



Portuguese wine

A short history of the Portuguese wine.

The wines of Portugal are a legacy inherited from the Romans, subsequently nurtured and developed by the Portuguese. For centuries, vineyards have flourished throughout the country, covering 9811,400 acres, with an average annual production of 112 million cases. Despite its small area, Portugal rates sixth in the world as a wine-producing country, wine production has been encouraged since the early kings, and records show exports dating back to 1367. Today, this industry employs 25% of the working agricultural population. Having been eclipsed by Port Wine for over 300 years, red and white wines are currently undergoing a major revival, due not only to investment in modern techniques and technology, including stainless steel and controlled fermentation, but also to the new generation of innovative winemakers.

The main organization responsible for the promotion and sales of these new premium wines is the G7, a group of the seven leading Portuguese wine producers. They represent a wide range of leading wine -producing regions: Vinho Verde, Bairrada, Peninsula de Setubal, Douro, Dao, and Alentejo. This group has worked together since 1993, increasing awareness and sales of Portuguese wines throughout the world, through the introduction of varietals, brands and winemakers to export markets. In a remarkably short period of time, their efforts are paying off, as consumers realize that Portugal is a producer of premium wines. The members are: Caves Alianca Caves Messias, Herdade do Esporao (Finagra), J.P. Vinhos, Jose Maria da Fonseca, Quinta da Aveleda and Sogrape Vinhos de Portugal. The current President is Paulo Amorim, Marketing & Sales Director of Aveleda.

Today, Portuguese wines can compete with wines from all other major wine-producing countries, and are being appreciated as wonderful wines for food with a great price/value ratio. Based on both indigenous Portuguese and international varietals, they offer a new world of sensory experiences.

The regions are classified, as they are in many other European wine-producing nations, so that appropriate regulations may be laid down. The main regions are referred to as Denominação de Origem Controlada (DOC).

Portugal's wine regions.

In looking at Portugal's wine regions, it's helpful to split the country in two, by drawing a line about a third of the way down. This separates the northern regions of the Douro, Dão and Bairrada, and the central and southern regions of the Alentejo, Ribatejo and Estremadura. As a useful generalization, the future for the northern regions lies in focusing on high-quality, top-end 'terroir' wines, while the strength of the southern and central regions is their ability to produce full flavoured red wines in large quantities and at affordable prices: new world-style wines with a Portuguese twist.



Portuguese wine - North.

*** The Douro.**

In a relatively short period of time the Douro has established itself as Portugal's premium wine region. It's hard to overstate the scale and pace of change that is currently taking place in this most spectacular of wine regions. The steeply terraced vineyards contain some wonderful terroirs, but because of the economic dominance of the Port trade it is only recently that these have been widely exploited to produce premium wines. Table wine has always been made here but, with a couple of notable exceptions (the legendary Barca Velha and more recently Duas Quintas Reserva and Quinta do Côtto Grande Eschola), it has been grim stuff, usually badly made from low quality grapes that were surplus to the requirements of Port producers.

Various factors have conspired to change this situation. Most importantly, a critical mass of like-minded winemakers has emerged, passionate about making the very best wines that these remarkable terroirs are capable of.

In particular, Dirk Niepoort has been a key player in recent developments in the region. As well as producing some brilliantly expressive Douro wines himself, he's been acting as a catalyst by encouraging the leading wine producers to get together and spur each other on to greater things. There's still very much of a pioneering air here, with many of the new premium wines in only their first or second vintage. One encouraging trend is that while the quality is uniformly pretty high, there are a variety of different styles emerging, all of which still hold true to their Douro origins. Significant names here include Niepoort's Redoma, Batuta and Charme, newcomers Poeira and Pintas, Vallado, Vale D. Maria, Vale Meão, Gouvyas, Crasto, and Chryseia.

The momentum generated by the Douro table wine revolution has led some of the Port shippers to start taking a greater interest in table wines. This is leading to improvements across the board, even with some of the more commercial wines. Having said this, the Douro is unlikely to ever be a plentiful source of cheap wine: with its high labour costs and low yields, this is an expensive place to work, and its future almost certainly lies at the top end of the market.

The Douro is not known for its white wine. The one notable exception is Dirk Niepoort's stunning Redoma Branco (which comes in both regular and reserva bottlings), fashioned from ancient vines in cooler microclimates at the top of the slopes

*** Bairrada.**

Unusually for Portugal, Bairrada is a region dominated by just one grape, the often-maligned Baga. 80% of wines from this region are red, and almost all of these are made from Baga. It is thick-skinned, high in acidity and pretty tannic. Combine this with the common practice of leaving the stems in the fermentation vat, and it has the potential to make tough, challenging wines. But while many of the wines made from Baga are overly astringent, the fact that some winemakers do great things with it suggests that the blame lies at the door of the less competent producers rather than the grape.

