Portugal's Crucible

A winemaking revolution pushes the boundaries in a land of tradition and turmoil

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The clash of tradition and modernity, amid an amazing array of grape varieties, terroirs and winemaking cultures, makes Portugal one of the most dynamic wine-producing nations in the world today.

The country is best known for its Ports, which continue in many ways to define Portugal's global recognition: Dow's 2011 Vintage Port was *Wine Spectator’s* Wine of the Year in 2014. But perhaps even more exciting is the recent emergence of exceptional table wines, especially reds, two of which earned spots in our Top 10 last year. As these bottlings continue to excel, new frontiers open up—and new tensions arise over the shape of things to come. Many of the issues roiling the wider wine world are playing out among the ancient vineyards and ascendant wineries of this distinctive land.
The breakout has centered on the Douro River Valley in the north of Portugal. Once exclusively enriched by the Port trade, this formerly remote corner of Europe has never had brighter—or more complicated—prospects.

The Douro is a vast vineyard realm of about 110,000 acres, defined by dramatic terraced vineyards that cascade down the sides of the valley formed by the Douro River, which flows from Spain, where it is called the Duero and is home to yet more notable wine districts. The Portuguese side of the border is defined by the river's rugged canyons, where the earth, dense with schist and granite substrates, sometimes has to be dynamited to carve out vineyard terraces. This is the home of the historic quintas (estates) that have made Port for centuries and are now leading the way for table wines.

"The Douro is a region of mountain viticulture, and the variables we have to choose from are almost endless. From orientation to altitude to microclimate, they all have a tremendous influence on how the grapes grow," says David Guimaraens, head winemaker for the Taylor Fladgate group, one of the Douro's most storied and powerful wine companies. "But it's not Burgundy. We have to turn the rock into soil."

Yet there is much more to Portuguese wine than the Douro. Approximately half of exports to the United States come from the Vinho Verde region in northern Portugal, which makes mostly light-bodied whites. In the Alentejo, in south-central Portugal, ripe reds rule. Other key regions holding out promise for table wines are the Dão and the coastal appellations of Lisboa and Bairrada. There are also vast troves of the historic fortified wines of Port and Madeira.

Portugal is about the same size as Indiana, yet has about 590,000 acres of wine grapes, just a bit more than California, all grown in a beneficent Mediterranean climate. With more than 250 native grape varieties, and about 80 used in fine winemaking, Portugal offers a daunting cornucopia of wines, a diverse and complex mix that powers the viticulture of this varied and beautiful land but also threatens to obscure its identity on the world stage.

On a two-week trip to Portugal earlier this year, I spoke with dozens of vintners and visited vineyards all around the country. I heard clashes of opinion on almost every important factor of grapegrowing and winemaking. Some want to modernize, employing the full arsenal of new technology; others feel traditional practices are still the best guides. Some believe in focusing on a few proven grape varieties; others use the rich palette of the country's indigenous grapes in multifaceted field blends.

There are pioneers who embrace long-overlooked white wines and obscure or undervalued regions. Outsiders become part of the movement, while competitors partner to further shared goals. Alongside the established leaders, a younger generation of ambitious Portuguese vintners is striving to define new terroirs and to better exploit Portugal's wealth of potential. It's an open field—and the race is on.

Looking to the Past

Cristiano van Zeller is a big man, gregarious yet cultured, who sports a beard well-suited to his broad visage. He represents the 15th generation of his family in the Port business, and his pride is undiminished despite the many ups, downs and near misses of his winemaking career. His
deep roots have given him a strong conviction that the old ways remain the best approach to expressing Portugal's distinctive character.

Few careers better encapsulate the changes that have swept Portugal during the past two decades. Van Zeller once oversaw the region's most storied estate, Quinta do Noval, before his family sold it amid debt and discord in 1993. Until 2000 he consulted for Quinta do Crasto, a top estate in the heart of the Douro River Valley, helping to refine its table wines, before moving on to focus fully on his own estate, Quinta Vale Dona Maria, founded in 1996. He has been one of the key players helping to catapult Portugal to the top tier of the world's red wine hierarchy.

