

Wine & Spirits

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Carmenere

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Old Portugal

By Deanna Gonnella

Portugal first entered my life in the form of a 500-milliliter bottle. I was working at *Betony*, in Midtown Manhattan as a sommelier. One February afternoon, I was in the cellar, tearing through a new shipment of cases. I started pulling out bottles that were nearly as old as me—1997, 1996—then others that were more than twice my age—1969, 1967, 1965—then nearly four times my age—1934, 1931...

Dean Fuerth was the newly minted wine director and on a tear, filling in a skeleton of a list. He flew down the stairs, snatched the youngest and smallest bottle, from 2006, and brought me into the private dining room to taste our new by-the-glass pour. I've never seen someone more excited to shimmy a cork out of a bottle.

That Colares came into my life when I needed inspiration. It even led me to a part-time retail job at Vintry Fine Wines, after I noticed their stock of back vintages. When interviewing for future jobs, Colares became the answer to the inevitable question, "What is your favorite wine?"

My answer was usually followed by a surprised, "You like Portuguese wines?" To which I would reply, "No, just Colares."

That is, until I met Josh Greene and started working at *Wine & Spirits Magazine*. Our tastings are cyclical and when Portugal panels come around, I have one eye out for any bottles of Colares that are sneaking through the door and the other avoiding contact with Greene, hoping not to get called on to

sit for a panel.

I had successfully escaped a tasting one afternoon and was walking through the pourer's area when I spotted an open bottle, one I recognized from the shelves at Vintry. I hadn't had the opportunity to try it yet in the store, so I took a glass and gave it a taste.

Delicious—and with 23 years of age, the acidity was gracefully lifting the umami notes and underlining the ripe tropical-fruit flavors. It was complex and beautiful and a complete surprise.

It was the Caves São João 1995 Beiras Poço do Lobo Arinto. Greene gave it a strong recommendation and, around the same time, sommeliers started to notice it as well. Jin Ahn added it to his list at *Nor-eetuh* in NYC, and the bottle showed up among his top-selling wines when he filled out our 29th Annual Restaurant Poll. Greene inquired, "Curious that an older vintage of a Portuguese white wine made your top-selling list this year?"

"Anytime someone's looking for something different, it's delicious," Ahn told him. "I put it on the list, then saw you gave it 94 points—the wine is fantastic



Ramisco vines in the coastal sands of Colares

and, for the value, you can't do any better. My clientele is not, 'Show me the best,' but 'What drinks the best?' I might tell them I have something that's really good and the price is amazing. They end up saying, 'Okay.'" He also uses it for special events, like a Portuguese and Spanish wine dinner or a menu with truffles. "I served the Caves São João with celery root agnolotti with white truffles," Ahn recalls.

Months later I was surprised at *Hwa Yuan*, in NYC, when Chris Struck of *Union Square Café* brought a bottle to dinner. He said he picked it up at a shop in San Francisco. Of the wines opened that evening with Heather Meyer (an importer), Jennifer Chin (a marketing consultant), Mariko Kobayashi (a retailer), Greene and myself—the Poço do Lobo outperformed the rest with the Sichuan cuisine.

The wine cropped up again on Bravo TV's latest season of *Southern Charm*. Cast member Thomas Ravenel and his girlfriend enjoyed a bottle of the arinto at *Pawpaw* in Charleston, South Carolina.

On the list, the description read: "chardonnay-like, deeply caramelized apricot, bright lemon zest, dried orange blossom"; Ravenel's date called the wine "interesting." This was huge—as someone who considered the show a guilty pleasure, I now was able to justify my obsession due to their fabulous taste in wine.

My "just Colares" approach to Portugal was tested again in December during a "pathways" tasting, a concept we'd developed for last year's Fall issue. I was presented with a pair of Portuguese wines and asked which I preferred. From that first pair sprouts another—if you liked this wine, try these next two. The pathway ultimately led me to a third pair, Adegade Colares 1997 Colares MJC Ramisco alongside Herdade do Rocim 2015 Alentejo Clay Aged Red.

It seemed like an unfair matchup to me. The Adegade Colares was elegant, fine grained and constantly evolving with flavors of fennel-seed turning nori and cranberry leaning into licorice. But then came

"With 23 years of age, the arinto was complex and beautiful and a complete surprise."

the earthy intensity of the Rocim, fruity mushroom flavors and crunchy purple-berry notes that tasting director Sarah Looper compared to “all the scents you get at Thanksgiving.” I was torn between an old love and a new flame.

With these bottles from very different regions in Portugal, I was more confused than ever. It was easy to write off the entire country before, but now there were three caveats and I could not ignore them. I needed to consult the experts and figure out what else to get my hands on.

