a source of lively debate among Burgundy producers, too, who have similarly struggled with tannin ripeness. In the past, when Baga might be ripe only two years in ten, the tradition of fermenting on stems (which contain tannins) undoubtedly contributed to the grape's reputation for, at best rustic, at worst green, astringent wines. Explaining that "for every action, there is a reaction," Luis Pato responded to the controversial practice by dispensing with stems altogether in 1985, "because the longer the polyphenolic chain [of tannins], the softer the wine, and the use of stalks increases the quantity of shorter tannin chains." At the other extreme, Quinta das Bageiras

always ferments with 100 percent whole bunches, which, Pato accepts, can support longer aging. For Nuno, who employs well-known consultant winemaker Rui Alves, it's a question of style: "Alves is a very traditional winemaker, and we are in tune."

Now that green-harvesting and low yields are de rigueur among quality-focused producers (and climate change has improved conditions), all save Luis Pato practice whole-bunch fermentation to a greater or lesser degree (Sidónio de Sousa, Quinta da Vacariça, and Buçaco Wines do more; Filipa Pato and Quinta do Baixo, less). Sousa says, "Stems can give a little more acidity and structure," while Filipa Pato likes the energy that they bring to a wine: "It's like keeping a light in it."

That's the precious role that the Baga Friends are now playing by keeping alive the tradition of Baga in Bairrada, concentrating on a variety that demands a singular focus if it is to shine. While many producers have lost faith and turned to other varieties, the group's members have shown that there are ways ahead for both traditionalists and modernizers. By focusing on the soils to which Baga is best adapted, keeping yields low, and retaining a feeling hand for this tannic grape in the cellar, says Filipa Pato, it has become more approachable without any loss of aging potential. This means that, while it might still be too optimistic to hope that Baga can go mainstream, it will continue to flourish among the skilled cognoscenti who know how to treat a diva and among the knowledgeable consumers who know how to appreciate its song. ■



Freshly harvested bunches of Baga grapes from low-yielding vines, which most top Bairrada producers would now ferment with a proportion of their stems