

A midsummer's race through time



Anne Krebiehl MW boards the Sogrape boat in the annual Rabelos regatta, an event that harks back to the Douro's past but also plays an important role in the region's strategy of using tourism to safeguard Port's present and future

Ancient customs often exert an inexplicable but undeniable pull. So it was that, walking along the *avenidas* and alleyways of Oporto, everyone was gearing up for the Festa de São João. It takes place every year on the evening preceding June 24. The almost all-encompassing street party leads up to St John's Day, or São João, honoring the birthday of St John the Baptist, which sees the annual Rabelos regatta of the Confraria do Vinho do Porto. As so often, the Christian feast day thinly veils a far more primal, pagan festival: midsummer and solstice. Elsewhere in Europe the night is marked by huge bonfires. Here in Oporto and Vila Nova de Gaia, the twin towns unite into one big celebration. There are concert stages throughout the old city, a center still full of artisans going about their business, of watchmakers and cobblers, of drapers and jewelers. This is what gives Oporto its charm and authenticity; it is still lived in by normal people, not given over to a corporate elite. The line at the ice-cream parlor is long, bunting is strung along the lanterns, street vendors set out their stalls piled high with sugar-glazed cakes, macaroons, and almond-studded sweetmeats. Others preside over neat standards of fragrant Greek basil and garlic bulbs that have their long stalks and purple flower still attached: It is a São João tradition to hit fellow revelers with these flowers. Today they have mostly been replaced by garishly colored plastic hammers, also sold on every street corner. The whistling sound they make on impact punctuates the night. Everywhere you look, people prepare, mounting beer taps and charcoal barbecues on the streets, some getting a head start by charring whole trays of red peppers, their sweet scent mingling with the smell of smoke, basil, and cotton candy.

All photography courtesy of Anne Krebiehl MW

Left: The 2015 Rabelos regatta gets under way, though winning is always far less important than taking part.

Things get going on either shore of the Douro as soon as the sun sets. The riverfront in Vila Nova de Gaia is one long stretch of music and feasting. Cars are banned, and everyone is about: whole families, from toddler to grandparent, everyone hitting everybody else on the head with their plastic hammers and garlic, including complete strangers. Typical São João fare is *broa de Avintes*, a dark, sticky corn and rye bread, grilled sardines, chorizo, and *caldo verde* (a kale soup). There is beer and wine, and later there are sweetmeats, churros, and Port. "It's all very traditional," says George Sandeman. "São João is about sardines and slices of pork and corn bread and wine, of course."

Sandeman, of the Port and Sherry house founding family, is now a board member of Sogrape, which incorporated Sandeman in 2002. He remembers, "My first São João was in 1972. It was not as big as it is today. It was not as widespread; it was much more concentrated in different areas. People moved from district to district to enjoy. You'd go to one place to dance a bit, drink some wine, eat some sardines, then you'd go on to some other place and do the same thing. That was in '72, but São João has been going on much longer than that."

Regeneration

The festival has ancient origins but was declared an official holiday when St John was made patron saint of the town, and it is now a great draw for visitors from around the world. Its increasing popularity mirrors the increasing importance of tourism to Oporto and the Douro. It is part of a wider regeneration, linked in no small measure to the capacity of the modern airport (enlarged, fully modernized, and reopened in 2006), vastly improved transport links to the Douro region, and the more recent slow but sympathetic renovation of the town whose ancient center was awarded UNESCO World Heritage status as long ago as 1996. It boasts original Art Deco

facades and architecture, spectacular tile mosaics, and a medieval layout. "We are seeing more and more international visitors, and that's consistent with the growth of tourism. The city has a dynamic vibe to it that you find in few old cities. It's a very doable city; you can walk everywhere, the nightlife is good, you can even take a metro to the beach. The only thing is that the water is cold, but at least no colder than Brighton," Sandeman jokes. "São João is being promoted as a great party and has a very special spirit." As night falls, revelers through the streets and start launching *balões de São João*, fire-propelled hot-air balloons of paper that rise like giant fireflies into the night sky. The official apex comes with an extended firework display on the stroke of midnight. As we watched from the balcony of the Ferreira lodge, over sweetmeats, Ruby cocktails, and Tawny, the night sky was lit up by countless *balões* and brilliant sprays of pyrotechnical sparks, whose explosions echoed from the rocks rising up behind us.