On a late January night, van Zeller is uncharacteristically subdued. He recently broke his leg, which is now in a cast, and he is still a touch feverish from a bout with the flu. Yet he is undeterred, meeting me at Crasto during a tasting of wines from the Douro Boys, a promotional group whose ranks include the owners of Quinta do Vallado, Quinta do Vale Meão, Niepoort and Crasto. Despite the tongue-in-cheek moniker, the Douro Boys represent many of the region's pioneering table wine vintners.

Van Zeller pours one of his newest wines from Vale Dona Maria. It's a red called Vinha da Francisca, for his daughter. It hails from the stupendous 2011 vintage and is a blend based on the intensely colored Portuguese grape Sousão (50 percent), with the remainder comprising native varieties Rufete, Touriga Franca, Tinta Francisca and Touriga Nacional.

It's a stunningly pure expression of the Douro's dynamism, deep and rich, with dark fruit and spice flavors framed by fresh acidity and supple tannins.

"When I planted Francisca [in 2004], I had the flavors in my head. You can't escape your heritage, and Sousão is a big component of Noval. My family planted Sousão at Quinta do Roriz in the 18th century," he says.

Van Zeller is also drawing inspiration from the past by starting fermentations in open basins the Portuguese call lagares—a technology straight from antiquity. "At Vale Dona Maria we are scrapping all the stainless steel and replacing it with granite lagares, with foot treading. The feet provide more gentle crushing than [any] robotic system, and that makes a difference," he says.

Van Zeller champions the unique viticultural heritage of old-vine plantings in the Douro, where dozens of grape varieties may exist side by side—an attitude at odds with the philosophy of some of his neighbors. He's no reactionary, head buried in the sand. But he insists that the old traditions developed for reasons that are rooted in Portugal's unique terroir, and that to abandon them is to risk losing the country's identity. His wines testify strongly to his beliefs.

Driving Into the Future

Upriver from Crasto is the small village of Pinhão, located in the heart of the Cima Corgo, the most prized of the Douro's Port grapegrowing districts. On Pinhão's outskirts is Quinta do BomFim, the winemaking center of the Symington family and a key source of fruit for Dow's Port.

The Symingtons are the Douro's biggest vineyard owners and one of its most deeply rooted families. They are betting on the future and relying on technology to get them there. The ambitious expansion and modernization of the cellars at Bomfim include six of the largest
stainless-steel lagares I've ever seen, complete with robotic plungers that mimic foot treading.

For Charles Symington, who helps oversee BomNn, the stainless-steel lagares are the key to precision winemaking. "If you want your wines quite a bit drier, like Dow's, or sweeter, like Graham's [Port], you've got to get it just right," he explains. "With the robotic lagares, we can tread as long as we want. We can just press a button for more extraction. It just doesn't happen if you don't have automatic controls." There are also heating and cooling pipes embedded in the steel. "This allows us to ferment at high temperature or low temperature, depending on what type of wine we want to make," Charles says.

In the wake of the 2008 financial crash, the Symingtons, who own 2,200 acres spread across 27 different quintas, bought the historic Quinta do Roriz estate, and subsequently made it the primary source for Chryseia, the table wine they produce in partnership with former Bordeaux vintner Bruno Prats. Prats brought an outsider's perspective to the table, at once sensitive to terroir and engaged with state-of-the-art technology. The 2011 Chryseia was Wine Spectator's No. 3 wine of 2014.

The Symingtons have also replanted many of the estate's old vineyards, a move that engenders sadness among their neighbors, including van Zeller, who oversaw the property's vineyard management until the sale. Yet the Symingtons are undeterred. "We replanted Roriz for economics," says managing director Rupert Symington. "For efficiency, lower unit cost and, of course, quality. We've eliminated overproducing varieties like [Tinta] Roriz and have put in Sousão and Touriga Franca instead."

While van Zeller and the Symingtons compete in their philosophical outlooks and market presence, their passion and the quality of the wines they make are helping to define Portugal's future. They share the same goals but are taking very different paths to get there.

A Cornucopia of Grapes

The farther you go upriver toward the Spanish border, the hotter and drier the climate gets. The Douro is a rugged region where the sinuous and curving lines of terraced vineyards define the landscape. At its bottom flows the Douro River, with adjoining streams emptying into it from precipitous peaks, all contributing to a multitude of terroirs and exposures.

