

ARTICLE ARCHIVE

Portugal

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ho's got "next?" Whether you are a shell-shocked consumer looking for alternatives to soaring prices in familiar regions, or just someone wanting new experiences in wine, one good answer might be the dry, red table wines of Portugal. If you are a typical wine lover, when you think of the wines of Portugal your first thought has to be of the great fortifieds, particularly the famous Ports of the Douro Valley. If you know any of the dry wines, your most likely experiences have been with inexpensive low end wines, from simple reds to Mateus Rosé. Yet, quietly but steadily, Portugal has developed a dry table wine industry that provides both good values at the low end, and at the high end, some exceptional wines. Although more famous for the reds, on which this article focuses, many of Portugal's whites also pleasantly surprised me.

This first article, while including wines from many regions, and even a few whites, is intended to turn the spotlight on Douro reds in particular for a few simple reasons. First, the Douro is certainly Portugal's most famous wine region, due to its Port wine production. The year 2006 marked its 250th anniversary as a demarcated wine region, making it the oldest demarcated wine region in the world. As such, it has a cachet that is unmatched by any other region in Portugal.

The Port connection is meaningful for something besides public relations, too. The grape varietals typically used in the Douro dry reds are those that you will likely find in most Ports. These are the varietals with which the Douro winemakers are used to working. In one fashion or another, the Port industry has supplied human and financial resources for the dry, red revolution. At the most obvious level, noted Port producers, including The Symington Family Estates, Niepoort and Ramos Pinto, have used their resources and knowledge of these grapes to create high quality red table wines.

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Additionally, individuals with strong connections to the Port industry have turned their attention to dry reds. To take one of the most notable examples, Cristiano van Zeller left Quinta do Noval to focus on dry wines, which he produces under the Lemos & van Zeller name from Quintas such as Quinta Vale D. Maria.

Finally, my tastings confirm that no other region is making as many interesting and distinctive wines as the Douro. I do intend to focus on other regions as time goes on. The Southern Portuguese region of Alentejo is the next likely candidate, and it will likely emerge as Douro's principal competitor. The competition, in fact, is already heating up. I listened to Douro winemakers deride Alentejo as "international." Meanwhile, one wine professional with ties to Alentejo made a crack about the rustic tannins still present in many Douro wines that make them seem like Port. While there is some validity to both comments, the blunt truth is that my tastings confirm that the vast majority of important producers making truly distinguished and distinctive wines come from the Douro as of this writing.

If these wines have been flying under your radar, don't feel guilty – even Douro winemakers describe an industry that is changing constantly and quickly, and only recently developing a respectable number of fine, artisanal wine producers. You can find lots of predictions from wine writers over the years concerning the potential of Portuguese dry, red wines, but the examples to back up the predictions have been relatively few until recently. Production in the past was often dominated by co-ops and other commercial entities known more for quantity than quality. Go back just fifteen years, and the industry would look completely different, which, incidentally, is roughly when I last surveyed them, finding not much of interest. In a single generation – most people use Portugal's 1986 entry into the European Union as the starting point – everything has changed.

Without turning this article into a treatise on Portugal's increasingly complicated classification system, the most important appellations have DOC (Denominacao de Origem Controlada...similar to France's "AOC") status. Some of the better known DOC appellations include Douro, Daõ and Bairrada in the North, and Alentejo and Ribatejo in the South. It is also common to see the

broader, less restrictive "Vinho Regional" designation instead of DOC at times. If the wine does not qualify for or chooses to reject the Bairrada DOC designation, for instance, you may just see instead "*Vinho Regional Beiras*" – wine from the Beiras region. Although in theory the *Vinho Regional* designation is not as prestigious as the DOC, many VRs are in fact very good wines that are fully the equal of many DOCs.

Not surprisingly, other wine interests have taken notice of Portugal's progress, too. For example, Jean-Michel Cazes (Chateau Lynch Bages) has a cooperative project with Quinta do Crasto, one of the finest dry, red producers in the Douro. Bruno Prats (Chateau Cos d'Estournel) has a cooperative project with The Symington Family (owners of Dow and Grahams Ports, among others). German winemakers own Quinta do Carvalhosa, and Frenchman Vincent Bouchard, of the Burgundy Bouchards, owns Quinta do Tedo, to name just a few foreigners investing in Portugal. That does not even include foreigners who are not actually owners. For example, Quinta do Crasto has a winemaking team that includes an Australian and a Spaniard.

To be sure, this is still an "arriving" region, one that will look radically different in another decade or so, as current winemakers mature, and other talented ones start up. Even now, one winemaker suggested to me that there were at best only a couple of dozen quality producers in the Douro Valley. From my perspective, there were many good wines available that anyone should be proud to own, and a lot that were very well priced, but there were not yet many "Omigod!" moments. There were also examples of why this is a still a work in progress. Many of the most famous wines are so new that there is little evidence of how the wines will age and develop, an important issue in creating truly great wines. Sometimes, I could taste through a lineup, and it would be obvious that the winery was struggling to find its style. By tasting the wines, it seemed as if I could almost understand their thought process, and what issues they grappled with. Sometimes, too, it would seem as if the struggle was to find a way to justify the higher priced wines, the prestige bottlings. Often, I found the mid-level Tintos and Reservas to be the sweet spots in the lineup. They were frequently of high quality, sometimes about as

good as higher priced bottlings, and sometimes better balanced as well. This is, to be sure, a generalization, with all that word implies.

All that said, Portuguese cult wines are already here, and have been for some time. *Barca Velha* was launched in the early 1950s when Ferreira (a winery since sold to Sogrape, the largest wine corporation in Portugal) decided to make a dry table wine blended from the typical grape varieties that go into Port wine. Like Penfold's Grange in Australia, it was a seminal wine, something different and unusually prestigious. Plus, it created the style that most emulate today in the Douro – blends of traditional varietals used in Port wines rather than single varietal wines.

The success of *Barca Velha* guaranteed nothing, however. As Dirk Niepoort, of the eponymous Port house told me, after *Barca Velha* there was relatively little of importance produced for a long while, and Portugal certainly did not become synonymous with quality red table wines. Niepoort himself started producing red table wines *circa* 1990. Compared to many of the most talked about producers in the Douro Valley today, he counts as an old timer. Other important producers gradually emerged throughout the '90s. In short, the Portuguese red table wine industry was destined to grow slowly, and in fits and starts.

Today, Portugal maintains an interesting blend of old and new. Modern techniques often seem to go together with old traditions. Many of the producers still have the grapes foot trodden at harvest time, for instance. The modern equipment is often right nearby.

There are many good values, but don't expect big bargains on the famous wines, especially after you add the markups necessary for them to get into the United States. The price the wine can sell for becomes a status symbol, but that does not always equate to quality. These wines are not well-known in the USA, but they are highly valued in their own market – sometimes, I think, a little *too* highly valued – and prices can be high.

Finally, from what I saw and tasted, in Portugal and in the USA, Portugal's time would definitely seem to be now. Simply put, the train is rolling down the tracks and gathering speed. It's time to take a ride. —Mark Squires