

Wines of Portugal: The Art of the Blend Part 1

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Not so long ago, wine drinkers identified their favorite bottles by geography, as in Bordeaux, but in the last twenty years, it's all about the grape, Cabernet, Chardonnay, and Pinot Noir, for example. Portugal has never been a varietal-driven wine culture, they excel at blending, as evidenced by their most famous wine, **Port**. Rediscovered by wine drinkers, what once was old school is now considered the “new” hot region, with excellent wines at great prices.

Portugal is the long and skinny finger of the western Iberian Peninsula. Buffeted by the Atlantic Ocean and northern mountain ranges, Portugal is a land of contrasts, with vines clinging to an array of soils and hundreds of diverse micro-climates, with 250 indigenous wine grape **varietals**. From the cool, refreshing whites of the northern Vinho Verde, known for its Alvarinho, to the hot, parched southern Alentejo, with its Alicante Bouschet, in between the two are some of the more recognizable **wine regions**, the Dão and Douro, known for Touriga Nacional, considered Portugal's national grape.

Even though the red **wines of Portugal** are powerful, rich and concentrated, they are not alcoholic, coming in at a balanced 13.5% ABV, and with great natural acidity, it makes them extremely food-friendly. There are three **classifications** of wine. Vinho is the lowest level, commonly considered table wine. Vinho Regional is the next step up, and consists of wines of character, typical of the region, with many experimental blends that don't meet the stringent requirements for the highest classification, DOC. DOC wines are highly regulated, and have to go through a rigorous approval process to prove they're worthy.

When you ask any Portuguese winemaker about their



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region, the common response is “It’s complicated”. Not only are there so many grape varieties, but each one has at least 4-5 nicknames, for example, **Tempranillo** is called Aragonéz in the south and Tinta Roriz in the north. Another complication is the system of approvals for the three classifications of wine, with the highest level, DOC, requiring not only adherence to vineyard constrictions such as maximum grape yields and permitted grape varieties, but the wine must pass the discerning palates of a tasting panel, sometimes returning several times before it passes muster, and can be awarded this highest stamp of approval.

Since joining the EU in 1986, Portugal has advanced their wine industry exponentially. The wines are becoming more sophisticated, with advances in technology and an emphasis on quality. And there’s a shift in perceptions. Over 60% of new enologists in Portugal are women, who contribute their own sensitivity and sensibilities to the wines.

Wines of Portugal is getting the word out, that Portuguese wines are dynamic and exciting, and a bargain for the quality. Eugénio Jardim, the US Ambassador for the marketing organization, recently visited Los Angeles, accompanied by three Portuguese winemakers and their importer, demonstrating the incredible range of wines from the different regions. These producers come from family-run, boutique wineries with a long history of crafting wine. And since the Portuguese have a tradition of drinking **wine with food**, and don’t usually have a glass of wine by itself, the wines were explored over a fabulous lunch at **Cafe del Rey**.

An aperitif kicked off the journey, a stunning **Setúbal Moscatel** from José Maria da Fonseca, the Roxo 20 Years, a dessert wine that is so complex, it will haunt your senses. An amber delight, this wine is a blend of four vintages, with the youngest wine being 23 years old, and the oldest, 80 years old. The base wine, made from an almost extinct grape varietal, is fortified with Armagnac. Aromatic, with great acidity and depth of flavor, it’s fruity, with notes of oranges, caramel, and spice, round and intoxicatingly beautiful, and not just because it’s 18.5% ABV. With a finish that goes on forever, this is a very special wine, a heady experience not soon to be forgotten. The wine is bottled in a 500ml bottle, and retails for \$99.

Portugal is not all about the big reds we’ve come to know, refreshing whites make up quite a few of the wines. The **Caves Transmontanas Vértice Espumante Bruto 2007**, made from 85% Gouveio and 15% Rabigato, from the **Douro** region, is a sparkling wine, fresh with a touch of nuttiness. The small persistent bubbles release aromas of citrus and peach fruit into a palate laced with anise and mineral notes, infused with a nuttiness from the toasty oak, and a rich, creamy body. So delicious, and for a vintage sparkler, a very good deal, at \$25. The **Casal da Coelheira White Reserva 2014**, a blend of 70% Chardonnay and 30% Arinto, from the **Tejo** region, is an aromatic white, with apple, pear, and white peach on the nose. Vibrant and structured on the palate, with lemon, peach and pear flavors, mineral accents play off toasty, yeasty notes in the wine, this is an award-winning white that delivers a very long finish. Both of these white wines accompanied the first course, an Octopus Salad, grilled octopus over frisée and spicy greens, dressed with a white wine saffron vinaigrette, superb!

Continued in **Part 2**



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