Just north of Pinhão, in the small village of Vale de Mendiz, and almost within the shadow of the great Port estate Quinta do Noval, Portugal's most successful winemaking couple has set up shop. In the 12 years since the founding of their estate, Pintas, Sandra Tavares da Silva and Jorge Serôdio Borges have quickly risen to the top of the Douro table wine scene. From a sliver of little more than 5 acres in 2001, they now own 25 acres of vineyards, finding key sites and buying them as they could afford to do so. They make their own table wine and Port while working day jobs: Tavares is employed by van Zeller at Vale Dona Maria, and Borges at nearby Quinta do Passadouro. The couple's Pintas red scored 98 points in 2011, the highest rating yet for a Portuguese table wine. But they are not resting on their laurels. They want to double the size of their tiny Pintas winery in Vale de Mendiz and are planning to build a new facility at the site of the nearby Quinta da Manoella, where they are rehabilitating a derelict
estate set in a small, steep-sided valley. The property, which Borges bought from his family in 2010, covers almost 150 acres, 42 of which are planted to vineyards. The couple had to build a 2-mile road down a steep slope just to reach the site.

Manoella offers a mix of 30- to 40-year-old vineyards that are dominated by Touriga Nacional (60 percent). It also has Tinta Roriz, Touriga Franca and Tinta Francisca. The mix is common to new plantings in the Douro, where three to five varieties have a majority presence. There's also a small plot of 100-year-old vines that comprises 30 different varieties, used to make the producer's vinhas velhas (old-vine) bottling.

This contrast between new plantings and old vineyards, a few selected grape varieties and a complex field blend, is a major issue playing out in Portugal today. What blend makes the best wine? What approach will be the easiest for consumers to understand? Will quality and marketability conflict?

One of the Douro's leading reds, the Quinta do Crasto Vinha Maria Teresa counts more than 40 varieties in the mix. Unlike New World vineyards or the tightly controlled appellations of France, many vineyards in the Douro—especially the older ones—are a mix of varieties that are only now being identified. In the viticultural traditions of the region, when one vine died, it was replaced, but usually on an ad hoc basis, with few records kept of what was actually put into the ground.

Tradition still holds sway at the Taylor Fladgate group. In its stable is the Fonseca Port house, which celebrates its 200th anniversary this year and whose 1994 Vintage Port shared Wine Spectator Wine of the Year honors with the 1994 Taylor Fladgate Vintage Port in 1997. The Taylor group is notable not only for the perennial high quality of its Ports, but also for a steadfast reluctance on the part of CEO Adrian Bridge to branch out from Port to make table wines.

"Someday we will produce table wine, no doubt," Guimaraens says. For now, he would prefer to assemble an entirely new team at Taylor to produce them. "I can't make them," he explains.

When Guimaraens surveys the Douro's vineyards, he sees both hurdles and opportunities. "The factor that distinguishes table wine, as it does in Port, are two tendencies: wines which base themselves on the first era of post-phylloxera vineyards, today dominated by stony terraces of vinhas velhas. These are characterized by high-density planting of field blends.

"Then there is the new style of Douro wines that are focused on Touriga Franca, Touriga Nacional and Tinta Roriz. To me these wines have a style all their own. They are fruitier than the old field blends."

Borges and Tavares acknowledge the tension inherent in the Douro's evolution. "First of all, we have to have an answer to the question of the field blends and the different varieties. For the first time, we have a variety that everybody knows—Touriga Nacional—and that's important. If all of us take the same direction, we can go further. I think Touriga Nacional and Touriga Franca for sure are the best varieties for us—the flagships," Borges says.

"But I think field blends are important. They show the identity of the vineyard," Tavares adds.
"The message of the field blend is difficult to transmit. Americans want to know what they are drinking," Borges counters. "For people to understand the field blend, they have to understand our varieties individually."

A Gold Rush on the Frontier

To the east, near the Spanish border, the Douro River emerges from a canyon where Egyptian vultures roam and wolves are said to patrol the remotest uplands. The Douro then meanders across a plain before descending once again into a chasm, near the village of Pocinho. This is the Douro Superior.

Although change is raging across the Cima Corgo, the gold rush is in the Douro Superior. New vineyards are being planted across a sere and wild landscape. Douro vintners are drawn by the availability of land and the unique terroirs, which range from near level terrain to those abutting sheer cliffs. Here, ancient terroir meets modern methods.

