

Varieties **PORTUGUESE GRAPE VARIETIES**

For the most part Portuguese grape growers have wisely resisted the impulse to plant “foreign” grape varieties and instead have gone forward with making wines that are uniquely regional. So at a time when critics complain that wines from throughout the world are beginning to taste similar, Portugal’s commitment to native varieties means that it continues to make indigenous styles of wine. This means that although winemakers may be fermenting and aging wines in the same manner that their colleagues elsewhere have been doing for some time. Unique conditions and historic grape varieties insure that Portuguese wines will remain distinctively different. The future is very bright, but even today, after only a brief time of orientation to the world market, Portugal is producing some of the world’s most exciting wines, especially when the concept of “value” factors into the equation, as it always must do in assessing any commercial product.



Throughout the country better varieties are being planted in more suitable soils and growing conditions. There is a new generation of winemaker eager to discover the quality potential of their properties. The awareness has dawned that the best wine originates in the vineyard. Along with this spirit, a trend has developed to produce varietal wines from native grapes that constitutes one of the most interesting aspects of the current Portuguese wine scene. Quantities are miniscule but the wines have developed a devoted following on the domestic market. Unfortunately few are yet available for export.

white WHITE VARIETALS

ALVARINHO: An aromatic varietal (acacia flowers, apple, honey) this grape produces outstanding white wines in a small sub-region of the Vinho Verde DO around Melgaço and Monção. It also lends weight and perfume to blended Vinho Verdes from this area. Growing in small bunches and producing unusually low yields, Alvarinho makes a concentrated white wine with a delicate aroma, but full rich texture. Flavors tend to the mineral, green apple and citrus range. Some of the more interesting wines are aged in wood, to augment richness and aroma. Incidentally this is the same grape grown across the Spanish border in the Galician DOC of Rias Baixas.

ARINTO: This thick-skinned white grape features an interesting combination of firm although unaggressive acids, and a soft round texture. It's rather minerally in aroma, with hints of apple, citrus and vegetable, but quite understated and mild. Many producers use extensive lees aging and/or pre-fermentation skin contact, to bring up more intense fragrances, but the effect is still low key and pleasant rather than sharply distinctive. The excitement is on the palate, chiefly the tension between Arinto's creamy texture and persistent fruit acidity. Winemakers are also blending Chardonnay with Arinto. If the yields are low and the wine is treated seriously, we feel the grape has potential to produce a wine of strong personality, along the lines of a Sauvignon Blanc, but perhaps without the latter grape's extremes of vegetal flavor and aroma. Known as Pedrena in the Vinho Verde area.

ENCRUZADO: A prestigious white grape grown in the Dão with, what seems to us, fine quality potential. The few varietal examples we tasted were made with extended skin contact before fermentation to increase aroma and flavor. The grape is highly perfumed, with an interesting combination of apricot, pear, green citrus fruits, light spices and aromatic herbs. Encruzado has a potentially very fine and interesting "terroir" expression, with earthy spicy nuances and hints of vegetation and anise underlying the soft apple like fruit. Extract levels are strong and well balanced with firm though fine-grained acids.

LOUREIRO: Thin-skinned varietal that makes a Vinho Verde characterized by its floral aromas and mineral-like flavor.

MARIA GOMES: The predominant white grape in the Bairrada. Elsewhere in Portugal it's known as Fernao Pires. A tendency to herbal, foresty scents. moderate acidity and soft textures. There are spicy accents if the yields are kept in check.

MUSCAT: Highly aromatic variety grown primarily on the Setubal peninsula, south of Lisbon.

TRAJADURA: Thin-skinned early harvested varietal which comprises Vinho Verde. Delicately aromatic, steely and light on the palate, with lemony appley fruit flavors.

red RED VARIETALS

ALFROCHEIRO PRETO: An early harvested red grape grown in the north, this varietal produces wine with spicy, anise, floral, minty aromas that are highly developed and interesting. The wines unfortunately also show strong, sometimes abrasive levels of cherry-like acidity. The examples of pure Alfrocheiro Preto that we tasted were lively and vibrant, but not of great interest because of what we perceived as extremely sour flavors.

BAGA: Synonymous with the Bairrada region, this strong, slightly rustic and tannic red is capable of producing full-flavored, ageworthy red wine. Baga is described as a capricious grape, in the manner of Pinot Noir, and ripening is not always reliable. Like Pinot it is subject to viral diseases and rot. Even in Bairrada, it has detractors, who complain about its great sensitivity to rot and mildew. There is generally an ideal harvest only once every 2 or 3 years. Many of the wines made from this somewhat controversial grape taste to us to be in a Rhone-like style: slightly peppery, savory, herbal scented and berry-like. Not a varietal to look to for finesse, perhaps, Baga produces promising raw material for aging or drinking with hearty meat dishes.

CASTELÃO: The name used for Periquita outside of Alentejo. Although it is also known as Castelão Frances, the official name for the grape is now Castelão.

PERIQUITA: This grape variety produces a vinous, cherry-scented wine of soft, ripe fruit, medium color and relatively low acids and tannins. It has redder fruit accents, but in profile and texture many of the pure Periquita-based wines we tasted reminded us of Merlot, or at least of the reason Merlot is so popular: the wines are neither harsh nor biting and they have uncomplicated, pleasant soft fruit flavors. This is not a noble grape, by any means, but it has the potential to produce very nice drinkable wine. It's actually known as Periquita only in the Alentejo; there are substantial plantings on the Setubal Peninsula, particularly in Palmela.

