

Dominó

Dominó from Rita and Vitor Claro.



Vitor Claro in one of the vineyards he rents in Colares.

Profile

Vitor Claro started Dominó in 2010 as a tiny side project when he was still a chef. What began as a personal challenge to produce against the trend of high alcohol, high extraction wines has evolved into a full time pursuit spanning grapes from all over Portugal.

Vitor fell in love with wine over shared bottles with friends and patrons at the numerous places he worked in over the years. In 2008, he found himself head-chef of an extremely successful hotel/restaurant/winery in Portalegre, a part of the much broader Alentejo region. His work there led him to harvesting two years in a row, befriending the head winemaker and taking his own interest in the actual transformation of grapes into wine. Inspired by the low intervention wines he'd fallen in love with over the years, he wondered if they could do such a thing locally.

"Let's just crush some grapes and make a simple wine".

He searched, found and fell in love with a small parcel of old vines in Portalegre, bought grapes from it and produced two barrels of white and two barrels of red. This was essentially the entirety of the Dominó project until 2015; that year he started working the entirety of the vineyard part-time with his wife Rita. And through a consultancy in the Beira Interior, he began producing a wine there (*Colmeal*). Some experiments with dry Muscat from Setúbal were made as well.

All of the wines were being made and stored in their respective regions while Vitor was running his own restaurant in Lisbon, the eponymous Claro. After deciding that a warehouse was necessary, Vitor and Rita found one 30 minutes out of the city... with an abandoned 1.5 hectares of vines behind it! Naturally, they rented the warehouse and started farming them.

With wine becoming an ever consuming endeavor for the couple (Rita was working full time as an architect), dissatisfaction with the restaurant life and a very promising 2016 vintage, they decided to change lives and make Dominó a full time project. In 2017 they expanded by acquiring a beautiful parcel in Carcavelos through a friend. They also started buying and picking grapes from the famous coastal region of Colares in 2018. Though they still live in Lisbon, the plan is to have 100% of the production vinified in the house attached to the Portalegre vineyards with the 2020 vintage.

Neither Rita or Vitor have studied viticulture or oenology; their work is 100% empirical. Nevertheless, the talent is evident and the wines keep getting better each vintage. To us, these are one of the most exciting, unique producers in Portugal, their wines always fresh, bright and full of life. And now that the Claro are fully dedicated to viticulture and taking the necessary steps to improve their cellar, we cannot wait to see what they do next.

Interview

This interview with Rita and Vitor Claro took place over Skype in March, 2020.

Let's start from the beginning. What were you doing before the Dominó project?

I first started as a cook in 1999 and this was my full time job until 2016. In 2010 I started a small side business making wine. It was two barrels of red and two barrels of white. It grew slowly over the years. During that time I met my wife Rita and in 2017 we both quit our jobs to focus full time on making wine.

Rita, what were you doing before the transition?

I was working as an architect. We started working our first vineyard together in 2015. After the 2016 vintage, we decided to fully dedicate ourselves to farming and winemaking.

So Vitor, you hadn't met Rita when you started Dominó?

I hadn't. In fact, up until 2014 Dominó was REALLY a side project, something very small. Then in 2015 we took over the first vineyard in Portalegre (Alentejo) and farmed it for two years. Before 2015, we were always renting cellar facilities in different places. 2016 was the first year we made everything in the garage in the back of our house. We were very happy with the harvest and the wines. They were not perfect but it was a major leap forward in terms of quality control for the grapes and the vinifications.

Let's go back to when you were working as chef. I know it's important to the evolution of the Domino project.

My first jobs were in hotels. I worked in London, Spain and Portugal. In 2002, I was 21 and opened up my first place. I had it for three years before selling it. I then worked for many other people until 2012, when I opened my final place. I ran it for five years and was also partners in another restaurant at a very successful food court in Lisbon. We were one of the few that did not achieve success there, so we sold that off and I focused solely on my place. But as I mentioned earlier, the wines of 2016 gave me a feeling there was a new life waiting for us. Wine was demanding more and more from us but at the same time it felt right.

