



WINE ENTHUSIAST[®]

MAGAZINE

MALBEC

THE LUSTY BIG RED
FROM AROUND
THE WORLD

PORTUGAL
DISCOVERED:
PRIMER ON
WINES

CALIFORNIA'S
HOTSPOT
COOL
WHITE WINES







FROM THE **EDGE** OF **EUROPE**

PORTUGAL'S NATIVE
GRAPES FORM
LARGER-THAN-LIFE
WINES LIKE NO
OTHERS.

BY ROGER VOSS

Portugal's grape varieties are its blessing—and its curse. They are impossible to pronounce, hard to remember and have the added confusion of changing names depending on which region of the country they are planted in.

But these are minor inconveniences when set against the wonderful, wild set of flavors that flow from these grapes. They are larger than life. The reds are powerful and spicy, smoothly elegant or hugely tannic. The whites range from fresh and crisp to creamy and from tropical fruit flavors to lychees and spice.

There is nothing reticent or shy about these varieties. They contrast with the often-melancholic streak in the Portuguese who still lament in song their past greatness and the loneliness of the long-distance sea voyage.

Portugal sticks firmly to its native grapes. Of course, Chardonnay, Syrah, Cabernet Sauvignon and others on the international circuit are planted. But they show no sign of displacing Touriga Nacional, Aragonês, Trincadeira, Antão Vaz or Alvarinho. Maybe this makes Portuguese wines more challenging to discover. But wasn't the same said about Italian varieties once upon a time? Yet, we now better understand the Chianti blend thanks to knowing the taste of Sangiovese.

Wines in Portugal are more about blending than about single-varietal wines. This is as much a guide to the tastes and flavors that can go into blends as it is to individual varietal flavors. To get a feel for these fantastic tastes from a country that has moved from the 19th to the 21st century in a few decades is to discover a whole new and exciting category of wine.

Reds

Baga (BAH-gah)

Big, tough, tannic and sometimes as hard as nails when it's young, this is a grape that needs years to develop its full potential. The growers in coastal Bairrada and the Beiras must sometimes curse the fact that the Baga is their local grape.

But worked gently and properly, the Baga yields great flavors and complexity. These are wines with deep color, powerful structure and dark tannins. The aroma starts out with berry fruit, developing into a heady mix of purple plum, tobacco and coffee.

That's in the hot years. But in cooler years, the astringency from the small, dark, thick-skinned berries never totally disappears. So vintages are important with Baga-based wines. Baga's idiosyncrasies are increasingly masked in blends, using either international grape varieties or Touriga Nacional to boost the richness and soften out the astringency. Taste a silky red from the master of Baga, Luis Pato, to discover its true potential.

Verdict: High quality when handled correctly, but a tough grape to grow.

Castelão (cast-EL-ow)

Castelão is probably Portugal's most widely planted grape variety. It makes juicy, red berry-flavored wines in a Beaujolais style. When aged in wood, it can also produce more serious wines, with meaty, intense flavors, cedar and raspberry. Castelão makes elegant wines that repay some aging.

Originally it was also called Periquita, and it still is occasionally in the Alentejo. That name has now mainly gone, found only in a major branded wine from top Setúbal producer, José Maria da Fonseca.

The disadvantage of Castelão outside Setúbal is that it ripens late: no

problem in hot years but a big disadvantage in cooler seasons. Producers therefore either blend it with other grapes, notably Syrah, Tannat and Touriga Nacional, or replace it with more reliable varieties.

Verdict: Medium to occasional high quality. Needs warm sites to ripen properly.

Tinta Roriz/Aragonês (TEEN-tah ROHR-reesh)/ (ara-GONE-esh)

Spanish wine lovers know this dual-named grape as Tempranillo. For Portuguese wines, it is Tinta Roriz in northern Portugal; Aragonês or Aragonéz (a reference to Aragon in Spain) in the Alentejo.

Although it is also used in Port, Tinta Roriz has really come into its own as Douro table wines have developed. Some of the region's finest wines, such as Barca Velha and Quinta do Vale Meão, use a large proportion in their blends. Enjoying the hot schist soil of the Douro, it creates structured wine, aged in wood, with black plums, blackberries and firm tannins. It is less smooth than its Spanish parent and certainly more robust.

Just further south, in the granite Dão, Tinta Roriz offers, depending on the winemaking, either big, juicy open wines or wines that have some of the mineral austerity of the granite soil.

