

PORTUGAL AND ITS WINES

Geoffrey Kelly



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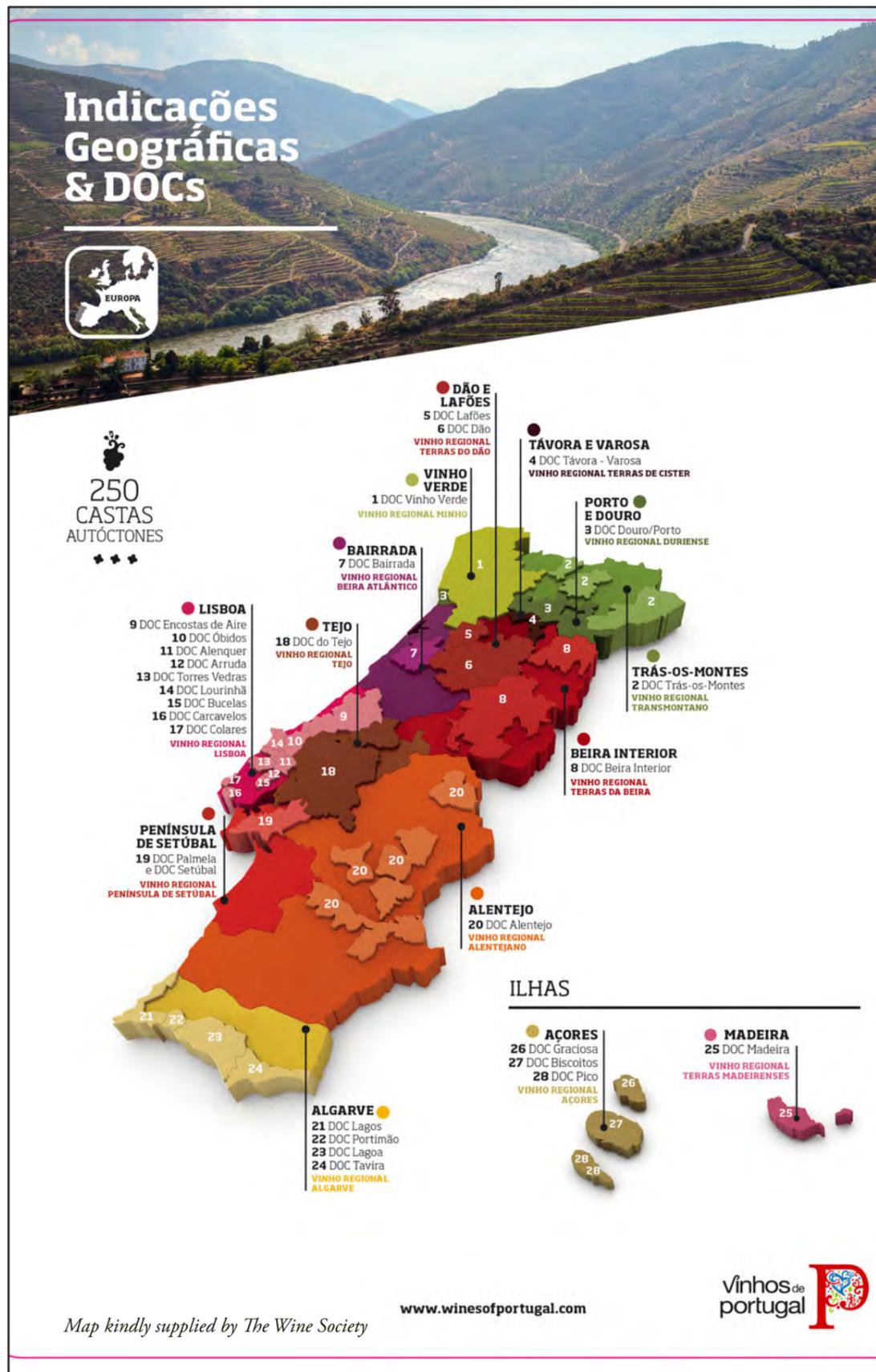
In the world of wine, few countries are as interesting as Portugal. The mainland lies entirely within the traditional 30-50 degrees latitude for optimum wine production and there are vineyards in every region of the country. With more than 250 indigenous grape varieties, only Italy can compare for its choice of wine styles and wide diversity of flavours. In volume terms, Portugal is the 5th largest wine producing country in Europe after the big three Italy, France, Spain, followed by Germany.

To understand how this small country – only 350 miles long and 140 miles wide – can produce such a remarkable variety of grapes and selection of wines you need to know something of its geography and how this affects the climate in the different regions of Portugal. Secondly, a little knowledge of the history and the origin of the Portuguese people will also help you understand why their cuisine, culture and wines have evolved quite differently from elsewhere to make this such a delightful and fascinating country.

