

## Creating Vinho Verde at Quinta de Covela

One of the things that fascinates me when I learn the history of many wine producers in Europe is how common it is to find vineyards that have stayed in the same family for several generations.

But that's not always the story. Every now and then I come across a new kid on the block. And that is the kind of story I discovered at [Quinta de Covela](#) on a recent trip with several other wine bloggers to Portugal.



A quick disclosure, this trip was organized by a wine communications group in Portugal named [Greengrape](#). Lodging, meals, local travel and wine were provided to participants of this trip.

### Meeting the New Kid on the Block

The trip to Portugal happened back in October, and started in [Porto](#) and then out to the [Douro Valley](#). We took the commuter train from Porto to the end of its route and then hopped on another train to go further. It was after dark when we got off the train and found ourselves at a small, rural train stop named Aregos, with seemingly nothing around it. And there was Tony Smith awaiting us — a total stranger to us at the time and us to him. After a quick introduction, we hopped into his SUV and off we went to his vineyard.



Smith is one of the relatively new owners of Quinta de Covela and Quinta da Boavista – both along the Douro river. And over the next few hours, as I learned about his path to owning these vineyards, I found myself in awe of his fearlessness to chase his dream in such a bold fashion.

Not only is he a new kid on the block in terms of owning a vineyard in Portugal, but he's truly an outsider who has made a new home in Portugal. He's originally from the United Kingdom, although has spent time living in Portugal over the years.

And when it comes to winemaking, Smith is an outsider once again. He had no prior background in wine, other than as a consumer. Prior to this venture he worked in publishing, with Conde Nast.

While he was successful in the publishing world, he had always admired that his father had owned his own business and wanted to do the same one day. Through discussions with his eventual business partner, Marcelo Lima, about starting a wine-related business he eventually found himself shopping for a vineyard in Portugal.

### **Buying a Vineyard in Portugal**

Smith and Lima's search for a vineyard led them to Quinta de Covela, which was on the auction block after the former owner went belly up. The former owner didn't go out of business due to problems with the wine, but from other real estate investments that didn't pay out.

Smith and Lima made an offer and ended up as the highest bidder on the property, but the bank that held the property refused their bid – considering it too low.

The bank then neglected the vineyards for two years while they tried to find an investor willing to pay more, until the bank itself went bankrupt. At that point Smith and Lima were contacted to see if they were still interested in the property, they were and they were finally able to complete the purchase.

### **You Own a Vineyard, Now What?**

After acquiring the property, Smith and Lima decided not to harvest their first year but spent that time restoring the vineyard from the neglect it had suffered. The vineyards had formerly been operated as biodynamic, but moving forward they have decided to use organic methods without biodynamic classification.



In order to restore and run the vineyards, they needed to find a team to help them. Given the historical quality of the wines, they wanted to rehire the team that formerly worked at the property.

One of their first goals was to rehire the former winemaker, Rui Cunha, but they weren't sure how receptive he would be as he is the cousin of the previous owner. They reached out to him and fortunately he was thrilled to come back, in part because Quinta de Covela was his first project — and therefore his first love. The rest of the team quickly followed.

### **Creating a New Vinho Verde**

Once Cunha was on board, Smith asked him if there was a style of wine that he had always wanted to create but hadn't been able to do. Cunha said, "yes, a vinho verde from 100% Avesso." This was a response that thrilled Smith, as he thought the white wines from this vineyard were already exceptional and he wanted to do more with them. They made plans to do a small batch of this vinho verde as an experiment, but Mother Nature intervened and forced them to rethink their plans.

A hail storm that year devastated much of their Chardonnay crop, a variety that they typically blend with Avesso for the vineyard's signature white blend. The loss of so much Chardonnay left them with an abundance of Avesso, which transformed their plan to make an Avesso Vinho Verde as an experiment into their new "Plan A." In other words, the Vinho Verde went to market and they were counting on the wine's success.

Fortunately for them, it was a smashing success. It was released under the name Covela Edição Nacional and the premier vintage (2012) sold out.



**Covela Edição Nacional** vinho verde has a bright and floral nose with vibrant lemon aromatics. The palate is also amazing, with vivacious lemon, lime and peach flavors. It's perfectly balanced and an amazing wine for food. Simply put, it's amazing!

But like I said, it has sold out. So it's a great wine that you're unlikely to have a chance to taste. However, we can all look forward to the next vintage.

Smith and team are so excited about white wines from Quinta de Covela that they are increasing the percentage of white grape vines on their estate. They have historically had 50% white and 50% red, and they are replanting vines with a goal of having 80% white grape vines.

### **Good People Make Good Wine**

One thing that stood out to me on this visit, besides the deliciousness of their wines is that Smith and Cunha were extremely likable people, with a good sense of humor. It made me reflect on something I've thought before, that the personality of winemakers comes through in their wines. If you're an asshole, your wine is more likely to reflect that and taste bad. If you're a friendly, approachable person with a good sense of humor, your wines will likely be more approachable and delicious.

And that likability is something that I'm sure has helped this team succeed. They've built strong relationships with their neighbor-producers and are advocates for the region as a whole, not just themselves.

While they need to be profitable, it's not all about the money. Smith commented to me that he's against "prohibitively expensive" wines, but at the same time acknowledges that uber-cheap wines are likely to lack quality. It's a reasonable viewpoint and one that I appreciate.

Smith is the kind of producer I root for. I want to see him and his team be successful and I hope to get to know him better as he continues on his journey. And, of course, I look forward to tasting future vintages of his wine.

While I appreciate the heritage that comes from multi-generational winemaking families, sometimes the new kid on the block will shake things up by taking chances that result in greatness. This has clearly happened with this team, and I love it!

**URL:** <http://cheapwineratings.com/2013/12/01/creating-vinho-verde-at-quinta-de-covela/>