Rita, you never had anything to do with the restaurants right?

I helped him out a bit towards the end, but not much more than that. Our first real collaboration together was in the vineyards. We found joy in this and it made us pursue this plan.

Vitor, what inspired you to start making wine on the side? And can you explain what Dominó was before taking over vineyards?

Basically I was lucky enough to be around people that opened amazing wines, wines that were important to me, that defined me. It was very subjective; I could just as well not been impacted by them at all. In 2008 and 2009, I was was working at a very successful place that tripled as a hotel, restaurant and wine cellar. I was the head chef there and this gave me the opportunity to do two harvests. It made me curious how wine was actually made. But what I really learned from working there was what I DIDN'T like as far as the wines they were making.

So my first goal was to make wines the opposite of what I disliked. I felt like this could be done. I set out to make a white and a red, making two barrels of each. It evolved to different wines from different plots and eventually even different regions. For instance, in 2015 I was doing a job at hotel in the North of Portugal and we decided to develop a house wine. So we made it, but when I left I kept the contact to make it under the Dominó label. That wine still exists, it's *Colmeal*. It was complicated, because I came back to Lisbon after this job and the vines were 500km away.

Can you break everything down?

Everything started in Portalegre. This is where the hotel/restaurant/winery was. The winemaker there is a very good friend of mine. This guy is a great engineer, incredibly technical. I told him I had

this idea: let's just crush some grapes and make a simple wine. Maybe it would work out.

□His response was that it wasn't possible, that it couldn't be done from the winery's grapes. This was during a staff meal, and a colleague of ours called Caterina said: "Why don't you use my grandfather's vineyard?" We asked where it was, and she said it was right here in Portalegre. So we set up a meeting with the grandfather and it started like that. There was no real plan. We visited the grandfather's vines, and in the end we didn't like them. But there was a tiny plot next to it that I totally fell in love with. The friend who I just mentioned was originally going to be the winemaker and we'd be partners, but he almost immediately bowed out. But I pushed forward.

In 2015 I was doing that consultancy in Beira Interior, which is a totally under-rated region in the North. We decided to make a house white and red for the hotel, bought some grapes and rented a facility that was close by and bottled those.

From 2010 to 2012 I rented one place, another in 2013 then another in 2015. The wines were spread out all over the place and we needed a warehouse in Lisbon because that's where we live. A friend of Rita's father told us he had a warehouse North of the city, about a 30 minute drive. Someone had lived there but it had been vacant for six months and he had no plans for it. So we went to see it and it was exactly what we needed. The thing is that in the back of the warehouse, there is 1.5 hectares of vines! These, on the other hand, were abandoned. So we took these over and made wine from them.

So this is how we came to have wines from different plots in Portalegre and the one in Beira Interior. And then one day I thought we should find some extra grapes by the sea shore because there is a lot of potential. So we went to Colares to buy grapes and make a wine from there. At that point we had resigned to drop the Beira Interior because it was simply too far away.

In 2017, we had a dinner with a friend. He asked me how the restaurant was going, not realizing that I'd closed it over a year ago! The truth is that we were extremely close in our twenties and were even roommates but had not seen each other in over a decade. So I told him business was lousy, that I'd closed the restaurant and we were focusing on wine.

His eyes opened wide and he told me that his grandmother, still alive in her 90's, owned a vineyard. It's a beautiful place about 20 minutes from Lisbon and 1.5 kilometers from the sea-shore in Carcavelos. It turned out the guy who was renting it had just quit; he asked if we wanted to go see it. We went to see it the next day and started renting it. That's the fourth wine we make.

So today we find ourselves making Carcavelos, Portalegre from three plots including a small parcel called Las Vedras and the Colares wines. It seems a bit confusing, but when you have all the wines in front of you it's quite simple.

So how did you learn to make wine?