I first visited Portugal in 1974. A few months earlier, on the 25 April, the Portuguese army had mutinied, tanks rolled into central Lisbon and the dictatorship of Salazar's successor Caetano toppled in what became known as the 'Carnation Revolution'. I had flown into Faro to visit a friend, a horticultural expert who had left England for a new job growing melons for the Lisbon market.

It is funny how some places have an immediate impact that you never forget. On this first visit, I was seduced by the intriguing new smells both of the countryside and in the towns where aromas of freshly grilled sardines and enticing meat 'assados' mingled with many unusual spices. Every day started with a cloudless azure blue sky, the baking hot sunshine was soon tempered by a slight dampness from the Atlantic air and it all seemed idyllic. My friend told me he intended to stay in Portugal forever. This was quite a bold thing to say as his entry visa only permitted a six-months stay at the time.

We travelled together westwards along the Algarve coast from Almançil to Sagres until we stood on 50 metre high cliffs at the very edge of the continent. At this spot in the early 15th century Prince Henry the Navigator waved farewell to Portuguese explorers as they sailed in their caravels towards the horizon and the complete unknown. On the way back Ian said he knew a very simple 'Restaurante Tipico' frequented only by locals serving the most delicious roast chicken. Sure enough, hidden behind some sand dunes I had my first experience of 'Frango Piri Piri' served to us at wooden tables in the open air. To this day I still rate this the best roast chicken ever and quite unlike anything I had tasted at home. Since then, of course a South



Map kindly supplied by The Wine Society

www.winesofportugal.com



African businessman with connections to Mozambique has created an empire based on the Piri Piri recipe. Nando's is certainly a success story but it never tastes as good as the moist and subtly spicy roast chicken that you can find at a 'Restaurante Tipico' in Portugal. As red wine flowed freely during the meal, I asked Ian how the revolution was affecting his business. He told me the local people were very conservative and whatever was happening elsewhere, those on the Algarve were not interested in a communist takeover. The local economy was doing too well, the building trade was booming and many foreigners from Germany, Scandinavia and the UK were investing in real estate, constructing villas and setting up hotels.

As an amusing anecdote, he told me that one of the main revolutionary marching songs frequently broadcast on the radio was sung to the tune "A life on the ocean wave". On an impulse I felt impelled to break into this cheery old song at the top of my voice. Immediately people at every table in the sand dunes were silent and staring at us. There was a distinct menace in the audience, so I stopped singing. Ian then diffused the situation by explaining 'Somos inglês'. Immediately everyone relaxed, people smiled and conversations resumed.

The 'Carnation Revolution' may have hardly affected the Algarve but twenty years later working for the Portuguese Government, I heard first-hand from owners of wine estates and cork farms in the Alentejo how traumatic the effects of the communist take-over had been. For several years many of the old estates were appropriated and their owners forced to leave. Harvesting of cork oak trees was often neglected, wine cellars were not restocked and generations of hard work and husbandry wasted.

The mighty Tejo

All the major wine growing regions of the world are connected to river systems and Portugal has two important ones: the Tejo (pronounced Tay-Jo in Portuguese) and the Douro. The Tejo (which we call by its Latin name - Tagus) is the longest river in the Iberian peninsula. Rising far away in mountains to the east of Madrid, the Tejo flows over 1,000 km west until it reaches Portugal where it widens markedly to create a broad alluvial valley much prone to flooding. At Lisbon it forms a broad estuary before finally meeting the Atlantic. The resulting rich fertile soil of the Tejo region of central Portugal is ideal for wine production.

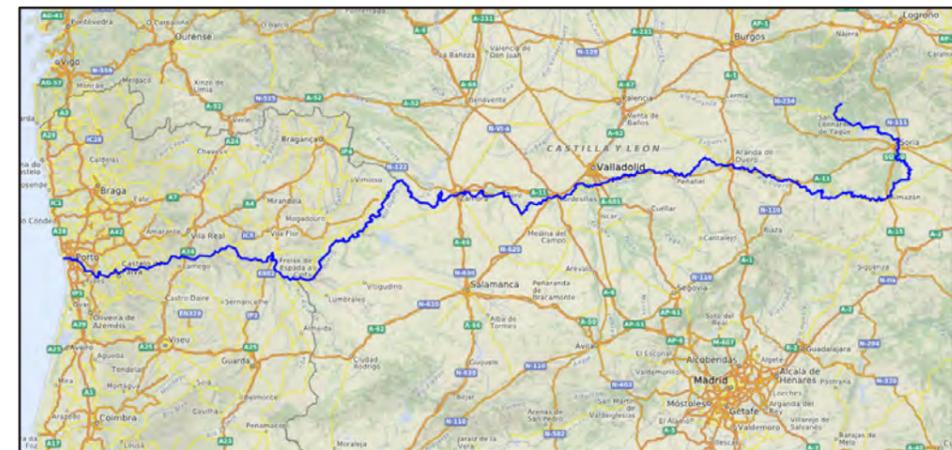
Closer to Lisbon and along to the Atlantic coastline is another prolific area for vines: **Vinho Regional Lisboa**. Together with the **Vinho Regional Tejo** these two regions produce more wine than any other region of Portugal and many of the UK's best-selling Portuguese wines come from here. Generally made with the indigenous Portuguese grape Castelão, these are easy going, fruity wines often with plenty of concentration and character. They offer good value too compared with similarly priced wines from France or Spain for example:

AdegaMãe Lisboa Valley Selection (The Wine Society) £8.50; **Porta 6 Red** (Tesco, Majestic & Sainsbury's) £7- £8; **Bodacious Red Wine of Portugal** made by Falua S.A. in Tejo at ASDA £6.50.