At Quinta do Vale Meão, the region's most renowned estate and the source of Wine Spectator's No. 4 wine of 2014, quality has risen vertiginously since its first wines were released in 1999.

There are no mixed plantings here: The grapes are organized by block and variety. The three leading varieties at Vale Meão are Touriga Nacional (45 percent), Tinta Roriz (25 percent) and Touriga Franca (20 percent). For Francisco "Xito" Olazabal, winemaker and the son of owner Francisco "Vito" Olazabal, Touriga Nacional and Touriga Franca are the Douro's best varieties: Nacional, with rich, complex and earthy dark fruit and violet-infused flavors that age well; and Franca, a bit higher in acidity and fruitiness.

Two years ago, Vale Meão doubled the size of its cellar. But instead of increasing its production of about 30,000 cases, Olazabal is using the extra space to modernize and upgrade. Yet old traditions linger; all of Vale Meão's wines are made using traditional lagares, including a very fine Vintage Port. The new structure is an extension of the cellar first built in the late 19th century, but it's hardly visible; much of it is below ground and blends seamlessly into the landscape.

Nearby is the home of one of the most influential pioneers of the Douro table wine revolution, João Nicolau de Almeida, 66, who is Xito's uncle. He recently retired from overseeing Ramos Pinto for the French Champagne house Roederer, where he helped develop Duas Quintas, one of the earliest and most consistently high quality of the Douro's table brands.

Avuncular and soft-spoken, de Almeida has been working on his latest project, a beautiful hilltop site in the Douro Superior called Monte Xisto (or Schist Mountain). Its 99-acre estate, with 25 acres of vines, overlooks the Douro near the mouth of the Coa. "Monte Xisto is an adventure and a legacy for the family. [Twenty-five acres] is more than enough," he says. "The idea is to make a winery and a family house."

The red, made from Touriga Nacional, Tinta Francesa and Sousão, is refined and rich-tasting, with a lovely minerality and red fruit flavors. A white based on the native Portuguese grape Rabigato is planned.
Just upriver is a much larger project, called Duorum. It is the product of a partnership between José Maria Soares Franco, who oversaw winemaking operations at Portugal's largest wine company, Sogrape, until 2006, and João Portugal Ramos, who runs his own wine company based in the Alentejo region.

Duorum covers 395 acres near the small village of Castelo Melhor, with approximately 110 acres already under vine, about half of what is envisioned. Why go to the end of Portugal to make wine? "I believe that here we can have a much more consistent quality in the grapes, and the reason is the climate," Soares Franco says. He cites the region's dry, hot weather. It receives about 300 millimeters of rain per year, only a third of the rainfall in the Baixo Corgo, 30 miles downriver.

Duorum's best red is known as O. Leucura, named for an endangered local bird. The 2008 offers a powerful mix of chocolate, mineral, tar and spice flavors and comes from a plot of old vines rented from a local grower.

I descend into the gorge of the Douro with Soares Franco and Portugal Ramos. Terraces have been carved out of the slopes with geometric precision. We pass by a pumping station that transports water from the Douro to the canyon rim to irrigate the young vines almost 1,000 feet above.

We soon stop and walk over to the abandoned train station of Castelo Melhor, still festooned with the decorative blue and white tiles, called azulejos, that are common on facades throughout Portugal. The waters of the Douro flow by. The men say that one day they hope to rehabilitate this site for tourists coming by the river, and help them enjoy all that this magnificent region has to offer. From their perspective, only by embracing Portugal's past can the country—and its wines—find a fruitful future.

White Wines in a Land of Reds

The historic capital of Portuguese winemaking is the northern city of Porto, Portugal's second largest, at the mouth of the Douro. In the past, young Ports were transported in cask by small, sturdy boats called barcos rabelos from the remote interior of the Douro, home to the quintas, to the cool marine climate of Porto, where they would be blended and then aged. Today, tanker trucks have replaced the boats, but Porto still plays an important role as home to many of Portugal's top vintners and winemakers.

At the Porto waterfront home of Luis Seabra, 42, and his Poland-born partner, Natalia Jessa, evidence of a different future is being poured. The occasion is an informal tasting and discussion of some of Portugal's newest offerings. In marked contrast to tradition, they are all white wines, and they offer eye-opening quality.

