

# Port Under Water

By Robin Lee

The fanfare greeting UNESCO's recent listing of the wine regions of Burgundy and Champagne as World Heritage Sites of "outstanding universal value" has a hollow ring in Portugal's Douro Valley. The Alto Douro, with its centuries-old terraces and 2,000-year history of wine production, was granted World Heritage status in 2001. Yet a massive hydroelectric dam, 354 feet high and 886 feet wide, is now being constructed on the Tua River, a tributary of the Douro.



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António Agrellos, winemaker for Quinta do Noval, will lose 31 acres of his family's "Grade A" classified vineyards to flooding that will submerge 1,040 acres under the resulting reservoir. Agrellos admits that there should have been a stronger protest earlier, at a local level, but explains, "We were never informed about what was happening until construction was already underway."

UNESCO oversees the decision to list a site, but is not responsible for protecting the site. The most drastic action UNESCO can take is to delist a site if the criteria for which it was listed are compromised.

"We are most unhappy about this dam," says Paul Symington, chairman of Symington Family Estates, whose Quinta dos Malvedos and Quinta do Tua, where Graham's Port is grown, are on either side of the dam site. "We were never included in any consultation. Now we find ourselves facing a giant wall of concrete with giant pylons marching across the countryside. It is a horrendous industrialized project in an area of outstanding beauty."

The Symingtons have opened discussions with EDP, the energy company that is building the dam. "Having stated clearly that we don't like this project," Symington says, "I have to say that EDP has been very cooperative and there is an ongoing dialogue about the placement of high-tension cables, burying the generator and reducing the

impact of lighting and noise as much as possible. We believe in the benefits of communication."

The NGO Plataforma Salvar o Tua (PTS), which is coordinating protests against the dam, has sent a letter to UNESCO signed by 18 wine producers, and has also collected 17,000 signatures for a petition to the Portuguese government complaining about the negative impacts of the dam and the closure of the historic Tua railway line, which is also to be flooded.

Dr. Mechtild Rössler, deputy director of UNESCO's Heritage Division, visited the site in 2013 as part of UNESCO's monitoring mission. "This is not about my personal feelings," she states. "We are part of an intergovernmental system, answerable to the governments of the member states. To present an objection to the Committee, we must show that construction of the dam infringes on the OUV [outstanding universal value] selection criteria, for example by destroying a key vista, or by having a negative climactic impact."

Professor João Joanaz de Melo, PTS technical coordinator, believes it is not too late to reverse the damage and save the Tua valley. "The building of the dam, which has started, is very destructive," he explains. "But it is still reversible. The wall can be taken down. It's the flooding that happens later which will be irreversible." ■