

Shining a light on Portugal

2 Feb 2011 by Jancis Robinson/FT

See [tasting notes](#) on 120 fine Portuguese wines.

Spanish wine may have been riding the crest of a fashionable gastronomic wave, but in many ways Portugal has more to offer the discriminating wine drinker - certainly far more indigenous grape varieties.

Not before time, the Portuguese are making a determined effort to have the outside world realise just how good their wines are (see [Porto's wine fair last weekend](#), for example). This could just be the most propitious time to explain the special virtues of Portugal. Isolation has its disadvantages but one strong advantage for Portuguese wine is that it is made from a dazzling array of high-quality vine varieties that are, for the moment anyway, rarely found elsewhere.

The Portuguese government is planning to invest in promoting Wines of Portugal on export markets. For the moment only Angola and Macau really seem prepared to pay for Portugal's finest wines, and the country's most valuable wine-related export by far is not wine but cork. But, perhaps even more importantly for Portuguese wine's long term future, they are also backing a project to preserve Portugal's unique viticultural heritage. This could be well timed in view of the growing reverence worldwide for so-called heritage or heirloom varieties of all manner of fruits, from apples and tomatoes to grapes.

As outlined in [How Touriga Nacional was rescued](#), a warning bell sounded with the realisation in the late 1970s that one of the country's greatest red-wine grape varieties was in danger of being abandoned in its native northern Portugal in favour of vine varieties that were easier to grow. A determined effort was made to rescue Touriga Nacional from extinction and, unusually for that technically obsessed era, a full range of different clones of the variety was maintained when the tendency elsewhere was to concentrate on simply the most productive or healthiest. But this was just one variety among many. At the same time, according to António Graça of Sogrape, a member of the official Portuguese vine-variety protection body PORVID, 'there was rampant erosion of our viticultural heritage. If we had kept on [just planting the vines that were easiest to grow], by 2025 we would have reduced the number of Portuguese vine varieties by 90%'.

Although for many years the Portuguese wine industry's efforts were focused far more on the cellar than the vineyard, Portugal's unusual viticultural riches are starting to be appreciated. The national vine repository at Pegões now has examples of 65 recuperated national varieties with a further 190 in prospect. The team of vine curators will presumably be using the country's unusually rich heritage of 19th-century ampelographies, directories of grape varieties, to help in their identification. And nowadays DNA analysis can help enormously, too - although it is still in its early stages in Portugal. Touriga Nacional, for example, does not seem to be related to any non-Portuguese variety and today is grown on a total of more than 7,000 hectares (17,500 acres) all over Portugal. Like Cabernet Sauvignon, its distinctive character seems to translate well in a wide range of different terroirs. When young, the wine is unusually floral, smelling of violets or, according to some Portuguese tasters, bergamot, the active ingredient in Earl Grey tea. It has long been one of the most admired of the many grape varieties blended into top-quality port and is probably best blended with more structured varieties.

In the old days, as elsewhere in Europe, vineyards were planted with a field blend of different varieties, but when Portuguese growers became more varietally aware, wines made exclusively from Touriga Nacional emerged from regions all over Portugal, with particularly good results in its native Dão region. But in the next phase of Portuguese wine evolution it seems likely that the variety will increasingly be blended with other varieties. In my [tasting notes](#), for example, it is clear that the blended Reserva from the masterful Quinta dos Roques in Dão is a more complex wine than its varietal Touriga Nacional.

The nobility and strong character of Touriga Nacional has been too obvious for non-Portuguese vine growers to overlook, however, so that the variety is now grown in Spain, Argentina, Brazil, Greece, Israel, California, Washington State, Virginia, South Africa and especially Australia. The initial Touriga Nacional cuttings were almost certainly taken to South Africa and Australia centuries ago when early colonists' ships were provisioned in Portugal en route. In fact another port grape, Tinta Barroca, is also grown in Cape winelands, presumably for the same reason.

Such is the singularity and quality of Portugal's own varieties that the country has remained admirably impervious to the wave of Cabernet- and Chardonnay-mania that engulfed so much of the rest of the wine world in the 1980s and 1990s. There are only just over 2,000 ha of Cabernet Sauvignon in the entire country and fewer than 600 ha of Chardonnay.

Syrah is the most planted international variety, but there are still fewer than 3,000 ha planted. I can strongly recommend the more authentically Portuguese likes of Trincadeira/Tinta Amarela, Baga, Touriga Franca or Alfocheiro Preto among reds and the distinctive white wine grapes Arinto, SÍria/Roupeiro, Fernão Pires/Maria Gomes. (Because vine identification is a relatively new science in Portugal, many varieties have had different names in different regions.)

The only significant imported vine variety is Spain's Tempranillo, known in northern Portugal as Tinta Roriz and in Alentejo in the south (cork country) as AragÓnez. The Spanish intruder is Portugal's second most planted vine after the 18,500 ha of vineyard that is planted with the vine known variously as Castelão, João-de-Santarém and Periquita. This widely planted grape produces usefully friendly, fruity red that can be drunk young but can also make wines that are still delicious after five or even eight years, as older bottles labelled Periquita prove.

It is a characteristic of typical Portuguese red that it is relatively high in both tannin and acidity, and Portuguese whites tend to be no less distinctive, crisp and long-lived. The Atlantic climate seems to help retain freshness in the wines and for many years it was Portuguese winemaking habit to emphasise the grapes' relatively thick skins and high charge of tannins - in stark contrast to the fruitier styles of New World wines. This stylistic distinction may have hampered the progress of Portuguese wines on export markets in the past, but for a palate tired of the limited palette of international varieties, Portugal has much to offer. And Portugal's talented new-wave winemakers are much more skilled at managing those tannins than their forebears.

When the first new wave of Portuguese wines hit the market a decade ago, they fuelled a great swelling of national pride and concomitant price rises that made them look overpriced outside Portugal. In a more sober marketplace, prices are looking a little more reasonable. Both reds and whites are well worth a look.

SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

WHITES

Esporão Reserva 2007 Alentejo
Luis Pato, Vinhas Velhas 2009 Beiras
Quinta do Ameal, Loureiro 2009 Vinho Verde
Quinta do Feital, Dorado Superior Alvarinho 2007 Monção, Vinho Verde
Quinta das Maias, Malvasia Fina 2009 Dão
Quinta da Pellada, Primus 2009 Dão

REDS

Niepoort, Batuta 2008 Douro
Quinta da Gaivosa 2005 Douro
Quinta dos Roques, Touriga Nacional 2008 Dão
Quinta da Sequeira 2007 Douro
Quinta do Soque, Vinhas Velhas 2007 Douro
Quinta do Vesuvio Reserva 2007 Douro

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