"We've always been seen as a red wine country, but there are some very beautiful white wine regions. We are just now discovering the old vineyards in the older regions. We found something that our ancestors knew in their bones, and it is very interesting," says Nuno Mira do Ó, who makes wine under the V Puro label.
He's pouring a 2012 white he calls Druida, made from the Encruzado grape. It hails from the Dão region, where granite-based soils dominate an upland district south of the Douro.

Rich, ripe and filled with luscious minerality, Druida is a revelation. "The grapes are special. They are bulletproof to oxygen. When I first made the wine I thought it was reduced. It has a strange behavior—it doesn't oxidize. It's not a fruity wine, but it [shows] the fruit beautifully," Mira do Ó explains.

Among Seabra's offerings on the table is a white he calls Xisto Cru, from the Douro. It's 100 percent barrel-fermented, but Seabra prefers it to rest gently on the lees without stirring. It carries all the richness, finesse and spiciness of a premier cru Burgundy, but instead of Chardonnay, it is made from Rabigato.

Also at the table is Tiago Alves de Sousa, the winemaker for his family's estate in the Douro. He's brought a white as well: the crisp Alves de Sousa Branco da Gaivosa Reserva 2009, a blend of Malvasia Fina, Gouveio, Arinto and Avesso—all indigenous Portuguese grapes. "Only Italy rivals Portugal in the amount of native grapes. With DNA fingerprinting, we are seeing the connections between the [Portuguese] varieties. Grapes with the same name in different regions are completely different," de Sousa explains.

At Pintas, Tavares and Borges also make one of the Douro's best whites, the barrel-fermented Guru, sourced from 50-year-old vines in high, cool uplands. Rich and minerally, it is composed of the Portuguese varieties Viosinho, Rabigato, Codega and Gouveio. Only about 15 percent of Douro vineyards are planted to white varieties, but that number will likely grow. In the past three years, white plantings have boomed, Borges says.

New Ground for Innovation

To the south of the Douro lies the Dão. Although less than 50 miles from the Douro Superior as the crow flies, the conditions here are very different. "These are the coolest vineyards, or almost the coolest vineyards, you can have in Portugal," say Douro-based winemaker Jorge Moreira.

The view from Quinta do Corujão, near the small town of Seia, is breathtaking. Small to medium mountain ranges undulate across the landscape to the north and east. Directly to the south is Portugal's highest range, the Serra da Estrela, which reaches 9,000 feet. Its snow-covered slopes glisten in the haze on this winter day. The Dão qualifies as a genetic font for much of Portuguese grapegrowing: Touriga Nacional may have first developed here, and the deeply colored and intense red variety called Alfrocheiro and the white Encruzado also come from the Dão.

Joining Moreira are fellow winemakers Xito Olazabal and Borges. In the Douro, they are informal rivals, but here they are collaborating on a wine called M.O.B., an acronym derived from the first letter of each one's last name. "We are very good friends, and we discussed that it would be fun to make a wine together. If we did it in the Douro we would be competing [with one another]," says Moreira, another acolyte of the Douro revolution, whose day jobs include overseeing the cellar of top Douro estate Quinta de la Rosa and revamping that of Real Companhia Velha, founded in 1756.
The M.O.B. trio is also in the Dão to explore the mostly untapped viticultural bounty of the region and to help it set a new course. They make both a white and a red. The M.O.B. white is 70 percent Encruzado and 30 percent Bical, another little-known Portuguese variety, with its origins in Bairrada. It was barrel-fermented for six months, evenly split between new and used 500-liter oak barrels.

"The Encruzado is a variety that is very neutral when it is young. It is a bit like Chardonnay," Borges explains. It also has a slightly floral nature, with high natural acidity, and is widely considered Portugal's highest quality native white grape.

The M.O.B. red is a blend of Touriga Nacional, Baga, Jaén (the Spanish Mencía grape) and Alfrocheiro. The 2011 features concentrated raspberry, meat, tar, smoke and spice flavors.

"What makes the Dão wines different is the minerality, and we have to work to keep it. We don't go in the direction of concentration. We want to be very gentle with our wines," Borges says. Moreira agrees: "We came to the Dão to make elegant and fresh wines, not big wines like the Douro."