The Tagus basin is tectonically active however and earthquakes are quite frequent. As recently as 1969 one measured 7.8 on the Richter scale but the most catastrophic was in 1755 when Lisbon was levelled and more than 60,000 people perished in the resulting tsunami and the fires which burned for almost a week. It is now known that the tectonic plates of Africa and Eurasia are in collision on the Atlantic seabed and over millennia these earth movements have pushed upwards creating the Serra da Estrela mountains of central Portugal as well as the Northern mountains of the Minho which form the border with Spanish Galicia. These mountains also create a shield from the wet Atlantic air. So in the Northwest of the country and in the city of Porto annual rainfall is higher than Manchester. Vegetation here is lush and vines grow abundantly producing a wide range of mainly white wines under the regional appellation Vinho Verde which stretches right up to the border with Spain.

The treacherous rapids of the Douro



Then just a few miles inland on the other side of the mountains, annual rainfall drops considerably and summer temperatures frequently exceed 40°C. Here we find the mighty Douro which starts by draining an enormous catchment area of 80,000 sq.km in northern Spain then crosses the broad plains of Old Castile, and after reaching the border with Portugal, it plunges about 1,250 feet (380 m) within 30 miles (50 km) in a series of gorges and rapids before making its way out to the sea on Portugal's Atlantic coast. This dramatic waterway which cuts its way through the Douro Region is arguably the most picturesque wine region in the world and the first to be demarcated in 1756.



The Douro Photo Credit Turismo Porto e Norte



Barco Rabelo Photo Credit RR-TdP

For centuries the Douro River was essential for the Port wine trade. Wines were transported in special boats called 'barco rabelos' from the vineyards upstream to the Port shipper's lodges in Porto and Vila Nova da Gaia where they could rest and mature in relatively cool conditions. Some parts of the river were extremely treacherous and could only be navigated by the most skilled sailors. The barco rabelos were built with long elegant steering oars, flat-bottomed hulls, and wide sails to allow the careful manoeuvres needed to sail the rough waters. Even when the railway became a competing mode of transport in 1887, barco rabelos remained a popular choice for wine shipments.

But by 1961, when the roads had also improved just six barco rabelos remained in use for shipping Port casks. Today you can hire a rabelo for a river cruise and there is an annual regatta each year on the 24 June when the Port houses display rabelos in their house colours.

In 1997 my marketing consultancy won a contract from the Portuguese Government to promote their wines in the UK. At that time, these two wine regions Vinho Verde and Port wine from the Douro were the only Portuguese wine styles generally available. Retailers offered a selection of Port (that sold mainly in the pre-Christmas period) and a Vinho Verde to remind Brits of their sunny holidays on the Algarve. Luckily our brief was to concentrate on non-fortified wines, so we were able to steer clear of the politics and bureaucracy of the powerful Institutes that regulated production of Port and Madeira wines.

New Wave wines from Vinho Verde

As for the 'Vinho Verde' many of the wines were 'own label' brands substantially sweetened to suit the British palate – as judged by the supermarket buyers. Apart from a slight spritz on the palate, these low alcohol (8-10% Alc.) rather tart wines seemed to me to lack any particular style or character. Normally there was no vintage on the label and no information about the grapes they were made from. Fortunately, we were able to call on the advice of Richard Mayson a fluent Portuguese speaker, who had published in 1992 the first book in English covering all Portugal's wine regions as well as listing most of the indigenous grape varieties and where they were grown which was an epic task!¹

At the Porto based Comissão for Vinho Verde, Richard and I found research was in progress to identify characteristics of the many local grapes in this ancient region. Although local wines were traditional blends of different grapes often cultivated and fermented together, we were able to taste experimental wines made from individual varieties. These had been allowed to ripen fully and showed their intriguingly different aromas and flavours. A ripe and delicious wine made with Alvarinho, a grape hardly mentioned in Portugal, but already commanding high prices in Spain, was followed by one varietal after another: Loureiro, Avesso, Trajadura and

more. Each wine quite different from the former. For almost fifty years the regime of Salazar had stifled innovation such as this and by the 1990s the benefits of the new freedoms were taking root all over Portugal. It was an exciting time to be talking about Portuguese wines!

Today I still prefer the more full-bodied wines from this region and here are some good ones: **Conde Villar Alvarinho 2019** (13.5% Alc.) £14.49 at Wine Rack; **Casal de Ventozela Alvarinho 2020** (13.5% Alc.) & **Casal de Ventozela Arinto 2019** (13.5% Alc.) - both £9.99 at Majestic.



