

Plumbing the Depths of Portugal: A Tasting Journey



In the pantheon of global wine regions, Portugal doesn't rank among the most storied, at least as far as the average wine lover is concerned. Most wine drinkers have heard of, if not tasted Port, the dark, rich dessert wine named after the town at the mouth of the Douro river in the country's north. I may be on the younger side of a generation of wine drinkers that were both enthusiastically, and sometimes regrettably (after a few bottles) familiar with Mateus Rosé, which proved, in my case, to be somewhat of a gateway wine.

Fewer wine lovers have encountered the brisk, lean minerality of a Vinho Verde from the DOC (Denominação de Origem Controlada) region of the same name, or the salty sweet, amber enigma of Madeira from the little island in the country's south. Beyond these relatively well-known examples, much of Portugal's rich wine landscape remains unknown to all but the most experienced wine lovers and Master Sommelier candidates.

This is despite Portugal's long history of wine growing and making that stretches back as far as most of its European neighbors. By most counts, the country is home to more than 250 different native grape varieties, and perhaps unlike most other countries in the world, every square inch of its territory falls within the bounds of a designated wine region. There is literally not a single place in the country that couldn't legally put wine into a bottle with an appellation on the label.

I had tasted more than a few Portuguese wines before my trip to Portugal last week, thanks to an over-developed sense of curiosity and a fabulous wine scene here in San Francisco, but I embarked on my recent journey with the desire to significantly deepen my understanding of what the country had to offer. To that end, ViniPortugal kindly organized a whirlwind tour of several wine regions that kicked off with a visit to the country's annual wine exposition in Lisbon.



As part of that exhibition, ViniPortugal arranged an extraordinary tasting of some of the country's most unique, rare, and storied wines. To guide this tasting, they brought in João Paulo Martins, a 25-year-veteran wine writer and author of the country's comprehensive annual wine review *Revista de Vinhos*, which is currently in its 22nd printing.

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"This tasting will focus on wines that would be, for you, probably difficult to taste because they don't exist in foreign markets, largely because of their low production," said Martins as he began. "We will be focusing especially on Portuguese grape varieties."

The next two hours were a tour de force of Portugal's remarkable history and prowess as a wine producer. Here are the wines that set the bar for what Portugal can do.

(...)

1992 Barbeito Sercial Madeira

Medium amber in the glass, this wine smells of crushed nuts and dried exotic citrus peels. In the mouth, burnt citrus peels, brown sugar, and very saline qualities wash over the palate in a shifting kaleidoscope of flavor. Phenomenal acidity and length makes for a wine that tastes almost dry, despite 53 grams of residual sugar. 100 half bottles made. Score: around **9**. Cost: \$120

Madeira might as well be in its own special universe, so unique and different is it from the rest of wines produced in Portugal, or the world for that matter. This small volcanic island 625 miles off the coast of Portugal most likely began producing relatively normal table wine shortly after being settled in the 1400s. By the 16th century, it had become a regular stop for ships leaving Europe and heading to Africa and Asia, who often loaded up on wine to bring to these exotic destinations. The wines were generally ruined by the time they reached their destination, until local producers began fortifying them which dramatically improved their longevity. Often, a shipment of wine would not be completely sold, and would make the return trip back to Madeira. In these cases, the wine had been subjected to months, and sometimes years of sea air, sun, and the turbulence of travel. A preference for the oxidized, saline, highly-acidic, and seemingly ageless quality of these wines developed, and the Madeira industry was born.

Calling it an industry might be overstating the case, even today when it is widely heralded as the world's longest lived wine and one of the greatest fortified wines of the world. Madeira has only six commercial producers on the island.

