

In praise of Portuguese whites

5 Jul 2012 by Jancis Robinson/FT but this is longer

Last year the UK was beaten into second place as biggest importer of Portuguese wine by - Angola. We British wine drinkers, and particularly those who sell wine to us, have a duty to maintain our reputation as connoisseurs. If we don't pull up our socks and ensure that a better range of top-quality Portuguese wines makes its way into the UK, we will have to concede that Angolans are more discerning than we are.

My colleague Master of Wine Julia Harding was made Portuguese Wine Writer of the Year last year, which meant that she was charged with selecting her [50 finest Portuguese wines](#) (from 1,200 tasted) and then presenting them to the trade, media and consumers in London, Manchester and Edinburgh last month. (See [this video](#).)

Reactions from wine drinkers there varied from surprise at the number of high-quality and refreshing whites to titillated confusion over many of the grape varieties (Julia narrowed the field by concentrating on indigenous vines) and bafflement at how difficult it is to find such wines on our shelves and wine lists.

This was not the first time I had tasted some recognised authority's selection of '50 Great Portuguese Wines'. They have always been interesting, but I and several other British wine professionals were particularly struck by the sheer objective quality of the wines chosen this year: 27 reds, 18 whites, four fortified wines (for questionable administrative reasons, this annual selection has to exclude those Portuguese wine jewels, port and madeira) and one rather fine traditional method sparkling wine, **Quinta das Bageiras, Grande Reserve Bruto Natural 2003 Bairrada**.

Every wine tasted as though it were hand-made, with real sensitivity towards the place and grape responsible for it. Admittedly some of them carry price tags as high as £80 a bottle, but there were others at £10 and under. What astounded and saddened me was how few of these beauties are available in the UK. About one in every three of the wines in this hand-picked selection has no UK importer.

As suggested by Julia's selection, and my own recent tastings of Portuguese wine both in Portugal and London, Portuguese winemakers are now producing an array of really fine white wines as well as the extremely distinctive reds more readily associated with the country.

Vinho Verde, crisp, young white made in the far north of the country, is perhaps the best-known Portuguese white and Julia included four in her selection. There was a time when these wines tasted a little uncomfortably like carbonated apple juice but these four were fine wines by any standard. I was particularly struck by the concentration and tension of **Quinta de Soalheiro, Primeiras Vinhas Alvarinho 2010 Vinho Verde** (£21.50 Butler's Wine Cellar) made from the grape that is so popular as Albariño across the river Minho in the Spanish wine region Rias Baixas. The serious price denotes a serious wine, one for the dinner table, from the most prized subregion Monção and Melgaço.

But even the local Monção co-op is able to deliver obvious wine quality in the form of **Adega de Monção 2011 Vinho Verde** (£5.95 The Wine Society). In this bone-dry wine that manages to be both subtle and dense, some of the local Trajadura grapes have been blended to add richness to Alvarinho. With just 11.5% alcohol but no shortage of personality, this would make a great aperitif.

I also enjoyed the tingling vibrancy of **Vales de Ambrões Avesso 2011 Vinho Verde** made in the south of the region from the full bodied Avesso grape, but the producer is without a UK importer, alas. (*Verde* is Portuguese for 'green' and all these wines demonstrate the green sap of youth. The white wines described below are more mellow and would be called *branco*, Portuguese for 'white'.)

The Douro Valley is most readily associated with port and a new groundswell of red table wines but Julia's selection included four full-bodied, intensely individual Douro whites. The most daring and playful, even if the price tag is no joke, is **Niepoort, Coche 2010 Douro** (rrp £65, UK importer Raymond Reynolds), Dirk Niepoort's latest creation, in homage to Jean-François Coche. The nose may have the same smoky, struck-match, reductive character as a cult Meursault from Domaine Coche-Dury, but the heat of the Douro Valley and the blend of Rabigato, Còdega de Larinho, Arinto and other white port grapes ensure that it is no carbon copy. This is a fascinating, beautifully textured, bumptious wine with a beginning, middle and end to the experience of tasting it.

A more affordable version comes in the form of **Quinta de la Rosa Branco 2010 Douro** (£14.95 Berry Bros), another variegated blend including Rabigato, half of which was fermented and aged in barrel. Dense, dry, appetising and tangy, this is a wine with more interest than most at this price level, and I would expect both these Douro whites to benefit from just as much bottle age as white burgundy.

From vineyards in northern Portugal with a much stronger Atlantic influence comes **Filipa Pato, FP 2011 Vinho Regional Beiras** (£11.95 Noel Young), made by the daughter of the leading light of Bairrada (who has now left the appellation in disgust at its laxness) Luis Pato. This equal blend of the top-quality grapes Bical and Arinto has wonderful aromatic appeal and a certain creaminess on the palate but, most importantly, like all of these wines, it bears no relation to any other wine made elsewhere.

The granitic Dão region was for many years the source of some of the driest, most curmudgeonly wines on earth. But a fruitier new broom has swept vigorously and effectively during the last 10 years or so and the exceptionally winning, full-bodied white **Quinta das Maias, Malvasia Fina 2011 Dão** (rrp £15, UK importer Raymond Reynolds) is just one example of a white Dão that can rival fine white Rhône in its confidence, and beat most of them in their ageing ability. This particular wine reminded me of milky coffee - in an intriguing, but good, way.

Even more like white burgundy with its two months' lees stirring is **Quinta de Saes Encruzado Reserva 2010 Dão** made from the characterful local Encruzado grape variety and wonderfully fresh.

Portuguese whites really do deserve attention, not least from those with an eye for a bargain. Don't let them all go to Angola!

See [Julia's tasting notes](#).

MY FAVOURITE REDS FROM HER TOP 50

Filipa Pato, Nossa Calcário Tinto 2010 Bairrada (rrp £25 Clark Foyster)

Luis Pato, Quinta do Ribeirinho Pé Franco 2009 Vinho Regional Beiras (rrp £80 Raymond Reynolds)

Quinta do Noval 2008 Douro (2007 is £31.50 Cambridge Wine Merchants)

Quinta do Crasto, Reserva Vinhas Velhas 2009 Douro (rrp £17 widely available)

Poeira 2009 Douro (2008 is £33.15 Berry Bros)

Wine & Soul, Quinta da Manoella Vinhas Velhas 2009 Douro

Quinta do Vale Meão 2009 Douro (rrp £65 Raymond Reynolds)

Quinta dos Barreiros, Gravato Vinha Velhas 2008 Beira Interior

Dulcineia dos Santos Ferreira, Sidónio de Sousa Garrafeira 2005 Bairrada

Quinta do Escudial, Vinhas Velhas 2007 Dão

Casa da Passarela, Vinhas Velhas 2008 Dão

Julia Kemper Tinto 2009 Dão

Quinto do Mouro Touriga Nacional 2006 Vinho Regional Alentejo

Esporão, TN Touriga Nacional 2008 Vinho Regional Alentejo

Sonho Lusitano, Pedra e Alma 2009 Vinho Regional Alentejo

Niepoort, Robustus 2007 Douro

Altano, Quinta do Ataíde Reserva Touriga Nacional 2008 Douro

Quinta de Chocopalha, CH Touriga Nacional 2008 Vinho Regional Lisboa

Quinta da Gaivosa, Abandonado 2009 Douro (UK importer Top Selection)

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