Across the mountains in the Douro region a similar impulse for innovation was blossoming too. Here they already knew the best grapes in their armoury since these had been codified years before for producing Port wine. Almost eighty different white and red varieties were legally permitted but this had been whittled down to a 'Top five'² red grapes and a similar number of white ones widely acknowledged as the best to use when replanting vineyards.

Because the method of making Port is so different from normal wine, it requires a completely different set of priorities to start making unfortified wines. To make dry wine, fermentation has to be gentle and takes several days to complete. With Port, the grapes are pressed immediately (traditionally by foot treading in open tanks or 'lagares') and the objective is to obtain the maximum extraction of colour and tannins before the resulting wine is run off, spirit is added and this causes the fermentation to stop. To make dry wines in the modern style often requires picking the grapes more selectively and making considerable investments in hardware and monitoring equipment to ensure fermentations are kept at a steady temperature while the yeasts complete their task.

Not surprisingly, in this ultra-traditional region quite a few Port houses were reluctant to make these commitments and decided they would stick with Port wines even though sales of sweet fortified wines were in general decline.

Luckily there were some who believed that this ancient wine region with its unique panoply of established grape varieties could compete with the finest of the world's unfortified wines. Our policy was never to talk about Portuguese 'Table wines' because of the connotations with inferior 'Vins de table' wines in France and many other countries.

The pioneer who first started making unfortified wine in the Douro region was Fernando Nicolau de Almeida at the Port producer Ferreira. After returning from a visit to Bordeaux in 1950 he was determined to see what could be achieved using only the traditional Port grapes of the Douro. From some of the lower and warmer vineyards he selected grapes to give structure to the blend while those from higher altitudes provided the essential acidity for a long-lasting wine. For his first vintage in 1952, as there was no local electricity supply, he had blocks of ice shipped 120 km up the river to help control the fermentation temperature in the raging summer heat. 'Barca Velha' as the wine was called is still made in exceptional years but nowadays in a state-of-the-art modern winery. Widely regarded as the benchmark for top Portuguese wines, a bottle of Barca Velha costs in the region of £500.

By the late 1990s when organising visits for the UK press and wine buyers there were several other trail-blazers we could call on to show the potential of the Douro for making world-class wines. Some of these were quite small producers who had bravely invested in the latest winery equipment and who are now firmly established and recognised as top wine producers: Quinta da Gaivosa, Quinta de la Rosa, and Quinta do Crasto (available from The Wine Society) are certainly worth looking for when you are in a good wine bar or restaurant in Portugal.

Another original trailblazer of unfortified wines in the Douro is maverick winemaker Dirk Niepoort who released his first red wine in 1990 under the name 'Redoma'. In 1999 he followed this with a superb 'Redoma' white wine and later a rosé. Dirk showed it was possible in the Douro to produce elegant white wines at less than 12% alcohol with plenty of acidity by selecting the right grape varieties and picking the fruit early.

The speed of development in the Portuguese wine industry over the last twenty-five years has been simply phenomenal. New wineries are opening all the time, takeovers of existing ones by Portuguese and outside investors accelerate and wine listings are out of date almost as soon as they are published. This is particularly the case with the Douro and the Alentejo (see later). UK wine buyers are now well aware of the Douro as a source of ripe, full-bodied wines with a difference as well as for their excellent value.

Some you can easily find are: **Animus Douro Red** at Aldi – ridiculously cheap at £5.49; Morrison's '**The Best Douro Red**' - also very good value at £7.50 and **The Wine Society Exhibition Douro** which is made from the same vineyard as the original Barca Velha £14.50 – when it is in stock.



The remarkable Story of Mateus Rosé

It may surprise people to hear that rosé wines were never traditionally popular in Portugal. This makes the success of the Portuguese brand Mateus Rosé even more remarkable and the story is worth re-telling. In 1942 a group of Portuguese friends decided at a dinner party to set up a new company to export wine. One of the group was Fernando van Zeller Guedes whose family owned Quinta da Aveleda, a well-known Vinho Verde property at Penafiel east of Porto. This company already exported these dry lightly sparkling white wines to Brazil and Guedes had the idea of creating a new wine with the same sparkle but pink in colour and a bit sweeter to make it more appealing in export markets.



A new plant was set up and a special bottle was designed based on the water flask used by Portuguese soldiers in the first world war. Near to the new production plant was an old baroque mansion called the Palace of Mateus. Guedes approached the owners for permission to use the name with a picture of the property on the label. Faced with the choice of a single payment or a royalty on each bottle sold, the Count famously made the choice of taking the lump sum. He did however persuade Guedes to buy part of the annual production of his own vineyards in the Douro, at a value 40% higher than the he could obtain locally.