Celebrations continue through the night, but the town is surprisingly sprightly and cleaned up the following morning. The concert stages are dismantled, and the action moves to the river where the Rabelos boats are moored along the Douro's Vila Nova de Gaia shore in readiness for the afternoon's race. The regatta was first held in 1983 on the instigation of the late Robin Reid OBE (1925–2015), former chairman of the Croft Group of Companies and co-founder of the Confraria do Vinho do Porto, who wanted to preserve this historic and integral part of Port production. It was on Rabelos boats that the precious, full pipes of Port were transported from the upper Douro downriver to the lodges at Vila Nova de Gaia to mature and be shipped. The wooden boats are flat-bottomed, so they can take around a dozen *pipas*. Rabelos boats of the past could carry up to 100 *pipas*; these were very difficult and too dangerous to maneuver, so in 1779 a legal limit of 70 *pipas* was set. Rabelos have one central sail and a giant rudder—which was necessary to navigate the often dangerous rapids and currents of the river before its flow was regulated by a number of dams constructed in the 1950s and '60s. Despite being perilous, the river was the only means of efficient transport; the Douro's mountainous



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terrain is just too rugged. Rabelos boats were in use even after the construction of the railway in 1887, but by the early 1960s there were just six boats left, with the last commercial Rabelos journey recorded in 1964. The sail was used for the return journey upriver. Where rapids or a strong current rendered wind power useless, oxen towed the boats from the banks. Everything about the Douro and Port implies strain, back-breaking work, huge endeavor and immense determination: the creation of the famous terraces; the pruning, tending, and harvesting of the vines in an incredibly harsh climate—a local saying describes it aptly as “nine months of winter and three months of hell”; the treading of the grapes in *lagares*; and lastly, the cumbersome loading and hazardous journey downstream. It is testament to what man will do for pleasure and profit. Centuries of hard labor can still be traced on the farmers’ faces today. The fruits of their exertions and of everyone who went before them can be tasted in the sweetness of every drop of Port.

An homage to Port

Fortunately, the only inherent dangers of today’s race are drunkenness and sunstroke. Each Port house is allowed to enter a boat: 2015 saw 14 of them. All are crewed by employees with a few lucky guests aboard. The Rabelos boats are towed from Vila Nova de Gaia to the mouth of the Douro at Afurada and line up in a row. The Sandeman boat was captained by Dr Miguel Pessanha, Sogrape board member, enologist, and master sailor. In fact, he is the man behind Mateus Rosé. Pessanha has sailed every Rabelos race and remembers the first one. “I was sailing in the Robertson boat [another Port brand], and it was a magnificent race,” he says. “I think the regatta always has the same spirit: It’s a party; it doesn’t matter who arrives first and who wins. It’s an homage to Port wine. Today it’s a lot more popular; crowds line the banks of the river and a lot of tourists come, and people who love Port are invited to the regatta.” One such guest treated everyone to a 1935 Sandeman Vintage, bottled in London in 1937. It was still full of fruit and life.

The sails can only be raised on the parting shot; some billowed only slowly. The pace of the race was almost leisurely.



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The finishing line is the city’s landmark Dom Luís I Bridge. Winning is a mix of skill and luck, depending on the boat’s place in the lineup in relation to the prevailing wind. George Sandeman, in hat and cape, cut a dashing figure at the bow of the boat. This year’s winner was the Symington-owned Cocksburn’s boat, by a lead of a third of a mile (500m). Fonseca came second; Sandeman, an honorable third.

Post-race, the Confraria awards the winners, and everyone repairs for dinner to the Sandeman Lodge. Long communal tables are set, and the buffet groans with *arroz de pato*, Portugal’s national duck-and-rice dish, fresh salads, ham, creamy *bacalhau* (salt cod), and *tripas à moda do Porto* (tripe and bean stew). All this is followed by caramel flan

with fresh oranges, strawberries, and cherries—and, of course, more Tawny. George Sandeman is voluble: “Creating the race was an act of revival. It was a reason to keep the boats alive; if the race did not exist, the boats would not be there. As you saw, it’s a beautiful event, it’s a lot of fun, a lot of camaraderie, a lot of competition. But in the end everybody sits down and has a good time.” Despite the increasing importance and the undoubted success of Douro table wines, Sandeman believes that Port remains the defining aspect of the region, but he sees tourism as a crucial part of it: “The survival of the region depends on Port, because the volume and value of Port as a contributor to the Douro region cannot be substituted—at least not in the short term,” he says. “Drinking Port—whether it’s at the top of the market with Vintages and old Tawnies, or at the bottom end—is niche and also still seasonal. Thus tourism is important, because it brings people here and exposes them to Port in a different environment and the place that makes it. The big challenge is getting tourism into the Douro region and getting people to see the landscape and understand why Port is such a special wine from a specified region and made in