Tinta Roriz's third home—its place in the sun—is in the hot, dry Alentejo. Here, fruit is to the fore—black figs, red berries—backed by sweet acidity. In top blends such as Herdade de Malhadinha Nova, it offers sophistication and structure as well as those delicious fruits.

Verdict: Top quality. A great table wine grape in the Douro; elegant and fruity in Alentejo.

Touriga Franca (toh-REE-ga FRAN-ka)

Touriga Franca would still be known by its old name, Touriga Francesa, were it not that the French objected and complained to the European Commission. The result? France 1, Portugal 0. So Franca it is.

What hasn't changed is that Touriga Franca produces wonderful, velvet, fragrant wines in the Douro. Though no relation, think of it as the Cabernet Franc to Touriga Nacional's Cabernet Sauvignon. It is soft and not hugely concentrated but a charming, delicious variety on its own.

Verdict: High quality. A fragrant partner in Douro wine and Port blends.

Touriga Nacional (toh-REE-gah NAH-see-yah-NAHL)

This is the variety that has almost made its way out of Portugal and into the international arena. With its dark color, aromas of raspberries, herbs and licorice and black currant and dark plum flavors, it truly is a major and classic variety.

Yet in the Douro, its homeland, it still represents under five percent of the plantings. It is hard to grow, with great foliage but low yields. Only as vineyard-specific sites have been identified in the past 20 years have plantings in the Douro taken off.

While there are occasional Douro wine labeled as Touriga Nacional, it is better as a blend. Much like Cabernet Sauvignon needs its Merlot. Touriga Nacional's partners are other

A CASE OF GRAPES

Here are some top-rated wines made from the grapes discussed in this article. Issue dates are in parentheses, and full reviews can be found in our online Buying Guide. www.wineenthusiast.com/mag

REDS

91 Quinta do Crasto 2004 Touriga Nacional (Douro); \$100. Cellar Selection. Imported by Broadbent Selections. —R.V. (9/07)

89 Casal dos Jordões 2003 Touriga Franca (Douro); \$NA. Imported by Organic Vintners. (3/06)

89 Cortes de Cima 2004 Aragonês (Alentejo); \$NA. Imported by Tri-vin Imports. (12/15/07)

88 J Portugal Ramos 2007 Vila Santa Trincadeira (Alentejo); \$20. Imported by Winebow. (11/08)

87 José Maria da Fonseca 2004 Periquita Reserva (Terras do Sado); \$23. Imported by Palm Bay International. (4/08)

87 Luis Pato 2003 Casta Baga (Beiras); \$9. Best Buy. Imported by Aidil Wines and Liquor Inc. (11/15/06)

WHITES

93 Cartuxa 2005 Pêra-Manca (Alentejo); \$NA. Editors' Choice. Imported by Tri-vin.

92 Quinta do Ameal 2004 Escolha (Minho); \$25. Editors' Choice. Imported by European Cellars. (7/08)

91 Anselmo Mendes 2005 Muros Antigos (Vinho Verde); \$16. Editors' Choice. Imported by Aidil Wines & Liquor Inc. (7/06)

90 Quinta dos Roques 2003 Encruzado (Dão); \$18. Imported by Wine-Worth LLC. (8/05)

89 Casa Santos Lima 2006 Fernão Pires (Estremadura); \$NA. Imported by Tri-vin Imports. (12/15/07)

87 Companhia das Quintas 2007 Prova Régia (Bucelas); \$10. Best Buy. Imported by Aidil Wines and Liquor Inc. (11/08)



Douro grapes, notably Touriga Franca and Tinta Roriz. On its own, it can be one-dimensional, all perfume and posing. In a blend, even as the major proportion, its structure and its vivid fruit flavors shine.

Further south, in the Dão, its other traditional home, the character of Touriga Nacional changes, producing wines that are less perfumed, more structured and more solid. It is also now found in the Alentejo, the Ribatejo and Estremadura.

Verdict: The highest quality. It is a truly world-class variety.

Trincadeira (trink-ah-DEER-uh)

With its big, beefy, dark flavors of black plums, figs and spice, there is nothing shy about Trincadeira. Its rich, balanced, spicy wines are best in the Alentejo and the neighboring Ribatejo. These Trincadeiras are among the most New World in style of Portugal's reds.

