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Rising Tide

LINDSAY GROVES SAVOURS SOUTHERN PORTUGAL'S DYNAMIC WINES

The Douro Valley may get more press, but the wines of Southern Portugal are where the real excitement is. Finding success both at home and abroad, southern producers are pushing the boundaries to craft some very exciting, cutting edge wines. Take note.

Portugal is currently the fifth largest wine exporting country in the world by volume and seventh in terms of value. Southern producers haven't wasted any time in taking advantage of the international market.

In fact, in many cases, they are beating out the more popular regions to dominate the most lucrative export markets abroad.

Anibal Coutinho, Portuguese wine authority and director of Vinipax wine festival, explains this success.

"The southern wines are also market leaders in the bigger importing countries of Portuguese wine such as Angola and Brasil."

Not only are these wines finding serious success abroad, but Coutinho points

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Hertz



out that, "Southern wines also lead the domestic consumption, helped by the proximity of top consuming Lisbon and Algarve."

For the most part, blends are the norm in the south, with producers using combinations of local varieties instead of the run-of-the-mill international cultivars that are the ennu of many a connoisseur.

The south has led the way for the modern wine revolution in Portugal. With modern vineyard practices, improved winemaking techniques and state-of-the-art equipment, southern producers have not only caught up, but also surpassed nearly everyone else in the country.

"Being the least historical wine region, the average southern winery is more modern and well equipped than the rest of Portugal," Coutinho explains.

Southern Portugal encompasses four regions: Ribatejo, Alentejo, Terras do Sado and the Algarve.

In all these regions, the amount of regional wine being produced far outweighs that with DOC status. This however doesn't mean much, as some of the best wines are being produced under less than glamorous designations.

Ribatejo includes wines under the Ribatejo and Vinho Regional Tejo designations. With a history of bulk wine production, co-operatives have been the trend.

However, more and more, mid-sized producers are taking over and ambitious young winemakers are jostling for the opportunity to make a name for themselves. The volume of wine produced in Ribatejo has been declining. Wines from here tend to be extremely good value, with most bottles selling for a few dollars.

Southern Portugal's largest wine producing region, Alentejo is currently the star of Southern Portugal with good reason. Some of the most dynamic wines coming out of the entire country are labelled under the Alentejo DOC and Vinho Regional Alentejano designations.

With gently rolling plains covering most of Alentejo's expanse, the region experiences extremely high temperatures in the summer, resulting in the common use of irrigation systems. Because of the heat, Alentejo is better known for its red wines. However, some increasingly impressive whites are creeping into the mix.

Alentejo has been a flag-bearer for the modern wine revolution in Portugal, quickly adopting modern vineyard and winemaking practices, creating some of the most innovative wine in the region.

Terras do Sado encompasses the Setúbal Peninsula as well as an expanse of land to the south. Historically, the Setúbal Peninsula has been known for its fortified sweet wines produced from the Moscatel grape. Although home to the two DOCs of Setúbal and Palmela, it's the regional wines under the Vinho Regional Terras do Sado designation that are creating some buzz.

Production is increasing, mostly attributed to the rise in popularity of table wines from the region. The area's economy traditionally depended on the fishing industry, but now tourism and wine production have become the main draws. Here, the Castelão variety thrives, planted on sandy soil that produces wines that are fruity and approachable.

It can be quite easy to write off the Algarve wines for making plonk to quell the

thirst of sun burnt English vacationers. While still a work in progress, wines from the Algarve are worth a second look.

Many wines carry the regional designation, Vinho Regional Algarve. Only a small amount of wine is produced here in comparison to neighboring regions, but production is increasing steadily. Most wines found at the moment are fairly soft and straightforward, but with the replanting of vineyards and the move towards more advanced equipment and production techniques, the wines of the Algarve are finding their voice.

Portugal is lucky to have a plethora of indigenous grapes. The north of the country tends to stick with the same grapes that have been traditionally used in the production of Port. The South, however, is a different story. Here you will find a diverse mix of varieties, including many that will be new to even the most expert palate. Although other cultivars can be found from time to time, here is a rundown of the main grapes you will encounter in the wines of the South.

Whites:

Antão Vaz

This is a variety that can lend itself to barrel aging if managed properly and also maintains racy acidity. On its own, it shows notes of tropical fruit, light spice and mineral. It has been of particular importance in the Vidigeira subregion.

Arinto

Known for its crisp acidity, it displays fairly subtle aromas including green apple, floral, citrus and mineral. As a very versatile variety, it is now found throughout much of Portugal.

Fernão Pires (aka Maria Gomes)

A very flexible grape, this variety is used for sparkling wines as well as table wines. It's known for its very aromatic floral, citrus and orange blossom notes and moderate (even verging on lack of) acidity. Although widely planted, its stronghold is Ribatejo.

Perrum

This is one of the mainstays of Alentejo and the Algarve.

Roupeiro (aka Codéga in the Douro, Alva in Alentejo)

A good quality variety that shows notes of honey, floral and citrus but can lack acidity. An easy ripener, it produces generous yields. It is found mainly in Alentejo but also is planted in the Douro.

Reds:

Alfrocheiro (Preto)

Rich in colour, this grape tends to be very approachable in youth, displaying notes of mint, black currants, berries and spice.

Alicante Bouschet

This variety is famous as the only vitis vinifera member of the Teinturier family of grapes, which are varieties that have not only red skin but also red flesh. Your average red grape, by comparison, has white flesh, which is why you can make white wines from most red grapes. It's not surprising then that this grape produces deeply-coloured wines that appear purple or nearly black. Alicante Bouschet is found as a single varietal wine or as part of a blend to add colour and tannin.

Aragonês/Aragonez (aka Tinta Roriz in North/Tempranillo in Spain)

Although famous as one of the major five grapes used in Port, Aragonez is also widespread in the region of Alentejo and in neighboring Spain. It produces full-bodied wines with intense red fruit, berry and pepper character and is high in tannin. As a variety, it is fairly high-yielding.

Castelão (aka Periquita in Alentejo)

A very popular variety, it is the main cultivar grown in the Sétubal Peninsula. It's also the most widely planted red grape in Portugal but does best in sandy soils. In youth, it displays intense juicy raspberry and red currant notes but with age can develop more tar, meaty and earthy character.

Moreto

Used almost exclusively in blends, Moreto on its own makes rather neutral wines. It is not grown much outside of Alentejo.

Negra Mole (aka Preto Martinho)

Used most often in the fortified wines of Madeira, however there is some debate

as to whether or not what is planted in Southern Portugal is in fact the same thing. Negra Mole produces wines moderate in colour with notes of red fruit and currants.

Trincadeira (aka Tinta Amarela in the Douro)

This one is a very traditional variety used in Alentejo but is also grown in the North. In the hot and dry South, it can produce wines that are rich and powerful with notes of cassis, plum, blackberries and herbs. It is also known for having bright acidity and softish tannins. As a variety, it is a little tricky to grow, with irregular yields and an affinity for mould.