Above: Rabelos boats at sunset on the eve of São João. Right: Garlic flowers on one of the many street stalls.

a specific way, that it’s not just a fortified wine. Some people don’t even think of it as wine, just as something fortified, which is very unjust and unfair to the wine—because that is what it is.” Miguel Pessanha fully agrees: “The Douro is an exceptional terroir; when you go there you can feel it is the land of wine. We use Portuguese varieties, so our wines have a lot of typicity and personality. I think we have developed viticulture a lot. We know our grapes and vines better, so we can produce better fruit, to make both Douro still wines and Port, of course. But Port is the most important wine of the Douro. Port is very important.”

Investment and development

Continuing investment in vineyards, enology, and infrastructure is key to making Port, Douro still wines, and tourism thrive. This takes different forms: Sogrape rebuilt the Quinta do Seixo winery in the Douro and received 32,000 visitors in 2014. Sogrape’s Port Lodges in Vila Nova de Gaia, comprising Sandeman, Offley, and Ferreira, received 265,000 visitors last year, 12 percent up from the previous year and 20 percent more than in 2012. João Gomes da Silva—Sogrape board member and head of marketing, sales, and PR—puts the

company’s progress into perspective: “The change is very much an economic and social one. You had a region that, 15 years ago, was still very much isolated from a physical point of view; it took at least four hours on a good day to get to and from Porto. The social fabric was isolated as well, and that has changed dramatically. You have much greater accessibility. This has not only allowed local people to get in and out more easily, but it has also brought in a lot of new people, visitors and professionals, via the development of tourism, as well as viticultural infrastructure. Now you have an interaction that is international.” Gomes da Silva is also aware of the pitfalls: “We all know what uncontrolled development has done to certain areas, but the Douro has managed so far to keep its authenticity, which is so important and adds a lot more value.” Sogrape owns about 500ha (1,235 acres) of vineyards in the Douro and buys grapes from more than 500 growers. Luís de Sottomayor—Sogrape’s chief winemaker for Sandeman Port, as well as for Casa Ferreirinha, which has made still wines in the Douro since 1952, most notably its flagship Barca Velha—explains that Sogrape’s investments and work in partnership with local universities has



enabled the development of clonal selections for Touriga Nacional, while current work focuses on safeguarding as many of the indigenous Douro varieties as possible: Tinta Amarela, Tinta da Barca, Touriga Brasileira, Donzelinho, and so on. That Touriga Nacional has hogged so much of the limelight is coincidental, says George Sandeman: “One has to put it into perspective. There are still over 100 varieties planted in the Douro, even though the past 25 years have seen a focus on five key red varieties, including Touriga Nacional. But the strength of Portugal is indigenous varieties. Sometimes you have to choose one or two to represent the other 100 because they have difficult, unpronounceable, or even romantic names. We have a variety called Amonãmedeix, which means ‘love don’t leave me,’ and another called ‘sheep’s tail.’ Touriga Nacional is a name that is easy to say and remember. It is an important variety—as all the others are.”

As owner of Mateus Rosé, one of the world’s most iconic, long-lived, and global wine brands, and the domestic market-leading still-wine brands of Planalto and Esteva in the Casa Ferreirinha range, Sogrape is well placed to invest. Gomes da Silva is candid: “What is money, after all? Money is the result of market reach. Bigger companies have a market reach that a lot of others do not have. This brings with it a capacity to support investments that otherwise would be more difficult to justify. We are not the only ones to invest in the Douro. In my view, the more we are, the better. We have a state-of-the-art visitor center, and one or two others are also doing that in a sophisticated way, but to me it is a pity that more don’t do the same. The more density and quality we have in that respect, the more we can attract the right kind of visitor. That creates a virtuous circle, economies of scope and of scale. I think this is critical. I think we are still only at the very beginning, but this will transform the Douro. I think in 15 years’ time we will talk about a cutting-edge wine region, because it will not lose its unique characteristics. All the complexity, the multitude of terroirs, the shapes and forms that have an impact on the wine—that will still be here.”

So, too, one hopes, will the magical stillness of the Douro, where you can hear the wing-beat of every bird.