

Portugal With An Emphasis on Alentejo

Our last article on Portugal focused on the Douro Valley region, although tasting notes were presented from many regions. This issue, although tasting notes are again presented from many regions, the accompanying article has an emphasis on the important region of Alentejo (Al-en-TEH-jo), the principal competitor to the Douro at the moment. While much of the excitement in the U.S.A. regarding Portugal's table wines focuses on the hot wines from the Douro, in Portugal itself Alentejo wines have a high profile, and are just as popular--or even more so.

Simply put, Alentejo is the fire to Douro's ice. Two more different regions can hardly be imagined. The Douro, atmospheric, rugged and remote, is nestled in the Northeastern corner of Portugal, several hours North of Lisbon. Alentejo (literally, "beyond the Tejo River") is a vast region in Portugal's South, but much of Alentejo is easily accessible from Lisbon. Its Southern capital city, Beja, is about two hours South of Lisbon by car.

Alentejo is sparsely populated, containing only about 7.5% of Portugal's population despite comprising approximately 34% percent of Portugal's land mass. It is divided into four administrative districts. The cities of Beja (pop. 35,000), Évora (the largest city with a population of 50,000) and Portalegre (pop. 25,000) anchor three of the districts. The fourth district, called Alentejo Litoral, has no anchor or so-called "capital" city. Although Évora is between Portalegre in the North and Beja in the South, Évora and Beja are customarily referred to respectively as the capitals of Alto (Upper) Alentejo and Baixo (Low) Alentejo.

Particularly in the Southern part of the region, the flat landscape, in sharp contrast to the Douro's steep and beautiful hills, can turn monotonous. People seem few and far between. It is dotted with sprawling farms, olive and cork trees, cattle, sheep, pigs and, increasingly, vineyards, many of which are springing up out of nowhere. Sectors around Évora and Estremoz are more interesting, but still no match for the breathtaking views of the Douro.

Stereotypically, Alentejo wines are appreciated for good quality to price ratios at the lower end and fruit forward approachability. "Their wines are easy," said one competitor. That increasingly unreliable stereotype is a back handed compliment, to be sure, and it was never totally true, as structured wines like Quinta do Carmo have proven for decades. It also ignores the increasing number of producers making serious, powerful and ageworthy wines.

Alentejo is a contender for the title, but the Douro is Portugal's best wine region. While, as noted previously, there is little in Alentejo to compare to the Douro's picturesque scenery, there is also, more pertinently, little to compare to the Douro's old vineyards and centuries old winemaking traditions. The Douro's connection to an existing, world famous wine industry--the Port trade--is a huge advantage for its table wine makers. The Port industry provides human and financial resources, a stable foundation and a tradition for the region. It is not surprising that the Douro stirs the blood of rabid enthusiasts with its history, romance and rugged *terroir*.

That, however, is hardly the end of the story. Alentejo is an increasingly prominent and prestigious region that cannot be ignored. It has certain advantages over the

Douro, including the ease and cost of harvesting and planting. If that flat landscape lacks the sheer majesty of the Douro's steep hills, it makes vineyard management much easier and cheaper. If its traditions are not as old, its freedom to experiment often produces excellent results. If Alentejo does not, in my opinion, have *quite* as many distinctive and exciting wines as the Douro at this time, it has *very* serious people making substantial investments who are rapidly changing that dynamic.

Change is in the air, in many respects. Circa 1990, Alentejo had a handful of co-ops, and approximately two dozen producers. Today, about fifteen years later, official figures as of this writing show 237 producers, an astonishing growth. Local producers are speculating that this rapid growth may in fact soon halt, as it was partly encouraged by a subsidy program that may end shortly, perhaps causing dozens of wineries and growers to disappear. One producer estimated that one-third of the wineries might vanish. Coupled with European Union attempts to reduce a glut of wine (consumption in the EU is down, and imports are up), the region's explosive growth may at least pause in the near future.

Classification

Portugal's wine classification makes "Alentejo" on the label a D.O.C., similar to France's A.O.C. and Italy's D.O.C. There are eight sub-regions classified within the Alentejo DOC: Borba, Reguengos, Moura, Redondo, Granja-Amareleja, Évora, Portalegre, and Vidigueira. While nearly all of the well known wines that you see in the Douro are DOCs, in less traditional Alentejo there is rebellion evident analogous to the Super Tuscan phenomenon. Many wineries simply opt out of the *Alentejo* DOC's requirements and designate most of their wines with the broader *Vinho Regional Alentejano* classification. Although in theory the "DOC" is the top of the quality line, in practice there is often no stigma to being a VR, particularly in Alentejo. Carrie Jorgensen, co-owner of Cortes de Cima, asserted: "The best wines are VRs in Alentejo." She added, "Alentejo is good for outlaws."