Waking a Sleeping Giant

In the Alentejo, high quality winemaking has yet to reach critical mass, but ambitious vintners are drawn by its inexpensive land and fertile soils. Huge plantations and co-ops dominate here, in contrast to the small holdings that are common in the rest of Portugal. And it is hot—very hot—in the summer. Many reds are overripe, and many whites overoaked. Most of the wines produced here are for domestic consumption.

Change is stirring, however. The 1,600-acre Esporão estate, on the plains near the town of Reguengos de Monsaraz, exports 65 percent of its production, with a big portion going to the United States. It has long been one of the region's leaders. The winery was started in 1973 by a branch of the Roquette family (of Quinta do Crasto), and has built its success on varietals and blends of native Portuguese grapes, along with bottlings of international varieties such as Syrah, Petit Verdot and Sémillon. Australian David Baverstock oversees the cellars, and he has long favored straight-arrow winemaking techniques—most notably stainless-steel fermentation and extended oak aging for the top reds and whites. But recent experiments, spearheaded by his Portuguese winemaking staff, are showing impressive results. Fermentations in large amphorae are resulting in intensely juicy and floral reds. Two years ago, Esporão's first lagares were built, but instead of granite they're made from the region's white marble.

Near the city of Portalegre, in the far northeastern reaches of the Alentejo, Spain-born vintner Susana Esteban is pursuing her own vision of what the region's wines should be: clean, fresh and vibrant-tasting. Procura, which means "search" in Portuguese, is the name of her label, and she's looking for undiscovered sites that deliver high quality grapes from native varieties.

Today, she shows me one such spot. It's a 60-year-old mixed planting of Fernão Pires, Arinto and Moscatel. "This reminds me of Bierzo, in Spain—with granite-based mountains and vineyards in the middle of nothing," says Esteban, who is from Spain's Galicia province. The name of the site
is Salão Frio, or "cold place" in Portuguese, and she leases its 5 acres from a local grower. Its small, bush-trained vines are rooted in a vineyard higher than 2,000 feet in altitude, above the torrid plains. "To me, this is Portalegre, not Alentejo, but it is very, very small." Harvest here comes six weeks later than at lower altitudes, and along with that come fresher flavors and crisper structures.

I taste the 2013 Procura white, which offers mouthfilling notes of apricot, citrus and peach that are well-spiced. Even more impressive is a Procura red from 2011, rich and intense, with delicate flavors of cherry and graphite. It's a mix of 40 percent Alicante Bouschet, the red grape most identified with Alentejo.

Esteban first came to Portugal in 1999 and worked at Quinta do Crasto until 2007. Propitiously, 1999 was also the year that Jorge Moreira, Sandra Tavares and Jorge Borges began their winemaking careers. Two years earlier, Xito Olazabal took over at Vale Meão. "We are still friends, and we are all very close because we didn't know anyone else [in wine] back then," Esteban says.

**The Future Is Now**

Those friendships have proven to be the ties that bind, helping to build the new wines of Portugal and portending many more exciting bottlings to come. It's indicative of the New World energy exploding in this Old World winemaking nation. And despite the clash of tradition and modernity, a greater role for Portugal on the world winemaking stage seems assured.

Whether Portuguese wines become sought-after in their own right rather than as curiosities remains to be seen. But the tide may be turning, assisted by the high quality of the 2011 vintage and the ensuing word of mouth that's so important in setting wine industry trends.

"My brother, Philip, who works the U.S.A. market for [Quinta de la Rosa], has just got back from a trip and says that people are now asking for Portuguese wine. The change has been dramatic and quite remarkable in the past six months," says Sophia Bergqvist, owner of Quinta de la Rosa. "There is a real buzz to Portugal at last," she adds.

Portugal still faces many hurdles. The sheer complexity of its terroirs, the distinctiveness of its wines and the multitude of grape varieties grown all present both assets and challenges that its vintners must face, mostly on their own. There's not much government support, and although some vintners have organized to get the word out, too many remain passive. All of this is set against the backdrop of a national economy that has been caught in the maelstrom of the wider European financial crisis, promoting despair and risk aversion.

Yet risk they must. The Portuguese proudly point out that Lisbon is the closest European capital to North America. They constitute a nation 40 years removed from a repressive dictatorial regime and are still reveling in their hard-won freedoms. But they face the Atlantic with an open spirit, ready to introduce the wine world to a new age of discovery.