VIEW FROM THE CELLAR

By **John Gilman**
Web site : www.viewfromthecellar.com

Monte dos Cabaços (Estremoz)

The winery of Monte dos Cabaços is owned by renowned Portuguese chef, Margarida Cabaço, who is one of the most famous names in cuisine in the country. Madame Cabaço owns the restaurant called Restaurante São Rosas in the beautiful hilltop village of Estremoz, which lies just below the town's castle and has frequently been ranked as the very finest restaurant in the Alentejo and also received awards as amongst the finest restaurants in the entire country of Portugal. I can heartily recommend the food at the intimate Restaurante São Rosas. In addition to running her restaurant and winery here in Estremoz, Margarida has also spent many years cooking abroad in the earlier part of her career (particularly in Holland, where she grew up) prior to returning full-time to her native Estremoz. The Cabaço family had long been grape growers and farmers in this region, and in 1992, they began to plan for the opening of the Alqueva project and the blossoming of the Alentejo as a wine-producing region by reorganizing their twenty hectares of existing vineyards at that time and planting an additional thirty hectares of vines. As Madame Cabaço is still a full-time restaurateur and chef- all in addition to making the wines in conjunction with her Oenologist, Susana Estéban- the family's vineyards are overseen by her husband, Joaquim Cabaço, so that Margarida can concentrate on cuisine and winemaking. By all reports, Joaquim Cabaço is one of the top viticulturists in the region and he ensures that the family's vineyards are in the bloom of health and produce pristine grapes. This was my first encounter with the wines of Monte dos Cabaços, and I was struck instantly by their superb quality, impressive mineral drive and Margarida's clear desire to more fully explore the capabilities of the terroir of the Alentejo to produce longer-lived wines that will blossom with time in the bottle. Consequently, she holds back her red wine cuvées for an extended period of bottle aging prior to release, which may still be standard operating procedure in other wine- producing regions of Portugal- such as the Dão- but remains quite rare here in the Alentejo. Estremoz is known as one of the "marble cities" of the Alentejo, as it has been well-known for centuries for the nearby marble quarries (many of its streets and plazas are made of marble) and this stony spine of geology also contributes to the underlying minerality which can be readily found in the wines from the vineyards that surround Estremoz.

There are currently three distinct bottlings of red wines here at the domaine: Monte dos Cabaços Tinto which is the regular bottling at the property and which is comprised primarily of a blend of Alicante Bouschet, Touriga Nacional and Aragonez and which is raised entirely in stainless steel tanks and given several years of bottle age prior to release; Margarida Tinto, which is almost entirely made up of old vine Alicante Bouschet in the vintage that I tasted and is raised for twelve months primarily in "one wine" French oak barrels (with about twenty percent of the wood new), and Monte dos Cabaços Tinto Reserva, which is made up of a blend of Cabernet Sauvignon, Touriga Nacional, Alicante Bouschet and Syrah and raised in fifty percent new French barrels for twelve months prior to bottling. All three bottlings were outstanding in their respective styles, with all of them seeing significant bottle aging prior to release, so that they youngest of the reds currently on the market is the 2009 Margarida Tinto, with the current release of the Monte dos Cabaços Tinto from the 2007 vintage and the Reserva from the 2005 vintage! I should note that the Margarida Tinto bottling is likely to change from year to year, as it reflects what Madame Cabaço feels "is an intriguing blend each year from grapes that are most successful in a given vintage", so that the previous year's version was primarily Syrah with a touch of Viognier blended into the cuvée (an Estremoz version of Côte-Rôtie?), whereas in the current release the bottling relies almost entirely on old vine Alicante Bouschet. Margarida Cabaço is equally skilled with her white wines, which were also excellent in quality and equally showed the structural integrity for aging. There are currently two bottlings of white wines at the estate: the Monte dos Cabaços "Colheita Seleccionada" Branco which is made from the traditional "big three" indigenous grapes of Roupeiro, Arinto and Antão Vaz and raised entirely in stainless steel, and the Margarida Branco which is made from a blend of Verdelho and Encruzado grapes and of which a small percentage sees some time in older oak barrels during its elevage. Monte dos Cabaços is clearly one of the very top producers in the Alentejo and Margarida Cabaço deserves to be every bit as well-known for the superb quality of her wines as she is in Portugal for her extraordinary culinary talents. I have listed the wines below in the order that we tasted them over the course of a truly superb lunch at Restaurante São Rosas.