Given this independent streak, it is not surprising that Alentejo has developed a reputation for making "international" wines. Producers often use internationally familiar varieties like Syrah to blend into popular local grapes like Aragonez (*uh-RAG-o-nesh*, also known as Tempranillo in Spain and Tinta Roriz in the Douro) and Trincadeira (also known as Tinta Amarela in the Douro). Producers are also increasingly adopting Touriga Nacional (the Douro's signature varietal). It seems to be a grape that will do very well in Alentejo.

Climate and Vintages

Alentejo's climate is dry and often brutally hot, although the Northern sub-region is a bit cooler than the South. Locals talk of interior temperatures from the hottest areas hitting 47C (117F) in the Summer. Work in the vineyards generally ends early in the afternoon. In fact, winemakers told me of various days in certain vintages where it just seemed impossible to work at all due to the extreme heat. It also seems to be getting hotter. It was not so long ago that 2003 was talked about as one of the hottest years ever in Alentejo. Yet, locals called 2005 equally scorching. They added that extreme, prolonged heat in 2006 seriously harmed the vintage.

As in the Douro, the trio of vintages from 2003-2005 produced many excellent wines

overall. Most producers pick **2004** as the best recent vintage, a view with which I concur as a generalization. It produced structured, dense and generally well balanced wines. Although I rank 2004 at the top, it is dangerous to generalize over a region this large with so many wineries that have different philosophies and, more importantly, different experience levels with their vineyards. It was a good Aragonese year for most, which is significant, said several producers, because it means that it did not get unbearably hot. In unusually hot years, those producers said that they rely on Syrah more. **2003** and **2005** were both extremely hot years that produced many excellent wines. They are not as consistent as the '04s, but there are many fine wines, ripe and succulent. If you see older vintages on the market, the **2001s** are powerful but focused, coming closer to 2004, and the **2000s** are succulent and rich.

The weakest recent vintages are clearly 2002 and 2006. **2002** was problematic in most of Portugal, as well as much of Europe. Picking at the right time did allow some wineries to produce good wines. Extreme heat and rain at the wrong times badly marred **2006**. David Baverstock, winemaker at Esporão, said that "2003 and 2005 were very hot, but manageable. 2006 was very hot, but not manageable." Based on my tastings (which have yet to include many top 2006 reds), one saving grace to 2006 is the performance of the white wines. From what I saw in Alentejo, good producers often turned out nice *Branços*, as whites are called in Portugal, far exceeding the reputation of the vintage--and of Alentejo, which is not exactly famed for its white wines. Most producers aim to correct that, and, citing consumer demand, spoke of a renewed emphasis on their *Branços*. I predict that white wines are going to become a point of pride in Portugal in general, and Alentejo in particular.

Some Final Thoughts

The stereotype of Alentejo being merely a fruit forward, good value region is plainly outdated. There are certainly many producers content to fill a niche of providing bang for the buck, with little pretension to greatness. There is, to be sure, something to be said for that. At the same time, while Alentejo has always had some flagships, the region is developing an exciting group of wineries that can act as additional standard bearers and adding them to existing stalwarts like Quinta do Mouro, João Portugal Ramos, Cortes de Cima, Esporão, Quinta do Carmo, Mouchão and Fundação Eugénio Almeida (*a.k.a.*, Adega Cartuxa). Promising young wineries with little profile in the U.S.A. include Malhadinha Nova, Zambujeiro and beautiful Dona Maria, among others.

Alentejo also has personalities that can be effective ambassadors to the world, from country gentleman Júlio Bastos at Dona Maria (formerly at Quinta do Carmo), to gregarious João Portugal Ramos, and passionate João and Rita Soares at Malhadinha Nova. Influential winemaker David Baverstock runs Herdade do Esporão. He helped shape the early years at prominent Douro wineries like Quinta do Crasto, Quinta de la Rosa and Fojo. These are folks who collectively may need to pay a little more attention to marketing the region, and not just their wineries, if the region is to become as famous in the USA as it is in Portugal. In the USA, the recognizable brand name for Portuguese dry reds is more likely to be "Douro" than anything else. The Port connection, again, gives the Douro a head start in consumer awareness.