I dialed up Dean Fuerth, now at *Sushi Nakazawa*, in Washington, DC. I told him how he opened the door to Portuguese wines for me by introducing me

to Colares, to which he replied, “It was also an ‘aha’ moment for me in terms of my appreciation for Portuguese wine.” He still pours it as a wine pairing with the tuna at *Nakazawa*.

When I asked him what he was excited about now, he took me to Dão—the 2016 Quinta do Perdigo Encruzado. “Initially, Dão was the region that first turned me off from Portuguese wine, as I associated it with bold, fruity, high-alcohol red wines with heavy-handed new-oak treatment,” he said. “Despite being a white wine, this encruzado presented the antithesis of my preconceived notions: The wine has a beautiful nose of unripe white peach, green pineapple and white flowers, and a refreshing, citrus and mineral-focused palate. Spot on with oysters and crudo.”

During our Restaurant Poll, Greene spoke to Manuel Azevedo of *Tasca Tasca*, a Portuguese small-plates spot in the town of Sonoma, and asked him, “If you were going to eat at *Tasca Tasca* tonight, what would you order and what would you drink with it?”

Azevedo responded, “I would probably start with the kale salad with chouriço, and a glass of sparkling—the Luis Pato sparkling Bairrada. Then I would order the cod cakes—they’re fried and served with cilantro aioli. One of my favorite wines is the Soalheiro [Vinho Verde]. And then the tripe, Porto style, with white beans, a little chicken and *presunto*. It’s based on a classic northern Portuguese tripe dish. With that, I would have the Periquita Reserva—I love that wine. The alcohol is nice and low. I rarely drink cabernet or chardonnay, or anything over 13.5 percent alcohol. A lot of these Portuguese reds are around 13 to 13.5 percent. I like those wines because I can have three glasses of wine with a nice meal and still be able to walk.”



Baga vines at Luis Pato's estate in Bairrada.

“When I first tasted baga I was, like, ‘What is this? Who drinks this wine?’ Years went by and I tasted baga again and they were amazing—a bit softer...delicious and affordable.”
—Irene Justiniani

Aged Portuguese Wines

Tasting Notes by Joshua Greene, W&S Portuguese wine critic



Adega de Colares 1997 Colares MJC Ramisco

In 1999, the Fundação Oriente, a cultural foundation based in Lisbon, purchased a 22-acre property once owned by Manuel José Colares, with the goal of keeping the Colares appellation alive. Once an acclaimed district for long-lived reds based on ramisco grown in the sands along the coast west of Sintra, this farthest western point on the European continent is now valued for its beachfront homes. Tucked amidst the houses, a few parcels of vines still survive. The foundation is now offering older bottles from the winery’s cellars, including this 1997, a tawny-colored red that needs a swirl in the glass to coax the tannins into the background. Their fennel-seed character slowly gives way to scents of nori, red cranberry and licorice, the wine taking on an autumnal intensity, ghosting its red flavors into the finish. Savor this on its own, or pour it with herb-roasted goat. (91 points, \$39; *Obrigado-Vinhos Portugal*, New Rochelle, NY)

Looking for my next favorite Portuguese wine, I took those notes and headed to *Aldea* in NYC to see what Irene Justiniani had on her list. Though she offers French, Italian, American and Spanish wines as well, 90 percent of what she sells is Portuguese. “I have always liked Portuguese wine, especially the reds,” said Justiniani. “When I was introduced to them, it was wines from the Douro. I found them to be very competitive with modern-style wines, and the prices were good. It was something you could put on the wine list and the wines would compete with malbec, Rioja and Ribera del Duero.”

I told her about my issues with Portuguese wine and she told me about her experience with wines from Bairrada 12 years ago. “When I first tasted *baga* I was, like, ‘What is this? Who drinks this wine?’ Years went by and I tasted *baga* again and they were amazing. They are leaving the grape on the vine a little longer so the wines are a bit softer...delicious and affordable.”