With German U-boats preventing neutral Portugal from selling its wines to their traditional European customers, the new company Sociedade Commercial dos Grandes Vinhos de Mesa de Portugal (now called Sogrape Vinhos S.A.) targeted their former colony of Brazil initially. Unfortunately in 1946 the Brazilian market collapsed while Europe was still in the grip of post-war austerity.

In the USA however, Mateus soon took off in a big way as their armed forces returned from Europe where they had developed a taste for drinking wine. It is hard to remember now what an astonishing success Mateus Rosé became. By the late 1980's annual sales had climbed to over 40 million bottles and the Mateus brand alone accounted for 40% of Portuguese wine

exports. In the UK everyone was seen with the unique Mateus bottle on their restaurant table. In the UK Danny Blanchflower raved about it, Elton John sang about it in his 1973 song "Social Disease": I get juiced on Mateus and just hang loose; and even the British Royal family were reputed to drink it.

Fernando Guedes turned out to be a superb salesman with a touch of genius for marketing. Travelling incessantly, he pursued a goal of conquering the world until Mateus was on sale in more than 120 countries. In Japan which became one the biggest markets, he introduced the brand with the slogan '*The Portuguese were the first to bring bread - now they bring you wine*'. Even Saddam Hussein was later found to have stockpiled Mateus in his palaces after he was deposed.

The real reason why Mateus is still so significant today is not because it is still very widely sold (every UK supermarket is still a stockist) but because the owners through their family-controlled business Sogrape invested the profits wisely to diversify and expand into more prestigious wines starting with the purchase of the famous Port house Ferreira in 1987. Along with the Port wines this company owned the prestigious Barca Velha wine label which is Portugal's answer to the famous Penfold's Grange in Australia or Vega Sicilia in Spain. Not content with buying some of the most prestigious wines in their home country, Sogrape also expanded abroad: now owning Finca Flichman in Argentina, as well as numerous wineries in Spain, Chile and New Zealand.



Dão and Bairrada – two hidden gems

South of Porto and the Douro lie two important wine regions **Dão** and **Bairrada** with their own unique wines and their famous food specialities.

Dão, my favourite wine region, lies inland bounded on three sides by mountains that provide protection from the excessive heat of central Spain in the summer and from the cold of the Atlantic in winter. The region is heavily forested with pine and eucalyptus trees and vineyards are found in the clearings mainly at 400m – 500m or even higher on the Eastern slopes of the Serra d'Estrela - mainland Portugal's highest mountain range. This region is famous for the king of Portuguese cheeses the 'Queijo da Serra' made from local ewes' milk mainly in the winter months at which point it spreads like butter. Later it hardens to become semi-cured and then finally cured when it can easily be sliced while still having the creamy texture and characteristic taste.

The climate in Dão is perfect for vines too and it was here the Sogrape company made one of their most strategic long-term investments with the profits of their Mateus brand. In 1988 they bought a 100 hectare estate called Quinta das Carvalhais. In the midst of the pine woods, orchards and hazelnut trees. Here they created a completely new winery with a capacity of producing 3 million litres of wine annually and handling the grapes from over 500 small local growers. On press visits a decade later we were shown how this was much more significant than a large winery that could meet mass market demand. Hidden behind the enormous stainless steel tanks were numerous mini-fermentation vessels to research individual grape varieties and particular vineyard sites and to compare many experimental blends. Everything was centrally controlled and monitored from one room on a bank of computer screens 24/7 - a feat which is which is far beyond the capability of most wineries today.

After years of stagnation under the regime of Salazar, individual wine growers in Dão were finally released from the obligation to sell their harvest to the local cooperatives and free to

make their own wines. There was a new dynamism particularly among small and medium size producers in the region keen to show what could be achieved using their traditional grapes. Dão red wines are normally a blend of three or more of the best grapes used in the Douro and can possess lovely ripe fruit aromas, great depth and concentration with plenty of ageing potential. For Dão whites the locals have a trump card with their local Encruzado grape. This can make fragrant, floral, delicious dry wines or when barrel fermented and left on the lees, they take on a soft complexity that is almost Burgundian in style. Dão wines are often listed in good restaurants but they are not so many UK retail stockists so far – see below.

To the west of Dão between the mountains and the coast, lies the wine region of Bairrada. With its fertile clay soils this is the only wine region in Portugal to be dominated by a single red grape variety: Baga. The Baga grape is high in acidity and quite tannic, making wines which soften with age and take on lovely perfumed aromas. These wines are perfect for drinking with the local meat speciality, roast suckling pig (Leitão) a truly delicious dish for which Bairrada is rightly famous. White wines are also made in Bairrada from another local grape ‘Bical’ that can produce scented, peachy wines in riper years and which has the crisp acidity to age in the bottle for more than a decade when it sometimes shows the classic petroleum like nose of mature Riesling.