Its growth and increasing quality make Alentejo one more wine region to put on your list. Here is your chance to get ahead of the curve, because in the next decade there

are going to be an increasing number of wines that people will want to talk about coming from Alentejo. There is already a substantial core group that is impressive and intriguing, and of course the region is chock full of fine bargains. I found many wines that were very pleasing for under 10 Euros--even some under 5. Hopefully, exchange rates will not destroy all of these values and some of them will make it to our shores. Most winemakers I spoke to, however, were increasingly concerned--and sometimes on the verge of panic--about the exchange rate problem.

Still, whether you are a bargain hunter or a trophy hunter, you will ignore Alentejo at your peril.

A Few Words About the Douro's New Vintages

Portugal's most famous wine region is now presenting or about to present many 2005s in the marketplace. I did not see many of these for my last report, but I now have a better idea of what they are likely to become.

The trio of vintages, 2003-2005, as in Alentejo, produced many excellent wines, although they are very differently styled. As in Alentejo, I believe **2004** is the best of this trio of vintages, producing concentrated, ageworthy and intense wines with excellent fruit that generally still retain their balance and focus. They are powerful, but they also have some precision, balance and focus. I believe that they will age well. Many producers indicated it was one of Portugal's best ever vintages for dry wines--if not *the* best, considering recent improvements in dry wine making as well as vintage conditions.

Vintage **2003** was the year that shocked most of Europe with scorching heat. In 2003, most producers indicated that it was harder for them to keep the wines in balance than it was in 2004. My tastings would seem to confirm that as some of the wines (not all, by any means) showed a little heat after long aeration. The vintage is a bit more inconsistent than 2004. The wines that work well, and many do, are ripe, succulent and sexy. They are more approachable and less dense than the 2004s, but often simply delicious. As the wines continue developing, it seems apparent that they are not quite as well structured overall as the 2004s, but at their best, consumers will find a lot to like from these wines.

2005 was a difficult year because it had so little rain, unusual even for the relatively dry Douro. Some producers said that they feared the grapes would not ripen properly. Many also reported slightly lower alcohol levels. The word "freshness" came up repeatedly in conversations to describe these wines. Where the wines have problems, it is the opposite problem of the 2003s--some can be too understated for their own good.

It is almost an old joke to report that many producers to whom I spoke thought their 2005s were their best releases ever, exceeding the performance of their 2004s-- that they touted as their best ever vintage just twelve months ago. The punch line here is that, at least for a lucky few, they may not too far from wrong. Charles Symington (Symington Family) probably summed it up most succinctly in calling 2005 "a winemaker's year," because the best wines from some top producers lack little and hold up well, more or less, to their 2004s and 2003s. There are many reasons for this, from some relatively new producers continuing to refine their craft (such as

Pintas, Poeira), to some dedicated producers simply making the most of what nature gave them (such as Quinta do Crasto, Lemos & Van Zeller, and Vale Meão). Overall, however, I would say that the 2005s are less consistently excellent, lighter and less concentrated than the 2004s. At the lower end, or if they are not fully successful, they can seem routine and foursquare. Many such will be early maturing. They certainly have more finesse than the big vintages preceding them, and considerable charm. While they match neither the succulence of the '03s, nor the density and intensity of the '04s, the best of them are often lovely, impeccably balanced and seductive. The best of them will find many fans, particularly those looking for a little more restraint in this warm climate region. This is likely an atypical vintage for the Douro, as a couple of producers asserted.

Wine of the vintage candidates include Vale Meão's flagship Tinto, Lemos & Van Zeller's *CV*, Crasto's *Maria Teresa*, Wine & Soul's *Pintas* and Vallado's new old vines cuvée, *Adelaide*.

2006, as in Alentejo, is a problematic vintage that will end the Douro's run of luck for the moment. It is impossible to say just how badly at the moment since most top 2006 reds have not been bottled or released. It was a year featuring a dry Winter, then both heavy rain at times and hailstorms, which missed many vineyards but affected others seriously. Some reported a loss of 70% to 80% of the new crop. Quinta de Roriz, for one notable instance, lost half of its crop. Some producers indicated that the crop was smaller, but fine. Just to complete the hat trick, however, extended heat also harmed the grapes at times. The Summer of 2006 was the 5th hottest on record since 1931.

Note: In this article, you will see references to how wines drank on the next day. For your information, since it probably affects how quickly wines age and deteriorate, when I put wines away to try the next day, I stopper them and refrigerate them overnight.

—Mark Squires