

The New York Times

Staying True to Native Grapes

Eric Asimov
JUN. 5, 2014

Of all the historical wine-producing countries, Portugal is the most overlooked.

Other countries mostly unrecognized for their wines 25 years ago have been welcomed to the globalized wine economy: Greece, Austria, a re-energized Hungary. France and Italy have always held attention, but little-known regions within both countries have emerged, to acclaim. Same with Spain.

But Portugal? Port will always have its niche, and so will Madeira, but when it comes to nonfortified wine, Portugal continues to be largely ignored, and often unfairly.

This is partly because the Portuguese, to their great credit, have largely refused to emphasize popular international grapes like cabernet sauvignon, chardonnay, merlot and sauvignon blanc at the expense of their myriad indigenous offerings.

Such internationalization, sadly, was once a proven formula for gaining worldwide attention. But the focus has shifted to what is distinctively local, and thankfully, American wine drinkers may have gotten past the point of being drawn in by some 100-point cabernet from Portugal.

It may also be that the Portuguese language poses something of an obstacle for Americans, who may intuitively understand that, say, Italy's bianco and Spain's blanco are white wines, but may not make the same linguistic leap when confronted with branco, the Portuguese term for white. Frequently, the response when confronted with such unfamiliar terms is to move on to something more recognizable.

In two exceptions, Portuguese wine has captured the imagination, but they are specialized cases. The first is Vinho Verde, the inexpensive, zesty white from northwestern Portugal, which seems to have hooked into the hot-weather zeitgeist and has sold fairly well in the United States in the last few years. But it's a rather innocuous pleasure, thought of mostly as a summer refresher.

The second is Colares, one of the world's more fascinating wines but made only in minute quantities. The vines grow in sandy soils and thus are immune to phylloxera, the ravenous aphid that eats through the roots of the classic European grapevines, requiring almost all vines to be grafted onto American rootstocks. Instead, the Colares vines can grow on their own roots. These are truly wonderful wines, graceful yet intense with the potential to age

for decades. But the vineyards have fought a losing battle for land with the suburbs of Lisbon, and may soon face extinction.

I changed my mind after Matt Kramer, a columnist for Wine Spectator, gushed about some whites he had encountered in Portugal. One, he wrote, he might have mistaken for a Chassagne-Montrachet if he had tasted it blind; an error, he pointed out, that would have been “hardly a slur upon a wine’s character.”

I had heard a few other recent rhapsodies upon the quality of Portuguese whites, and concluded that they were well worth investigating. So the panel gathered to sample 20 from recent vintages, hoping for a few of our own bolts of enlightenment.

For the tasting, Florence Fabricant and I were joined by Pascaline Lepeltier, the wine director at Rouge Tomate and a newly minted master sommelier, who had recently traveled to Portugal, and Todd Wernstrom, a wine distributor whose company, Ice Bucket Selections, does not deal in Portuguese wines.

I can’t say that any of us felt the thrill of a discovery, though I found the wines pleasing and intriguing. As is often the case with Portuguese reds, all the whites were made from indigenous Portuguese grapes, yet none struck us as especially distinctive in the way that carricante seems unique to Mount Etna or furmint to Hungary. Quite a few of the wines were made in the modern fashion, fermented in steel tanks and bottled young to preserve freshness and aromas.

Our No. 1 bottle, the 2012 Luís Pato from the Beira Atlântico region, was in this style. It was made primarily of the Maria Gomes grape, Portugal’s most common white grape, also known as fernão pires. It was tangy and delicious, spicy, herbal and intended for early drinking. At just \$13, it was our best value. You could go through a lot of this wine in the summer.

Other wines saw time in barrels and were more capable of aging, like our No. 3 bottle, the 2012 branco from Quinta de Foz de Arouce, which happened to be the wine that caught Mr. Kramer’s imagination, though it was the 2010, with a couple more years of age, that moved him to the Burgundy comparison.

The ’12, made entirely from the cerceal grape (not related to sercial, a constituent in Madeira), was lively with complex fruit and herbal flavors and the sort of inviting texture that comes from barrel aging — mostly old barrels, which did not impart flavors. I look forward to drinking this wine in a few years. It was also one of the more expensive in the tasting at \$37.

Other noteworthy wines included the No. 2 bottle, the rich, fleshy 2012 Quinta do Sagrado from the Douro, a blend of four grapes fermented in steel tanks; the No. 4 2012 Vadio from Bairrada in the Atlantic midsection, a somewhat rustic, pleasantly bitter wine; and the No. 5, a refreshing 2012 Casa de Mouraz from the Dão, inland from Bairrada, made entirely of the encruzado grape.

I would not presume to offer definitive conclusions after this tasting, other than these

wines absolutely bear further research. I have no doubt they will reward deeper dives, particularly into the more promising regions for whites, which seem to be the coastal areas of Bairrada and Beira Atlântico, and the Douro.

I can say that if you like mainstream Italian whites, many of the less expensive bottles in this tasting will offer a similar sense of dry, fruity refreshment. If you like more-complex sorts of wine, like, dare I say, white Burgundy, then a barrel-aged bottle like the Foz de Arouce may prove intriguing.

It's fair to say that the Portuguese wine industry is well along in its transition to focusing on wines that can be marketed around the world. What that means for its white wines is still in the process of shaking out.

Vadio Bairrada 2012 ** 1/2

Pleasantly rustic, with lingering flavors of citrus, herbs and tropical fruit with a slight bitterness.