Good Dão and Bairrada wines currently available in the UK include the **Agenda Dão Red** wine at Majestic £7.99 and **Vadio Branco, Bairrada 2019** at The Wine Society which they describe as ‘a blend of Bical and several other Portuguese grapes ‘with flashes of lemon citrus lifting more delicate white flower perfume’ at £14.50 and **Vadio Bairrada Tinto 2017** at The Wine Society also £14.50. ‘Crying out for the rich and fattier dishes the Baga grape complements so well. This is an elegant wine from a small family-owned estate, with cherry and raspberry fruit and firm tannin structure.’



Originally built for the King of Portugal, the Bussaco Palace hotel at Luso between Dão and Bairrada is known as ‘The Cathedral of Wine’ and is famous for producing its own wines and its cellar has vintages dating back more than 50 years.

South of Lisbon – Palmela & Setúbal

South of the river Tagus on the Atlantic coast lies the peninsula of Setúbal. This is a largely flat, sandy region incorporating two designated ‘DOC’ wine areas: **Palmela** and **Setúbal** where the Castelão grape is popular. These wine regions are two of my favourites because they can produce great wines and are often amazing value too.

Palmela red wines have plenty of concentration and ripe fruit character with aromas of raspberries. With extra aging in wood barrels they also show depth and complexity. Palmela also has the north-facing limestone slopes of Arrábida which are best suited for growing white grapes and here they make excellent white wines too.



One of the best Cooperatives in the whole of Portugal - Adega de Pegões (pronounced ‘peg-oysh’) is based in Palmela, With over 1,200 hectares of vineyards farmed by just 100 members they produce a wide range of excellent wines which are exported worldwide.

Pegões Colheita Seleccionada Branca 2019, at Majestic is fantastic value at £7.99. This is a blend of Arinto, Verdelho, Chardonnay, Antão Vaz and Fernão Pires.

I have been generally disappointed by the Portuguese wine selection at Laithwaites but they stock another white wine from Adega de Pegões which stood out for me: **Portinho do Corvo 2019** which is a fine blend of Verdelho and Fernão Pires.

Setúbal is home to one of Portugal’s most famous wine companies: José Maria da Fonseca. In 1850 this was the first company to sell a bottled red wine called ‘Periquita’ at a time when wines were always shipped in bulk. Bottling their own wine not only guaranteed authenticity but helped to build the brand name. Made from a blend of Castelão, Trincadeira and Aragonês, Periquita is still in production today and exported worldwide. The Setúbal region is also renowned for its fortified sweet Muscat wines. The Muscat grape variety which is not found in other parts of mainland Portugal was almost certainly introduced by the Romans. ‘Moscatel de Setúbal’ differs from most other sweet wines because after fermentation is stopped in the traditional way by adding spirit, the grape skins are left in the wine for several months. This accentuates the aromas and flavours of the Muscat grape. The wine is then transferred to large oak or mahogany vats and after four or five years it turns from orange colour to mahogany brown and the candy flavours transform into subtle tastes of dried figs, apricot, prune and raisin. In José Maria da Fonseca’s cellars they hold casks of these superb wines going back to the late 1880s. Their best commercially available version ‘**Alambre**’ guaranteed to be at least twenty years old sells at Waitrose for £7.99 a half bottle.



Alentejo - Portugal’s ‘New World’ is based on ancient roots

We will probably never know for sure how Portugal came to possess such a huge number of indigenous grape varieties but there are plenty of hints how wine making started in the south of the country.



Alentejo Vines at Quinta do Quetzal Photo by João Silva

From prehistoric times the Heraklean Way was a well-known ancient path that followed a line along the diagonal of the sun's summer solstice. Starting in Portugal at Sacred Point (Ponta da Sagres) on the edge of the continent it crosses Iberia, southern France and then the Alps in a straight line - the same route used by Hannibal of Carthage with his elephants when he invaded Rome in 218 BC.³

Well before that, in the 9th century BC, the Phoenicians had established their colony at Carthage and extended trade links round the Sacred Point at least as far North as the Douro river where they found lucrative sources of tin from Gaul and Britain. They also brought with them knowledge of viticulture, wine and the means to transport it in clay vessels called amphora(e).

In Alentejo the tradition of using amphorae for storing and fermenting wines never completely died out. In the late 1990s we would take journalists to taste wines stored in these ancient clay pots (called 'Talha' in Portuguese) and compare them with wines from the same harvest fermented in stainless steel. The former always seemed more interesting to me with a softer feel on the palate. This may have been psychological but I knew their curiosity was guaranteed to make a good headline and these unusual wines fetched a premium price.

More recently, interest in amphora winemaking has spread world-wide partly as a reaction to the ubiquitous stainless steel. 'Egg Fermenters' are the latest trend. Ovoid shapes ensure any grape mass floating to the top remains immersed and the lack of sharp edges improves fluid dynamics so there are no 'dead spots' and the wine is more homogenous. All these ideas derive from the ancient amphora vessel and today there is a specially designated origin 'Alentejo-Talha' DOC for wines made in this way.



