



The International Wine Review

Double Issue

Report # 24: The New Wines of Portugal

Introduction

Portugal has made dramatic progress in producing world class red and white table wines over the past decade. We've monitored its progress in red wines in two previous reports. In this, our third report on this country, we traveled to Portugal to assess both red and white table wines throughout all the major wine-producing regions. What we found was an unusually dynamic country producing a very wide array of high quality, distinctive wines not just in the Douro but throughout the country from the Minho River in the north to well past the Tagus River in the south.

On our trip five years ago, we found many rich, balanced wines, especially in the Douro, but we also encountered some rustic wines that were over ripe and tannic, indicative of hot growing conditions and unskilled winemaking. On this trip we found fewer poorly made wines despite a very extensive sampling. Most red wines show good balance, silky tannins, and fresh flavors. We were even more impressed with the progress made in the production of white wines in Portugal. Aside from the fresh, simple blends of Vinho Verde and the Arinto wines of Bucelas, Portugal is not well known for its white wines. However, we now find delicious white wines being made in every region, including, surprisingly enough, the warmest parts of the southern Alentejo.

One of the most significant developments in Portugal is the emergence of a new generation of winemakers who are building on the work of table wine pioneers like João Portugal Ramos of the Alentejo, Domingo Soares Franco in the Setúbal Peninsula, Francisco "tito" Olazabal of the Douro, and Luis Pato of Beiras. The new winemakers are raising the bar in terms of quality both in vineyard management and in the cellar while at the same time retaining Portuguese winemaking traditions, from the use of indigenous varietals to pressing grapes in traditional lagares. We found this new generation of skilled winemakers working throughout the industry, from large commercial wineries to family-owned artisanal wineries and growers' cooperatives.

For this report, we evaluated close to 500 wines, the most we've ever tasted for a single report. The tasting notes on these wines are given in the Tasting Notes and Ratings Section at the end of this report and, also, in our tasting notes data base at www.i-winereview.com. Given the large number of

In this Issue

Introduction	Cover
The Geography and Wines of Portugal	3
Portugal's Wine History	4
The Pioneers of Wine.....	4
Portugal's Consulting Winemakers.....	5
The Vines and Wines of Portugal.....	6
Portugal's Regions and Their Wines	7
Portuguese Food and Wine Pairing	15
Economics and the Market	17
Tasting Notes and Ratings by Region	19
Vinho Verde	19
Douro	25
Beiras	39
Lisboa	44
Tejo.....	46
Setúbal Peninsula.....	48
Alentejo	52
Annexes	61

wines tasted, the notes are organized by geographic region of production. Unfortunately, too many of these wines, especially those produced by small family wineries, are not yet imported to the US. And even those that are imported can be difficult to find. On the other hand, there are many excellent wines which are widely distributed and those of outstanding value are indicated in the tasting notes.

This report is organized in our usual style. We first look at the geography of wine production, followed by a brief history, both ancient and recent, that contributes to our understanding of wine in Portugal today. Next we briefly explore the unique, indigenous varietals of the country and the phenomenon of the Portuguese consulting winemaker, which has contributed significantly to the rapid rise in wine quality. Then we look

Introduction

Continued from page 1

in depth at the wines of each important wine-producing region in Portugal. Given the incredible differences in terroir and varietals, exploring the wines of each region is almost like being in a different country. The report continues with an exploration of the exciting cuisine of Portugal and how it pairs with the country's wines. While not familiar to most Americans, Portuguese cuisine is unique and delicious. It is as different from Spanish cuisine as Spanish is from French and warrants a serious look from anyone seriously interested in food and wine. The best Portuguese cuisine in the US can be found in the cities of California, Massachusetts, New Jersey, and Rhode Island that have high concentrations of Portuguese immigrants. The report ends with an analysis of the world market for Portuguese wine. While the world of Portuguese wine is complex for the average consumer to understand, we conclude that the unique varietals and terroirs of the diverse regions of Portugal are an asset that should help Portugal raise its share of wine imports in the US.

For readers interested in still more information on Portugal, its food, wine, and winemakers, please see the numerous entries on our blog: iwinereview.blogspot.com

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