

Valley of the dammed

Robin Lee reports on a threat to a unique wine-producing region

The drystone walls of terraced vineyards are like hairline wrinkles receding into infinity. From the porch of the Quinta dos Malvedos, infused with the heavy scent of jasmine and lemon blossoms, the view is intoxicating. The wines are also fragrant and sweet. Port is an old-fashioned wine. No one knows for how long precisely, but wine has been made in the Douro Valley in Portugal for over 2,000 years. The formal classification of the vineyards dates back to 1756, when the Marquis de Pombal took action to protect the lucrative port trade, more than a hundred years before the famous classification of Bordeaux.

In 2001, UNESCO designated the Alto Douro wine region in Portugal a World Heritage site of “outstanding universal value”. Specifically, it is the positive interaction of human activity and Nature that UNESCO designates a “cultural landscape”. The purpose of the World Heritage Convention is to give listed sites international recognition, which can bring practical benefits such as boosting tourism and attracting internal investment. Governments are required to protect listed sites. Yet in 2009 the Portuguese government approved construction of the Foz Tua dam on the last undammed tributary of the Douro. The dam will create a 421ha artificial lake extending over 27km where now there are olives, oak forests, orange groves, cork trees and terraced vineyards. The scenic Foz Tua railway line, dating from 1887, will also be flooded.

Plataforma Salvar o Tua is an NGO committed to reversing the decision to build the dam. João de Melo, its technical coordinator, believes it is not too late to act: “The building of the dam, which has started, is very destructive, but it’s the flooding that happens later that will be irreversible.” According to de Melo, the dam will contribute at most only 0.5% of Portugal’s gross energy consumption. “EDP – Energias



Grape pickers, Douro Valley, Portugal © Robert Harding

de Portugal, the country’s biggest energy company – stands to lose €700 million on this project,” says de Melo. “The energy and construction industries and the government have a vested interest in negotiating these large contracts, which are later written off and paid for by government subsidies from Europe and higher energy bills for the consumer,” he alleges.

Mechtild Rössler, Deputy Director of UNESCO’s Heritage Division, visited Portugal in 2012 on a UNESCO mission to assess the dam’s impact. “My personal feeling does not count,” Rössler explains. “From UNESCO’s point of view what counts is if the construction impacts on the outstanding universal value of the site. The objections I heard when I was there were to do with the impact of the flooding on biological diversity, but the site is not inscribed for its biodiversity. I asked the protesters, why are you not fighting to save the Tua railway? It could be a tourist attraction. The people there did not think the train was very important. However if the railway was not closed

I could report that the dam impacts on a key vista point.”

Quinta dos Malvedos and Quinta do Tua, the two wine estates where the Symington family makes Graham’s Port, are adjacent on either side to the site where the dam is being built. “If we had known about it in time we would have protested,” says chairman Paul Symington. “But by the time we found out what was going on it was too late to do anything. It was presented as a *fait accompli*.”

António Agrellos is the winemaker for Quinta do Noval, one of the Douro’s most legendary estates. His own family vineyards will be flooded by the dam. He only learned this when he was offered compensation for compulsory purchase.

“This place was paradise,” Agrellos says, surveying the landscape sadly. “I cannot bear to see it being destroyed.” **R**

Plataforma Salvar o Tua has a campaign website: www.salvarotua.org

Robin Lee is a freelance journalist who writes regularly about wine.