The José de Sousa Cellar – Photo by Jerónimo Heitor Coelho



Despite these old traditions, the province of Alentejo ('beyond the Tagus') is now considered Portugal's 'New World' for winemaking. Comprising a third of Portugal's land mass, the horizons here are vast, skies are blue and the rolling plains and undulating hills stretch from the Atlantic to the Spanish border. This is a land of olives, cork oaks, sheep and the Iberian pig of 'Pata Negra' fame. Summer temperatures regularly reach 35°C and in contrast to the densely populated north of the country, Alentejo is home to less than 6% of the population. The ancient city of Évora, once a very backward provincial capital is now extremely fashionable. In the last 25 years wealthy Portuguese as well as foreigners have been buying up estates, investing huge sums and creating vineyards as perceptions changed. Top Alentejo wines now command high prices and many wineries encourage visitors with daily tastings and local gastronomy.

Near the old fortified town of Reguengos de Monsaraz built on the river Guadiana as a defence against marauding Spanish, lies Esporão a 700 ha estate dating back to the 13th century. The present owners bought the property in 1973 just before the revolution after which it was taken over by a worker's collective that held sway for several years. Consequently, Esporão only started to produce and bottle its own wines in 1985. Head of winemaking is Australian David Baverstock who has worked in Portugal for many years and admires its unique terroirs and grape varieties. Over the past 40 years and at huge cost, the Esporão estate has been transformed. It now has its own dam to secure water for irrigation and a nursery that grows over 190 (mainly Portuguese) grape varieties. Almost 40 of these are in commercial production and the estate soon hopes to become officially certified as an organic wine producer.



The Roman Temple at Évora Photo Credit Alentejo Promotion Office

Esporão welcomes visitors for vineyard tours, wine tastings and to eat in the restaurant as well as buy their wines and olive oils. In the UK their main selling brand is Monte Velho which is available from The Wine Society as a red and white wine. The red is a blend of Touriga Nacional, Aragonez, Syrah and Trincadeira and the white is made from Antão Vaz, Perrum and Roupeiro – both good reliable wines priced at £8.50 a bottle.

Another highly influential Portuguese winemaker is João Portugal Ramos commonly referred to as 'JPR' who has been advising wineries all around Portugal since the 1980's. In 1997 he built his own winery near Estremoz in Alentejo where he now has 500 hectares of vineyards.

JPR's wines are always well made and at the lower price ranges, they offer particularly good value for money. He also makes wines under his 'Falua' label in the Tejo region.

Here are a couple of good value Alentejo red wines which are easy to find: **Cidade Branca** is a red wine made by João Portugal Ramos selling at £8 in Morrison's and **Gaião** is another Alentejano red which is good value at £7.99 at Wine Rack.



The Future and Climate Change

One of the benefits of climate change and the rise in global temperatures is that it is now possible to make seriously good wines in the UK. Whereas thirty years ago, it was accepted that we couldn't successfully grow the classical varieties required for making Champagne, this is no longer the case. Each year that passes more red grapes are being cultivated in the UK and transformed into award-winning red wines too.

In 'New World' wine producing countries of the Southern hemisphere however and even some European regions, it is becoming increasingly difficult to make acceptable, well-balanced wines using the traditional or legally permitted grape varieties. Here in Portugal mother nature is offering possible solutions. Recent DNA analysis has shown most of the indigenous grapes found in Portugal were at one time wild vines growing naturally.⁴

This small wine producing country on the edge of Europe with its unusual diversity of soil types, terroirs and unusual weather systems is nature's showcase for overcoming some of the challenges facing viticulture. Already there are over 70 Australian wine producers growing Touriga Nacional the leading red grape of the Douro and another of the wild grapes of Portugal – Verdelho – has more area under cultivation in Australia than in the whole of Portugal. Verdelho was chosen, I am sure, because of its ability to maintain a good level of acidity even in high temperatures.

A-Z of the main Portuguese grapes

Portugal has at least 250 indigenous varieties. Many of these are difficult for foreigners to pronounce. To make things more complicated many grapes go by different names in different regions. The following is a list of the most important 'castas' or grapes you are likely to find on a wine label or on a wine list.

If you can retain some of these you will be well on your way to holding your own with any restaurant sommelier or in a wine shop 'Vinoteca/loja de vinhos'. Believe me you will be amply rewarded for showing a little knowledge and interest by the enthusiasm of the responses you receive.

White Grapes

Alvarinho - mainly grown in the Minho (NW Portugal) where Vinho Verde comes from. Known as Albariño in Spain, this produces crisp, aromatic wines with notes of peach, apple and citrus fruits with a mineral character.

Antão Vaz - one of the best white grapes that thrives in Alentejo and Setúbal. Can be picked early for its crisp acidity or left on the vine to ripen for making more full-bodied wines with a great breadth of flavours.

Arinto - one of Portugal's oldest grape varieties which almost certainly originated in Bucelas north of Lisbon. Widely grown today in northern and central Portugal to produce dry, tangy wines with plenty of acidity and citrus fruit flavours. Known as padernã in Vinho Verde.