This is the region of the smallholder. There are a staggering 4700 registered growers, and the average plot size is a tiny 0.2 ha. Most sell their grapes to the cooperatives that dominate the region's production. But some estimate of the potential of this region for quality wines can be gained from the observation that more than two-thirds of the vineyards here are over 50 years old.



Notable quality producers include Casa de Saima, Luis Pato, Quinta das Bageiras and Quinta do Baixo. In terms of size, the biggest producer in Bairrada is Caves Aliança, based at Sangalhos, although most of their wines are made from grapes grown outside the region.

Although Bairrada is mainly about red wines, there attractive sparkling whites are a bit of a specialty here, and I've had the odd good still white wine, too.

* **Dão.**

Dão reds have changed beyond all recognition over the last decade. Until 1990 production was dominated by underperforming cooperatives and the resulting wines were usually tough, tannic and unlovely. Since then there has been massive improvement, and while there's still some mediocre wine made here, the overall standard has been raised. Like Bairrada, though, the fragmentation of vineyard holdings has been a hindrance to progress.

Located inland, the Dão has cold wet winters but mild, dry summers. The granitic-soiled vineyards are at altitude, resulting in ripe grapes with good acidity, and the potential for elegant, expressive red wines. I think of it as Portugal's Burgundy.

Of the smaller producers, there are three names that frequently crop up. Quinta dos Roques makes a serious range of varietals wines (including some good whites from Malvasia and Encruzado), together with a complex reserva. Quinta das Maias shares the same wine making team, but with elevated vineyards makes wines that are a little lighter but perhaps more elegant – in particular, the new black label reserva is impressive. Quintas do Pellada and Das Saes also share a winemaker, and these wines are slightly more traditional but highly acclaimed.

Sogrape, Portugal's biggest wine company has been doing good work in this region. Typically of forward-thinking Portuguese producers, they are far advanced in the process of reinventing themselves as a thoroughly modern producer making wines that the export markets want. Marketing Director Miguel Oliveira Pinto says that Sogrape have made a conscious decision to change the style of their wines to appeal more to international tastes, with their range adjusted 'to fit the international palate'. According to Oliveira Pinto, 'the reds now show more up-front fruit and better integrated oak'. As well as producing a premium-priced modern interpretations of Dão at Quinta dos Carvalhais, they also make large quantities of the reliable but inexpensive Duque de Viseu, partly from bought in grapes where they have been working to help small farmers improve their viticulture.

Another large company active here is Vinhos Borges. They have raised the quality of their slightly plonkish co-op brand, Meia Encosta, and have recently added a new range of estate-bottled varietals wines from their Quinta da Aqueira. These are fairly classy, modern wines with elegant fruit and well-judged use of new oak. If you get the chance, try the wines of Dão Sul, a dynamic company who have established joint ventures with a number of single estates in Dão, and latterly Douro, Bairrada and Estremadura. The concept is to produce single Quinta wines which are all bottled at one place and then marketed by the same team.

* **Vinho Verde.**

Vinho Verde has red and white wines which can offer some pleasant drinking from quality minded producers. Most offerings, however, are dire, so choose carefully. The wine has a slight spritz which was once due to a slight secondary refermentation, but unfortunately in modern times this is much more likely to be carbon dioxide added just before bottling.



* Port wine.

The table wines of Portugal are frequently very good value, with a smattering of producers that are turning out excellent wines. The fortified wines of the Douro are, however, unrivalled. They are much imitated, with similar styles emanating from the southern vineyards of France, California and Australia, but they are never equalled, and certainly not bettered.

Port is basically wine fortified with brandy spirit. This is added prior to the natural cessation of fermentation, so the wine is always sweet, as the addition of the strong alcohol kills the yeast converting the sugar into alcohol (the process of fermentation). The eventual alcohol content is still high, however (typically 20%), thanks to the brandy that has been added. Most Port is red, although some firms also produce a small amount of white Port.

Since the 18th century there has been a strong British presence in the Douro, as this was where British drinkers sourced their wines following the deterioration in relations between Britain and France at this time. The firm red wines of the region were bolstered up and protected with brandy before the sea journey north, and thus Port as a wine style was born. Or so the story goes.

Styles of Port.