That's very kind of you but I haven't learned yet! We try to make everything better each year. I always try to honestly explain that we are not winemakers. The guy I was originally going to have a partnership with, he's a winemaker. If you want to plant 100 hectares and make a thousand types of wines, he can do it. I cannot.

We do a very simple job in the cellar. We focus on farming as best we can. The wine makes itself. We hope to make it better and better each year. Everything is empirical; we've never studied oenology or viticulture. We visited as many cellars as possible, spoke to as many winemakers as possible.

Is everything being made in the same place now?

Last year we still made some wine in Lisbon and some wine in Portalegre. Our goal is to bring everything to Portalegre for the 2020 vintage, with the exception of Carcavelos because we want to make a DOP wine there. It's a fortified wine and to get the appellation it has to be made within it. So we will make the fortified wine in a municipality cellar there.

You currently live in the center of Lisbon right?

Yes.

Are you planning to move?

Our goal is to eventually move to Portalegre. But the kids need to be in school until they are 17 or 18. We may change our minds, but right now we want the boys to do the mandatory years of school in the city.

How far is Portalegre?

□Two and a half hours.

How do you manage your time between the city and the vineyards?

We are currently renting a house in Portalegre and are planning to buy it. We usually go on Thursday night and come back Monday morning. Sometimes I go during the week, Rita stays with the boys and joins me on the weekend. We split the time as reasonably as possible.

What about the vineyards that are further away?

We are farming the grapes in in Portalegre and Carcavelos. The one in Colares is farmed by a friend who's doing a great job. We come and pick the grapes.

Do you see any major shifts since you're working the vineyards full time?

We need to refurbish where we make wine to have the minimum dignity of calling it a cellar. That's in the books for 2020.

I always feel that a wine is not just one detail but a culmination of many small ones. There are many small things we want to pursue and do better and better. We're still putting some of our tanks outside in the street to ferment. We want everything inside the house. We want to have more control; moving it all to Portalegre is the point. We are now in a much better position to mobilize efficiently for harvest. These are small changes that will make a big difference.

You said earlier that the goal when you started was to make the opposite of what you were tasting at the time. Your wines are evidently much lower in alcohol and extraction than most Portuguese wines. What does that mean to you?

Lower alcohol is not our main goal. Alcohol is a consequence. We have old vines that produce very low yields of great grapes. The clones are not the ones planted with the intention of quantity and the very high sugar levels you get in Alentejo. It's not just about picking early. However picking time does make a major difference. Even in 2010 I was always the first guy to pick grapes. I remember

because once at dinner with one of my neighbors who also makes wine, he was astonished I was already harvesting. He was planning to start three weeks later. Now he's started picking earlier, and in fact we even overlapped on one of the days last year.

If you want to do a more "impressive", bigger wine you need more alcohol. We don't mind losing phenolic structure to preserve natural freshness. Everything was a reaction to what was happening ten years ago, the peak of "big wine". Everyone was trying to make the wines bigger and bigger.

I was having a conversation recently with a winemaking friend and he told me I was chasing trends by making low alcohol, low extraction wines. I told him he was totally wrong and here's why: I don't know any producer who brands his wines as "low alcohol". But I know a lot who tout 16 or 17% alcohol as being a positive quality. Some in the Douro proudly have 18% on the label and clearly made harvest choices to get the wine that high in alcohol. And I'm not talking about Port but dry table wines. That is chasing a fashion trend as far as I am concerned.

But at the end of the day these people have to exist and so do we. Our wines are fresher and lighter because they are a contrast to bigger, heavier wines. My wines are only considered light because something else much bigger exists. At the end of the day, we pursue what we want and what we like.

We never got around to it: can you explain the name Dominó?

Dominó is a very basic pun. In Burgundy you have *domaines* and in Bordeaux you have *châteaux*. My first love in wine, despite not being able to afford it, is Burgundy. So our little *domaine* was a dominó. Everyone liked the name so we kept it.