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PORTUGAL

When one mentions Portuguese wine, it's the port that's top of mind, but the country's table wines are unlikely to stay in the wings for long. **BY EMILY MCAULIFFE**

When I arrived in Portugal two years ago, my knowledge of Portuguese wine, like most people's, was essentially limited to the drink that became a cornerstone of the country's identity: port.

But after immersing myself in the domestic wine and gastronomy scenes, I quickly learned that port, Portugal's namesake fortified red wine, was just the tip of the vinous iceberg. Alongside the fortified mastery sits an impressive collection of table wines that predate port production – which started in the early 19th century – going as far back as the Roman times.

While Douro Valley and its still wines have slipped into mainstream wine circles, it's lesser known that the entirety of the pint-sized country is a patchwork of surprisingly diverse regions that produce wine of such quality, it's difficult to find a bad one in Portugal. Even the sloshing jugs of house wine included in 5 euro (roughly US\$6) lunch deals are remarkably drinkable. Which calls for a trip and sip through Europe's westernmost nation for some astonishing in-country discoveries.

THE QUIET ACHIEVER

The Portuguese are a humble bunch and tend to tinker with their craft without the need for external validation. Port wine gained its foothold on the international wine scene largely thanks to the British. When Mateus shot to worldwide fame circa 1970, counting Queen Elizabeth II and Jimi Hendrix among its fans, few would have realised the light, sparkling rosé's Portuguese origin.

Portugal, however, is gradually moving its way up the ladder of recognition. In 2016, two of the wines in the top 50 on Wine Spectator magazine's annual Top 100 wines list hailed from Portugal – the Dão region's Quinta de Cabriz and the Douro's Real Companhia Velha (www.realcompanhiavelha.pt). In 2017, the Douro's Quinta das Carvalhas joined the list with one of its wines. These accolades followed a stellar year in 2014, when three of Wine Spectator's top four wines were Portuguese.

José Silva, one of the country's renowned food and wine critics, points out that while Portugal has three particularly unique wines – port, Madeira and vinho verde (green wine) – only one (port) enjoys global recognition. "We have a problem," he says. "We don't know how to sell the country."

José Álvares Ribeiro, executive director at Symington Family Estates (www.symington.com), one of Portugal's largest wine producers, agrees. "Here in the Douro," he says from Symington's Quinta do Vesúvio, "we have not one but two great wines, when you consider the table wines. Look around, we're in paradise," he says, referencing the region's magnificent tiered vineyards that stagger down steep slopes either side of the river. "We have a lot going for us, but there's still a tremendous job ahead to bring our wines the recognition they deserve." ➔

A Wine drinkers visiting Portugal are waking up to how good its table wines are.

B The azulejos (coloured ceramic tiles) at the Pinhao railway station in the heart of Douro Valley.





C The parish of Colares is the extreme western point of continental Europe.

D Red grapes are the backbone of Portugal's vineyards.

E The bucolic landscape of Douro Valley – the Alto Douro Wine Region has been a UNESCO World Heritage Site since 2001.

HIDDEN GEMS

While many travellers make a beeline for the Douro to get their Portuguese wine fix (for good reason), there are equally notable wine regions across the country, including on the capital's doorstep.

"I always tell guests not to miss the wineries around Lisbon," says Portugal-based Ryan Opaz, who co-founded specialist food and wine tour company Catavino (<https://catavino.net>) and ran the Digital Wine Communications Conference for eight years. "Places such as Setúbal, Colares, Lisboa and Tejo are typically regions nobody has heard of, but they're really exciting and dynamic."

Colares, for instance, which sits in a windswept, sandy outpost by the Atlantic, is one of the country's oldest regions. It preserves an almost 100-year-old custom designed to protect the purity of the Colares ramisco and malvasia grapevines, which were spared Europe's devastating phylloxera attack in the 19th century. Under this system, select growers pool their grapes, which are then made into wine by a cooperative before being redistributed to the individual wineries for ageing.

Another widely upheld tradition in Portugal is foot treading, as many producers believe that the technique is superior to mechanical pressing. "That's something great about Portugal," says Opaz. "When you visit a winery, you're actually visiting a family with a strong connection to the past and age-old traditions, and that's something held sacred here."



Revista de Vinhos magazine's 2017 Sommelier of the Year RODOLFO TRISTÃO, of the two-Michelin-star Belcanto in Lisbon, explains the evolution of Portuguese wines.

"We're a small country with small winemakers and, internationally, port is our flag, which leaves the other wines little space to be showcased. But that's changing due to the increase in tourism in Portugal, as well as the international awards we've won. Foreign sommeliers are now visiting our country and are beginning to include Portuguese wines on their menus."



Where are the best wine bars in Lisbon? Find out on www.silverkris.com



MIXING IT UP

Blending is also a key characteristic of many Portuguese wines, with fields often laced with multiple grape varieties that are mixed and matched in the bottle. "In Portugal, it's not uncommon to have three, four or five grape varieties in the same wine, and this is quite unique in a global market that tends to favour single varietals," says Silva.

Opaz believes that the blending gives Portuguese wines an edge. "I like to think of single varietals as monochromatic paintings and blended wines as beautiful, multicoloured creations," he says. And in a country with almost 300 grape varieties in active production, you never know what liquid beauties the Portuguese might come up with next. ■

Singapore Airlines flies daily directly from Singapore to Frankfurt, where you can catch a codeshare flight to Lisbon. KrisFlyer members can earn 6,387 miles with a direct Singapore-Frankfurt flight, on eligible fares.

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GET EXPLORING

DOURO VALLEY Explore the Douro Valley in style with a luxury day trip on Portugal's historic royal train, The Presidential (www.thepresidentialtrain.com). The experience includes an onboard Michelin-star lunch and wine tasting at the private Quinta do Vesúvio estate.

MINHO REGION Vinho verde is exclusive to Portugal's northern Minho region. Sample it at Quinta de Soalheiro (www.soalheiro.com) or Quinta da Aveleda winery (www.aveledaportugal.pt).

SETÚBAL Another uniquely Portuguese wine is Moscatel Roxo, made with rare purple grapes. Visit the country's oldest Moscatel de Setubal producer, José Maria da Fonseca (www.jmf.pt), located 30km south of Lisbon. Catavino runs tailored tours to various wine regions throughout Portugal.