

BY PETER BRUL

**Young people from the cities are  
looking for a future in organic farming**

# Portugal

## A NEW SPIRIT IN ORGANIC FARMING



# ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES THAT MAINTAIN THE ECOLOGICAL INTEGRITY OF THE LANDSCAPE



MUSHROOMS GROWING UNDER THE OAK TREES



THE LOCAL BRANDY, AGUARDENTE DE MEDRONHO

Portugal, in the south-west of Europe, is a relatively small country, with an area of 92,000 km<sup>2</sup> and a population of 10.5 million. Mainland Portugal is split by its main river, the Tagus that flows from Spain to the Atlantic, near the capital, Lisbon. The northern landscape is mountainous towards the interior with several plateaus indented by river valleys, whereas the south, which includes the Algarve and the Alentejo regions, is characterized by rolling plains.

After Portugal joined the EU in 1986 it went through a period of transition. It had been a quite closed country some time. One of the effects was a “protected” agriculture, underdeveloped and lacking in innovation. Because the use of agricultural inputs was low, I was asked to look at the possibility of converting rice farming in the early nineties. But, at that time the price of conventional Portuguese rice was higher than that of organic rice on the

European market. During the past 25 years Europe’s agriculture has changed a lot. More than 450,000 farmers have stopped farming, and 180,000 hectares have been afforested or left uncultivated. In general, only the larger units have survived. As in so many other countries, the victims were mainly small farmers, who were not eligible for financial support and could not compete with those who are in a position



# IN SOME REGIONS, LIKE THE ALENTEJO, THERE ARE PROGRAMMES TO ENCOURAGE YOUNG FARMERS TO START UP IN BUSINESS

to regularly supply large quantities. Portugal is one of the world's largest producers of wine and cork. The main classifications of land use are arable land and permanent crops (2 million ha), permanent crops (0.7 million ha), permanent pasture (530.000), forest and woodland (3.6 million) and other land (2.3 million).

Twenty five years ago, there was hardly any organic farming in Portugal. In 1993 there were still only 73 organic producers. This figure rapidly grew to more than 1,500 in 2005 and more than 2,000 in 2011, with more than 200,000 hectares. Marketing is still a limiting factor for further conversion, either because domestic demand is still quite low, the distribution network is weak, or there is not enough information about export markets. The most important processed items are olive oil and wine. Both can be found in the big supermarkets and are also exported. The producers are generally small-scale, but some larger entities have been getting involved. Twelve percent of interviewed farmers produced an average of more than 20,000 hectolitres of wine per year. Some farms produce five times more, mainly for export. The Portuguese organic wine sector has developed in recent years with one product, *Herdade dos Lagos* from Mertola, winning a gold medal at Biofach 2011

**Agrobio** is one of the pioneering organic organizations in Portugal and has offered training for many years and continues to organize courses for advisors and farmers. It also organizes conferences, at least once a year, involving Portuguese

and foreign experts. It publishes a bulletin for farmers (Infobio) and a magazine (*A Joanhinha*, "the Ladybug"). The Agriculture University offers some courses on organic farming. There are always many applicants for these courses, which are obligatory for those wishing to become organic farmers.

Young people are looking for new alternatives. For several years Portugal has been suffering a heavy economic recession. This has created high unemployment and reduced the opportunities for young people to get a decent, well paid, more or less secure, or interesting jobs. Some young people in the big cities, such as Lisbon and Porto, are becoming interested in (organic) farming. Some of their families still have land in the countryside, that is hardly used or has an extensive, almost no-input 'management' in olives, cork or eucalyptus trees.

**In some regions**, like the Alentejo, there are programmes to encourage young farmers to start up in business. One joint EU-Portuguese programme is being managed by ADPM, a rural development organization, based in Mertola in the Alentejo. The typical landscape of the Alentejo is called the *montado*. It is dominated by parkland-like woodlands, with strawberry trees, cork oak and several local species of oaks, rarely found elsewhere, together with a great diversity of herbs and shrubs. This landscape is grazed by local breeds of cows and black pigs scurry under the trees, feeding on the acorns. This is the world's main cork producing region and

the unique landscape is under pressure, because the cork is harvested just once every 15 years and this does not provide enough income. Some farms are abandoned. Alternatives, such as large scale olive tree or eucalyptus plantations, or cereal production, pose a big threat to the regional biodiversity.

**The goal of ADPM** is to stimulate economic activities that maintain the ecological integrity of the landscape. They have a strong focus on organic farming, and promoting the economically viable and ecologically sound use of the area's natural parks. They promote activities such as harvesting cork and the fruits of the strawberry tree, collecting herbs and mushrooms and eco-tourism, activities that they believe are better suited to maintaining the character of the region. In one of the projects, around 25 young farmers have been trained in herb production, with plans to train further groups. This group is now producing a range of mainly Mediterranean herbs, as well as some typical local varieties, which you can only find there. One example is green lavender, an endemic plant with a good potential of being developed as a drug ingredient with antifungal properties. Studies are under way to explore the diversity of herbs in this unique territory and how they might be commercially exploited. One important crop in the ecology of the maintenance of the landscape is *cistus labdanifer*, which is used to produce *labdanum*, an alternative for ambergris in natural cosmetics. The herb growers work together and learn from each other. All of them have drying facilities, and three producers have equipment for distilling essential oils. So the herbs are processed on the farm, immediately after the harvest to achieve the best quality.

The strawberry tree is an important element in this unique landscape. In combination with the oak trees it helps



HERB  
PRODUCTION AND  
PROCESSING



THE MONTADO  
OFFERS A GREAT  
DIVERSITY OF  
HERBS, RICH IN  
ESSENTIAL OILS



provide a perfect environment for a wide range of species like rhododendron, wax myrtle, gum cistus, medicinal herbs and edible mushrooms, and many rare animal species. The fruit of the tree is harvested in October and November and is traditionally used to produce a brandy, called Aquardente de Medronho. There is a certified organic medronho made from fruits collected by local farmers. Harvesting is done by hand and processing is on a small scale, without using any additives, in order to achieve a perfect flavour. The

Portuguese producers from the ADPM programme and Agrobio members from other regions in Portugal will be running two joint booths at Biofach this year where they will be showing their wine, olive oil, mushrooms, honey and herbs, and serving tasters of Aquardente de Medronho. ■

One joint EU-Portuguese programme is PROVERE, focused on the rural development of Portugal. Various public and private actors of Alentejo are participating in a Regional Collective Efficiency Strategy led by the Municipality of Almodôvar and coordinated by ADPM for the sustainable exploitation of wild resources.