Portugal - how to convince the rest of the world

28 Jul 2006 by Syndicated

Portuguese table wines are a mystery – to most non-Portuguese anyway. This is a great shame as Portugal has many unique attributes as a wine producer, not least its dazzling range of indigenous grape varieties, many of them, such as Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, Trincadeira and Castelão among many reds and Arinto, Bical and Fernão Pires among whites, with their own powerful and attractive identities. This is in stark contrast to Spain which has almost five times as much vineyard as Portugal and yet has drawn on a much narrower range of vine varieties.

But while Spanish wine exports are booming internationally and there is a sense that Spanish wine's combination of predominantly Mediterranean climate with European sensibility is flavour of the year, Portugal has been struggling to make its presence felt on wine lists and shelves outside Portugal and its old colonies Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Goa and Macau.

In Britain, the promiscuously open but penny-pinching wine market I know best, Portugal's prospects have long been blighted by many professional wine buyers' insistence that Portuguese wine, like eastern European wine, had to be cheap. But after knocking on the door of the UK for years Portuguese wine has finally managed to push it open a little. Last year Portugal's table wine exports to the UK rose by 10 per cent in volume – even if they are still tiny compared to those from many other countries.

So how does an under-appreciated wine producing country go about improving its position in an important wine market? I have spent 30 years observing, and being a target of, generic wine export campaigns. The very first wine tasting I ever attended was an attempt in London's Canada House by Ontario wine producers to penetrate the British market. They still haven't managed it. A substantial proportion of my bulging mailbag (rapidly being replaced by my overloaded electronic mailbox) is made up of attempts to convince me that Country X or Region Y is making superb wines – really – or that their latest generic advertising campaign is not a colossal waste of money.

Over the years I have come to the conclusion that only two things are essential for a country or region to succeed at exporting. Firstly, there has to be at least one or preferably several seriously committed individuals in the importing country driving the campaign who are fully supported by the exporters. This sounds obvious but in my experience too many of those representing their country's wines abroad are either civil servants simply hanging on to their jobs (don't get me started on Italy's presence in the UK) or external public relations people who don't really understand or care about the wine market and fritter away the budget on cute little gestures that have nothing to do with introducing wine drinkers to the wines in question.

The most obvious example of a person who almost single-handedly persuaded the British to drink the wines of the country she was hired to represent was diminutive Hazel Murphy who in the 1980s, through a combination of lateral thinking, determination and efficiency, turned the British into Australian wine drinkers from a standing start.(My sense is that the tidal wave of California wine exports to Britain has been more the work of individual companies than any generic campaign.)

It is not coincidental in my view that Portuguese wine has started to do so well in in Britain now that Fernando Andresen Guimarães is Portuguese ambassador to Britain and Antonio Silva and Filipe da Mota Neves are in charge of the wine effort at London's Portuguese Trade & Tourism Office. As a wine writer who goes to far more than my fair share of the hundreds of wine tastings held in London each year, I am rarely aware of a diplomatic presence at any of them. But the Portuguese ambassador seems to be at every one of the many Portuguese wine events held – whether in the trade office, his residence or on the other side of town. He, unusually, really does seem to care about the reputation of his country's wines.

So what is the second pre-requisite of wine export success? This is almost embarrassingly obvious: that the wines really are worth shouting about. Hideous amounts of money have been spent on advertising the name bordeaux for example – all over the world, with campaigns which have had to be acceptable to producers of both red and white wines, in all languages and cultures and are therefore so dilute as to be ineffectually vapid. But in my view the money has been wasted, not just because the ads say nothing but also because the product they are advertising has not (so far) been consistent enough to warrant all that expenditure – money that has come directly from poor, embattled growers' pockets.

Those of us who have been tasting with interest what Portugal has to offer the wine drinker (as opposed to the port drinker who has been fully satisfied for centuries) over the last 10 years or so have noticed an enormous and rapid evolution. Portugal has long had the grape varieties, the huge variety in grape-growing environments (from the Atlantic-washed Minho in the far north-west to the arid Alentejo in the south-east) and the refreshing acidity that its Atlantic coastline confers on the wines. What it has lacked until recently is vine-growing and wine-making sophistication.

Most white wines were either too thin or not sufficiently refreshing. Dão was hopelessly fruitless. Bairrada super-tannic in a tarter fashion. Alentejo wines were too often rustic and/or overripe. The first generation of Douro table wines were extremely exciting but certainly not polished.

But in the last few years there has been an extraordinary sea change. Much to my surprise one of my favourite wines at last March's generic Portuguese wine tasting in London for example, the largest yet where 60 producers showed over 700 wines, was a full bodied white wine, **Esporão Branco Reserva 2004 Alentejo**, a blend of Antão Vaz, Roupeiro and Arinto that should satisfy any lover of California Chardonnay looking for more zest and interest. Or, if you want to be purist and stick to an all-Portuguese white (Esporão's winemaker David Baverstock is Australian by birth – though hardly by experience any more), there is **Quinta da Murta, Murta 2005 Bucelas**, a fine, perfumed, marine-influenced Arinto that retails for even less than the Esporão.

Dão's new, fruity, interesting manifestation could be seen in **Caves Aliança, Quinta de Garrida Touriga Nacional 2003 Dão**, rather less expensive than the equivalent wines from the giant **Sogrape** stable and following in the footsteps of the admirable **Quinta dos Roques** and sister property **Quinta das Maias**. Unfortunately the leading Dão property **Quinta da Pellada** was not represented at this tasting.

Similarly, the wines of the wizard of the Bairrada region (who has chosen to desert the appellation for the looser and larger Beiras) **Luis Pato** were not present but I was excited to taste the new reds and whites of his daughter **Filipa Pato** who made, in the noble tradition of famous wine-producing hotel **Buçaco**, from grapes sourced in both Dão and Bairrada.

By far the greatest concentration of seriously exciting wines however came from the Douro Valley, and here there was a notable contrast between the finesse apparent in the best recent offerings from specialists such as **CARM, Dirk Niepoort, Pintas, Quinta do Passadouro** and **Quinta do Tedo** and the more rustic, though certainly powerful, wines made by some producers whose raison d'etre is port.

But every wine country needs a calling card, a well-priced brand that is easy to find and in tune with the modern drinker. João Portugal Ramos is to be congratulated on **Marquês de Borba Tinto 2004 Alentejo,** a wine which has consistently offered value, and thoroughly Portuguese character.