Trincadeira likes heat and dryness. It survives even the hottest conditions in the southern Alentejo region of Baja. It thrives in the upper Douro where its name has morphed into Tinta Amarela. Here it is, surprisingly, much more elegant, especially when it appears as an element of a Port blend.

Verdict: Medium to high quality. Beefy wines, sometimes better tamed in a blend.

Whites

Alvarinho (al-vah-REEN-yoh)

From the Portuguese side of the Minho river, you can stand in vineyards of Alvarinho in Vinho Verde and see Spanish vineyards of Albariño in Rias Baixas. They are that close.

And yet they are very different. Portugal's Alvarinho is fresher and crisper than Spanish Albariño. With its floral, fruity aromas and flavors

of crisp grapefruit and mint, this is true Vinho Verde style. Its uplifting spritz combines with just enough richness to produce top-quality wines. There is a taste profile link with Riesling, with the same minerality and reflection of the terroir.

Generally bottled on its own, rather than in the blend favored in much of the rest of Vinho Verde, Alvarinho is the sought-after wine, the one every producer likes to boast about on the label.

Verdict: Top quality grape that has shown the way to a new confidence in Vinho Verde.

Antão Vaz (an-TOWNG-vash)

Antão Vaz is the Chardonnay of Portugal; the grape that lends itself to wood aging. Its creamy, rich flavors are full and rounded with light acidity and green stone fruits and, just like Chardonnay in Burgundy, there is a fine sense of minerality from its terroir. It can be fresh and fruity, but can also be more complex when winemakers use barrel fermentation and lees stirring to give extra richness.

Winemakers now regularly make it the heart of their white wine blend, often with Arinto, sometimes even with Chardonnay.

Verdict: At the forefront of the new generation of classy whites from the Alentejo.

Arinto (ah-RINH-toh)

If you need acidity in wines from the hot south and center of Portugal, look to Arinto. It is ultra-crisp, with apple and grapefruit and lifted green fruit flavors. Sometimes the acidity gets too exuberant and winemakers put it in wood to round it out and soften the green character.

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Its home is Bucelas, a district just north of Lisbon. This DOC is the center of Portugal's sparkling wine industry. Arinto is on hand as the perfect crisply acidic base. It is also yet another of the white grapes of Vinho Verde, where it is called Padernã. In Dão, it appears as Cerceal.

Verdict: Medium quality grape, a great base for sparkling wines.

Encruzado (ehh-kroo-ZAH-doh)

It may be little known, but Portuguese winemakers regard Encruzado as one of the great white varieties. Its flavors and aromas range from apricots and nectarines to golden raisins, green plums and citrus. Its wines are increasingly wood-aged, bringing out a nutty, vanilla character and in the best examples, a rich and creamy texture.

Encruzado is still relatively rare, even in its home territory of the Dão, where it thrives in the arid, granite vineyards. Quinta dos Roques produces a 100-percent Encruzado.

Verdict: High quality. Makes great, rich, wood-aged wines.

Fernão Pires (fer-nowng-PEER-esh)

Fernão Pires is the most widely planted white grape in southern and central Portugal. With characteristics that are reminiscent of lightly spicy Gewürztraminer; flavors of lychees with some citrus; and a happy ability to make dry, off-dry and even sparkling wines (when picked early), it is small wonder that Fernão Pires has spread from its home base in Ribatejo and Estremadura.

It is found in the Setúbal peninsula south of Lisbon, as the base for sparkling wine in Bairrada (where it has acquired a feminine name and become Maria Gomes), and inland in the Beiras of central Portugal.

Modern winemaking techniques, preserving the aromatic character of the grapes, has certainly enhanced the popularity of Fernão Pires. There are a few single varietal Fernão Pires wines. Most producers like to blend it with other southern varietals, Arinto and Bical being the most popular.

Verdict: Medium quality, but popular as a variety that gives spice to a blend.

Loureiro (low-REHR-roh)

Loureiro is the second great quality grape of Vinho Verde, a worthy partner to Alvarinho. It has a distinctive aromatic quality, sometimes likened to Moscatel, with freshness, acidity and flavors of lemon, orange zest and peach. It is lighter and more acidic than Alvarinho, making it a classic summertime apéritif.

Loureiro is often blended. Its favored partner is Trajadura, a grape that adds weight and fills out the wine. But even here, the musky, grapy character of Loureiro will shine through.

Verdict: Very good quality, aromatic. **MF**