TINTA BAROCCA: A noble Port varietal that also grows in neighboring regions, Tinta Barocca is relatively thin-skinned and therefore does not do well in the extremely hot, dry Douro Superior, where it tends to raisin, but is ideal for cultivation in the cooler Cima Corgo. Barocca generally makes wine with strong alcohol levels, moderate tannins, and low acidity.

TINTA CÃO: One of the noble Port Varietals, Tinta Cao makes a wine of sparse yields, but rich flavors.

TINTA RORIZ: This is the name used in the Douro and Dao, for Tempranillo, Spain's premier red varietal. On the schistous soils of these regions it produces full-bodied intense wines. It's called Aragones in Alentejo, where it's the most widely planted red variety, as well as other parts of southern Portugal. Although most Tinta Roriz is blended, some of Portugal's top estates are making a wondrous varietal wine from it, beautifully aromatic with smoky tobacco notes, herbal fruit accents, hints of cocoa, molasses and caramel. The texture can be positively silky. This is superstar material, particularly when the winemakers harvest from low yielding vineyards that build extra concentration into the wines. Very encouraging.

TOURIGA FRANCESA: This variety matures earlier than the fuller-bodied Touriga Nacional, to which it is related. The yield is a bit heavier as well. The grape produces an aromatic, herbal and tobacco-scented wine that lends grace and nuance to blends where the heartier Nacional predominates.

TOURIGA NAÇIONAL: This is generally regarded as the noblest Portuguese varietal. It is a very vigorous vine grown in the Douro and Dão and known to connoisseurs as the primary constituent of the greatest Port wines. It is also planted as far south as the Ribatejo. To reduce the vine's vigor, quality-oriented producers are training it on single Guyot canes, a system which is rare in Portugal. Recently single varietal mono casta wines are being made from Touriga Nacional, many of which are outstanding and among the most pure in character in all Portugal. Concentration levels vary greatly depending on yield. The top wines show fine positive aromas: leafy, oily, cassis- and anise- accented, with suggestions of pepper. There are smoky campfire notes and meaty aromas in some of the wines as well.

Touriga produces wine with soft creamy supple textures, but always with an edge of vegetal oily fruit echoing some of its signature aromas. The grape obviously shows great potential for very intense black fruit extracts and the tannins are strong but, if well managed, also supple.

It also makes a wine that is opaque in color. Winemakers sense that they are onto something potentially big here. No less an authority than Jancis Robinson concurs, as is evidenced in her recent comment that "I am left in no doubt whatsoever about the innate quality of Touriga Nacional for table wines, almost wherever it is grown." (Jancis Robinson, *Jancis Robinson Tastes the Best Portuguese Table Wines*, Lisbon, 1999) Most Touriga is vinified as part of a blend where it adds richness, complexity and structure. With age Touriga Nacional-based wines can develop floral and cedary overtones.

TRINCADEIRA: The name in the south, particularly Alentejo, for the Port variety Tinta Amarela. The grapes typically get very ripe with high degrees of sugar and the wine can be undistinguished, although richly fruity if yields are restrained.

terms PORTUGUESE WINE TERMS

ADEGA: A wine-making facility. “Adega Cooperativa” is a cooperative wine cellar purchasing grapes from small farmers which is generally financed by government loans.

AGUARDENTE: Grape spirit or brandy. Used in the production of fortified wines, such as Port and Madeira.

BARRICA: A 225 liter oak barrel used in the aging of top quality red and white wine.

BRANCO: White

CASTA: Grape variety. “Mono Casta” means a wine made from a single variety.

COLHEITA: Literally vintage or harvest. The term is most commonly used in reference to the rare vintage-dated Tawny Ports which can only be bottled after at least 7 years in cask and must indicate the date of bottling on the label.

D.O.: Literally “Denominação de origem,” or controlled appellation, Portugal’s highest quality designation. Wines made with the D.O. designation are controlled as to the region of origin, authorized grape varieties, minimum alcohol levels, permissible yields in the vineyard, cultivation procedures, fermentation and aging requirements. This prestige designation covers only 15% of the country’s wines. Formerly referred to as “D.O.C.”

ESTUFAGEM: The heating process used to age Madeira wines.

GARRAFEIRA: A uniquely Portuguese designation indicating wine from a superior harvest which attains 1/2 degree of alcohol above the legal minimum and is matured for at least 2 years in wood and a further year in bottle prior to sale.

GRANDE ESCOLHA: A special selection of the best vineyard plots in harvests that produce wines of the finest quality. This is not a legal designation.

LAGAR: A stone trough traditionally used for treading the grapes underfoot and fermenting after harvest in the Douro, Dão and Bairrada.

LAGRIMA: Literally “tears.” Generally refers to a sweeter style of White Port.

PIPE: A 550-liter oak cask used in the Douro for aging Vintage Port, and also table wines of quality.

QUINTA: A privately owned farm or vineyard. Growers with small estates who produce and bottle their own, generally limited production, wine make what is referred to as “Vinho de Quinta.”

RESERVA: A legal designation for wine that is of superior quality, attains a mandatory 1/2 degree of alcohol higher than the D.O. minimum, and spends a minimum of 1 year in cask prior to sale.

ROSADO: Rose

SECO: Dry

SELO DE ORIGEM: A seal granted by the local authorities which is put on every bottle of D.O. wine.

TINTO: Red

VINHO REGIONAL: A regionally designated table wine of higher quality than ordinary table wine. Vinho Regionals can be made within D.O. areas using unauthorized grape varieties, or they can originate in districts that are not classified as D.O.