Bical - A popular grape in Bairrada and Dão with plenty of acidity, hence it is often used for making sparkling wine. In warmer vintages it can produce wonderfully scented peach like wines.

Encruzado - the most important white variety in the region of Dão and increasingly appreciated elsewhere. A productive grape with a remarkable balance of sugar and acidity giving it the

capacity to stand on its own as a varietal wine. Can take on Burgundian characters when aged on the lees or barrel fermented.

Fernão pires - Portugal's most planted white grape (known as Maria Gomes in Bairrada), this is a versatile grape making crisp, aromatic wines with lowish acidity and floral notes.

Loureiro - one of the most fragrant of the grapes used to make Vinho Verde.

Verdelho - The second most popular grape in Madeira where its acidity is a useful counter to other sweeter varieties. Now popularised by two Aussie winemakers David Baverstock at Esporão and Peter Bright at Terras d'Alter in Alentejo where they use it to make good white wines with crisp acidity. Increasingly adopted in Australia.

Viosinho - Considered to be one of the leading white grapes in the Douro, it is now cultivated in Tejo, Lisboa and further south. A slight lack of acidity means this variety is most successful when grown at higher altitudes and along the Atlantic coast where it can make good, dry, aromatic wines.

Red

Alicante Bouschet - This red grape is unusual because both the skin and the flesh are red which gives full bodied inky-coloured wines. Very popular in Alentejo where it is nearly always part of a blend.

Aragonez/Aragonês - known as Tinta Roriz in northern Portugal, this is the same as Tempranillo in Spain. One of the principal Douro grapes rightly prized for its rich tannins and aromatic, raspberry, red-fruit flavours.

Alfrocheiro - though not especially widely planted, this is a very promising variety beloved of winemakers for its deep-coloured, well-balanced wines, but not liked by vine growers due to its susceptibility to rot.

Baga - mainly grown in Bairrada but found also in Dão this late-ripening variety can make lean tannic reds but in the right hands, dense wines with bright cherry fruit are possible capable of long ageing. Also used as a base for sparkling wine.

Castelão - one of the most widely planted varieties, particularly in the south where it is often called Periquita, making fleshy, fruity, sometimes gamey reds for short or long-term keeping.

Touriga Nacional - the backbone of many Ports and now appreciated for the quality of its red wines too. Small grapes give a high concentration of colour, extract, sweetness, and aroma, which makes it ideal for longer term ageing.

Trincadeira - one of the most widespread varieties in Portugal. Makes excellent dry red wines with blackcurrant fruit flavours and herbaceous, floral aromas.

1. 'The Wines of Portugal' by Richard Mayson has recently been re-published and completely updated in 2020: www.infiniteideas.com

2. The Top 5 red grapes in The Douro: Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca / Francesa, Tinta Roriz, Tinta Cão, Tinta Barroca.

Top 5 white grapes: Gouveio (Godello in Spain); Malvasia Fina, Rabigato; Roupeiro, Viosinho.

3. <https://oxfordastrologer.com/2015/07/were-the-celts-astrologers.html>

4. From Dr Jamie Goode, an acknowledged UK expert on wine who, unusually, has a scientific qualification (a PhD in plant biology): <https://dracaenawines.com/dao-the-hidden-gem-of-portugal/>

WINES WORTH FIGHTING FOR ...

English involvement with the wines of Portugal goes back to the foundation of the state. Breaking away from the Christian Kingdom of Galicia in 1139, Alfonso I declared himself the first King of Portugal with his capital at Guimarães north of the Douro. After several victories against the occupying Moors in the south, he advanced steadily and by 1147 was threatening their stronghold in Lisbon. By coincidence in May that year, a fleet of knights left Dartmouth in England to sail to the Holy Land as part of the Second Crusade. Bad weather however forced them to shelter at the city of Porto where Alfonso encouraged them to join his fight against the Moors in Portugal instead. Over many goblets of Portuguese wine an agreement was reached and following a siege of four months, Lisbon was successfully taken.

Nearly all of the crusading knights decided to remain in Portugal and thus started 600 years of flourishing trade between Portugal and England. Initially English cloth was exchanged for fruit, olive oil, and wine. Later when the Portuguese developed an enormous liking for salted cod or 'bacalhau' the waters around Britain were an excellent resource and their wines were always welcome in return too. In times of war between Britain and Spain or more frequently Britain and France, Portugal has always provided a reliable source of wine for English merchants. Tastes in wines have changed but whether it is sweet wines like Port, Madeira or Moscatel de Setúbal or the white wines of Bucelas (based on the Arinto grape) so favoured by the Duke of Wellington and highly popular in England after the Peninsular War, the treaty of friendship between Britain and Portugal has always ensured that a reliable source of wine is available.



The Alhandra Monument near Lisbon commemorates the victory of the Anglo-Portuguese troops over the Napoleonic armies, and the construction of the impregnable Lines of Torres Vedras 1809 -1810.