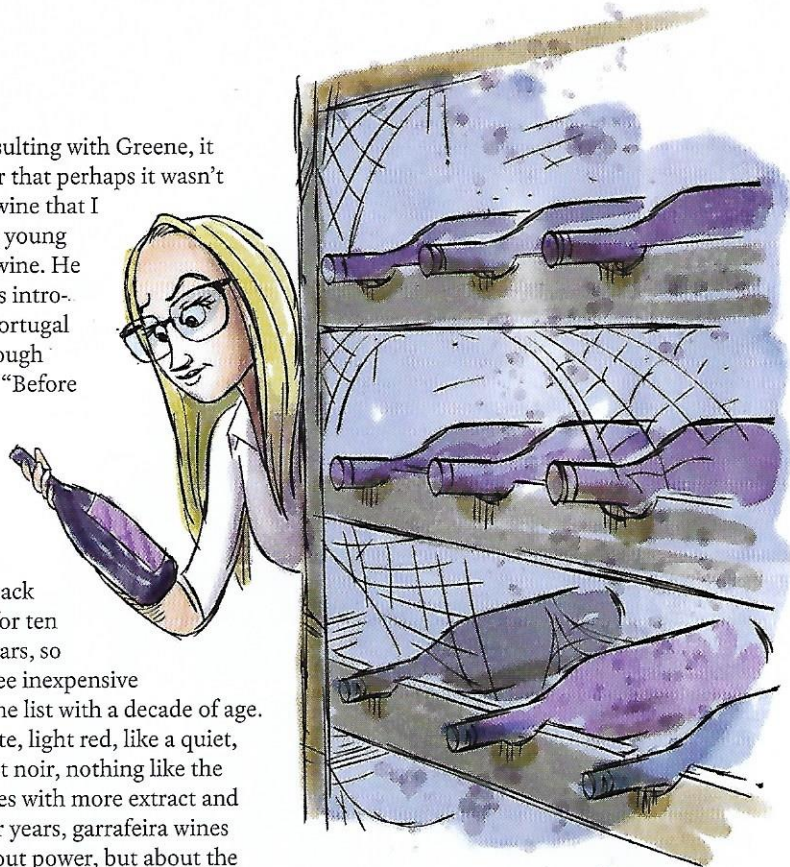
There was a bottle of Luis Pato 1991 *Vinhas Velhas Bical-Maria Gomes-Cercial* on the list and I decided to give it a try. “I bought six six-packs of this and I was just hand-selling it to people that wanted to try something different. Not everyone likes white wine that has age; they tend to be slightly oxidized and have that deeper orange hue.”

At 27 years old, the wine was lively, powerful and aromatic. There was spice mixed with citrus marmalade mixed with grilled peach mixed with ripe pineapple. Justiniani was down to her last two bottles. At first, she wasn’t sure if she should list it. “What if someone doesn’t want to talk to a sommelier but wants to buy it?” she said. “But I put it on the list and it started selling like crazy.”

After consulting with Greene, it became clear that perhaps it wasn’t Portuguese wine that I disliked, but young Portuguese wine. He explained his introduction to Portugal was also through older wines. “Before Portugal entered the EU, the tradition was for producers to hold back their wines for ten or twenty years, so you would see inexpensive *Dão* on a wine list with a decade of age. It was delicate, light red, like a quiet, mature pinot noir, nothing like the modern styles with more extract and new oak. For years, *garrafeira* wines were not about power, but about the finesse that age would bring.”

So, what gives with the 2015 *Rocim*? For me, their use of amphorae mimics the benefits age might bring to the wine. The porous clay vessels increase the right kind of oxygen exposure, leading to the development of tertiary flavors and the softening of tannins.

And while I will continue to give young Portuguese wine a chance, it’s probably not going to be my first choice—especially if I can go on finding bottles from the 1990s on lists for under \$100. ■



Caves São João 1995 Beiras Poço do Lobo Arinto

There was a time, back in the 1980s, when those of us who were into Portuguese wines took this sort of late release for granted. That was before the EU, when a number of classic producers like Caves São João held back wines. Now they are called library releases, and only the rare, dedicated producer still has them. This 22-year-old arinto was grown on what were, at the time, 45-year-old vines planted in clay-limestone soils. Today, there is nothing old about it, just a complex, luscious and delicious wine that stays with you long enough to help you consider all the different foods that would work so well with its graceful acidity, pale floral notes, fresh lemon-pulp flavors and deep umami resonance. Perhaps hamachi over sushi rice, or miso-glazed black cod, or Cantonese ginger-and-garlic crab... (94 points, \$35; *Obrigado-Vinhos Portugal, New Rochelle, NY*)



Herdade do Rocim 2015 Alentejo Terracotta Clay Aged

Rocim is located in Vidigueira, where Catarina Vieira’s family purchased this estate in 2000. One of the workers at the estate made his own wines, aged in amphorae, a local tradition that interested Vieira and her winemaking partner, Pedro Ribeira. He helped the team get their start with amphorae, lining the vessels with beeswax and olive oil, then filling them with grapes from the old vines on the property, where the pH of the soils promotes acid retention in the fruit. Once the wine finishes fermentation, they protect it with a layer of olive oil. The result is a beautiful, voluptuous and complex red, with earthy intensity, fruity mushroom flavors and crunchy, purple berry notes. It would make a great addition to any fall or winter roasts. (93 points, \$50; *Langdon Shiverick, Los Angeles, CA*)