Vintage Port: Port vintages are declared depending on the quality of the vintage, some houses declaring much more frequently than others. In general, though, a vintage is declared about three times each decade. A declared vintage means that the Port house feels the wine is of the necessary quality to age well in bottle. The wines see up to two years in oak, but then do the rest of their ageing in the bottle. They may need upwards of fifteen years before they are ready, and may last for decades more. This is the finest quality level of Port.

Single Quinta Port: Most houses have quintas (vineyards) where they source their best fruit. In non-declared years they will release the wine from the quinta as a single quinta wine. These wines can be excellent value, frequently close to vintage quality.

Late Bottled Vintage Port: Good Port houses still produce good LBV wines. Such wines have been aged in wood for longer than Vintage Port, four years in total, or five years for a Traditional LBV. This prolonged ageing results in a wine ready to drink at a younger age.

Tawny Port: Wine aged in oak for a long time, resulting in a tawny colour. The age will be stated on the label, frequently ten or twenty years, less often thirty or even forty years.

White Port: A heavy aperitif wine, varying in style, often with a hint of oxidation.

Other styles: Ruby is a young and simple style. Vintage Character is a Port blended to resemble a vintage wine (often unsuccessfully in my opinion), and Crusted Port is a blend of several Vintage Character Ports.



Portuguese wine - South.

* **Alentejo.**

The Alentejo has led the way in Portugal's wine revolution. It's a region that has enjoyed tremendous success over the last decade, producing red wines in two distinctive styles. On the one hand, there is the traditional Alentejo style. This is typified by José Maria da Fonseca's José de Sousa, part of which is fermented in clay pots, and which displays leathery, herby, sweet-spice complexity. Another traditional style producer is Cartuxa (from Evora), best known for the brilliant but unusual cult wine Pera Manca. On the other hand, there is the modern, fruit-forward, almost new-world style that has been such a huge commercial success and which has propelled this region forward so fast.

The Alentejo is huge, with its flat plains covering almost a third of the country. Much of this area is given over to cereal production. It's also hot, and irrigation is common. In contrast to the northern regions, with their fragmented smallholdings, production is dominated by large, professional outfits.

Two of Portugal's most high-profile winemakers have been key in developing the reputation of Alentejo wines. First, João Portugal Ramos celebrated consultant winemaker and now with his own estate at Estremoz he makes impressive yet still-affordable red wines that successfully combine ripe, concentrated fruit flavours with carefully managed oak. The second is David Baverstock at Esporão, who also consults for a number of estates in the Douro. Ramos and Baverstock have concentrated on local grape varieties, but in recent vintages both have been making a Syrah, the only foreign grape to so far to have made much of an inroad into the region. The great success of the Alentejo has been in making thoroughly modern, concentrated wines that still retain a distinctly Portuguese character. Demand exceeds supply here, and large companies such as Caves Aliança and Sogrape have invested in the region. Other names to watch out for include Cortes de Cima and Mouchão.

* **Ribatejo.**

For a long time the provider of bulk wine, the Ribatejo is now emerging as an exciting source of modern-styled commercially astute red wines. The fertile alluvial soils on the banks of the river Tagus produce soft-textured, ripe, drinkable reds in the sorts of quantities and at the price points that excite supermarket buyers. Further up, on the stonier soils more serious wines can be made. Unlike most other Portuguese regions, foreign varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot are quite common here, and seem to do well. João Ramos has a thriving venture here under the name of Falua, which makes half a million cases a year and is soon to be relaunched under the label of João Portugal Ramos Ribatejo. Ramos' ex-deputy, Rui Reguinga, is another high-profile winemaker who consults for a number of producers in the region, including Quinta do Lagoalva, a large estate owned by the Campilho family. The future looks relatively bright for the Ribatejo.

* **Estremadura.**

A long, thin region running up the Atlantic coast from Lisbon, Estremadura has struggled in the past as a producer of bulk wine from tired cooperatives. While the region is still quite a mixed bag, there are some impressive wines emerging at both the quality and volume ends of the market. As in the Ribatejo, it's not uncommon to find international grape varieties planted here. The dominant figure in Estremadura is winemaker José Neiva, of DFJ Vinhos. Dubbed the João Ramos of central Portugal, his company makes a broad range of overtly commercial red wines characterised by their ripe, accessible fruit, lush textures and good concentration, all at very affordable prices. Neiva is quite open about the interventionist winemaking techniques that he uses to wring every drop of flavour from his grapes. Some appealing fruity whites are also made here.



Map.

