

## Red Wines of Portugal



Let's play a little wine-related word association. What is the first thing that you think of when I say "Portugal?" Port, you say? Naturally. But I bet you didn't think about value-oriented red wines. And you would not be alone.

Portugal is a relatively small but diverse wine producing nation that is climbing quickly up the international wine scene ladder as a country that is capable of producing interesting and affordable wines. This is due in large part to a wine making community that is dedicated to expanding the wine horizons of Portugal beyond its famous sweet fortified Port wines.

While the history of wine in Portugal dates back before Roman occupation - all the way back to the Phoenicians - it really took off during the middle ages, primarily due to the needs of the Church. In the 15th century, during the "Age of Discoveries," Portugal's wine production really took off as Portuguese explorers established trade routes with Africa and the Far East. Spices, gems, textiles flowed into the city as wine flowed back out and around the world.

Portugal is a thin strip of land - roughly the size of Indiana - located on the Iberian Peninsula in Western Europe. Spain literally wraps around the northern and eastern borders. Due west lies the cool Atlantic Ocean while the temperate Gulf of Cadiz forms the southern border.

With a wealth of indigenous varieties, varied geography and modern wine producing technology, Portugal is now exporting a selection of unique and interesting quality table wines. Climates have a big impact on the style of wine. Regions within a stone's throw of the coast are heavily influenced by the moderating effects of the Atlantic Ocean, whereas slightly further inland, temperatures rise considerably and precipitation drops dramatically. Even between neighboring regions these small differences have a huge impact on the styles of wine made.

The difference between the coastal region of Minho (responsible for light, spritzy, Vinho Verde) and the wines of the Douro (home of Port) is a case in point. Southern Portuguese regions such as the Alentejo are showing promise with native varieties, Castelão, and Trincadeira, and white skinned grapes such as Arinto.

The popular grape varieties include Touriga Nacional and Tinto Roriz, better known as Tempranillo in Spain. These wines are hand crafted from start to finish. The more aggressive winemakers are fanatical about controlling the yields in the vineyard are tightly controlled. In some cases, crop-thinning is done twice each season and all the fruit is picked by hand and hand-sorted before vinification. All this effort adds up to several remarkable wines offered in a variety of price points.

Here are a few delicious red wine choices that will light up your palate and stay lite on your wallet.

Until recently, wine production in the Douro region of Portugal was limited largely to sweet wines, such as vintage Port. Lately, however, the traditional Port houses have begun to explore the area's untapped potential for producing dry red table wines. The **2009 Quinta do Casal Monteiro Red** is a brilliant example of this realization. A blend of traditional Port grapes, such as Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, and Tinta Roriz, this dry red wine offer up plenty of red cherries and plum notes on the nose. But what really impressed me was the great feel this wine has in the mouth. It has an abundance of juicy fruit of cherries and red raspberries. The finish medium-bodied finish highlighted accents of rustic tannins and red currants. This is a delightful wine for the price. **\$10**

Also from the Douro region comes the **2013 Bonavita Red Blend**, a blend of Touriga Franca, Tinta Roriz, Castelão and Syrah that is fermented in stainless steel tanks and then aged in American oak casks for six months. Wonderful scents of red berry, dried herbs and earthy undertones dominate the bouquet. Juicy black cherries, dark plum, black fig and black licorice linger on the palate with a touch of cherry cola on the medium finish. **\$10**

The **2014 Vinha do Monte Alentejo** is a wonderful red wine blend bargain from the Alentejo region. The dark purple wine has a beautiful bouquet of cassis, black plum and hints of espresso. In the mouth, it features flavors of ripe dark cherries and black plums with black pepper on the long, balanced finish. This is a big-but-balanced wine with firm tannins that can stand up to well-marbled steak. **\$10**

The **2014 Quinta do Crasto Tinto** is made predominately from Tinto Roriz - also known as Tempranillo in Spain - from the Douro region. It is aged for 18 months in French oak casks and offers up an interesting smokey, meaty nose. The wine offers up loads of dark fruit, black cherry on the front of the tongue and black plum on the middle and back of the tongue. Firm tannins on the medium-balanced finish support more smoked meat notes all the way through to the end. **\$15**