



Tim's Wine Market

February 2025

By Tim Varan

Over the past two years we have only featured two wines from Portugal in the Explorers Club but it is a country that is starting to produce a lot of world class wines so it bears more exploration. I should be clear that the lack of selection is not due to limited selection, but rather that much of what I taste from Portuguese producers are wines made to have mass appeal. Primarily a reference to red wines these are bottles I describe in my notes as “stylized” meaning a lot of extraction, copious amounts of oak and typically high alcohol. Thankfully there are a number of winemakers who are turning away from such production methods and utilizing their numerous indigenous grape varieties to produce wines that are more authentic to their place of origin. As a good introduction to this category I have selected two wines from the same winemaker, João Portugal Ramos, who is crafting authentic wines across the country that are a beacon for other producers. To understand the wines of Portugal we need to first understand the unique history of production in this country and why they are finally making their way onto the world stage.

There is archeological evidence that wine was produced around 2000 BC in what is today the region Andulasia by the Tartessians. This was a rich culture for the time with advanced metal skills and they actively traded with the Greeks and later the Phoenicians. It was the Phoenicians around 1000 BC who brought better winemaking techniques and grape varieties to the region, creating an active wine industry they used to trade around the Mediterranean and beyond. The Romans eventually captured the region and continued the wine trade until their fall. When the region was conquered by the Muslims in the 8th century most wine production ended and the industry stopped until the middle of the 13th century when they were expelled. During this time there is record that some wine was shipped out of the north of the country to present day England. The strong relationship with England still exists today, with some producers openly complaining that the industry has been too dependent on the country for too long.

For most of this time the emphasis on export wines have been two categories; light, fizzy Vinho Verde and fortified wines from the Oporto region called Port. Both regions are located in the north of the country and while neighbors the wines could not be more different. Both of the selections for this month come from these regions but are very different, modern examples that are good representations of both terroir and modern styles.

2023 João Portugal Ramos Alvarinho | \$25 per bottle

Both of our features this month come from the same winemaker, João Portugal Ramos. Yes, his middle name really is Portugal, coincidentally his mother's maiden name. João was born in Lisbon in 1953 and spent summers during his younger years at his grandparents estate outside of Lisbon where they also had a vineyard. After boarding school in Germany, where he learned organizational skills, he attended university and grad school in Portugal becoming an oenologist, or wine scientist. His first job was at a run down cooperative, Cooperativa de Pegões, in the Alentejo region where on his first day they had to kill snakes in the winery. Around this time he also purchased a run-down house in the region for his family and planted a vineyard on the property, hoping to sell the grapes to raise money for renovations. From this experience he learned to love the wines of the Alentejo region and what it would take for wines from Portugal to compete internationally. After a decade he left the cooperative and launched his own company in the region, which has now grown to include wineries in the Vinho Verde, Douro and Beiras regions as well.

For those familiar with Vinho Verde you may be surprised by this wine. For decades the typical Vinho Verde has been bottled with a little sweetness and a touch of carbon dioxide giving it a subtle spritz on the palate. The style has been popular in Portugal and England, and pockets of the US, but Ramos decided early in this endeavor to produce a wine that represents the future of this region. There are nine sub-zones of the vast Vinho Verde region and when Ramos began searching for the right site he settled on Monção and Melgaço, thought to be the ancestral home of the Alvarinho grape variety. As a quick aside, Alvarinho, or Albariño as it is known in Spain, is thought to be of Portuguese origin, not Spanish. The Monção and Melgaço sub-zone is warmer and drier than the rest of the Vinho Verde region, resulting in riper grapes with lower acidity, which means richer, more powerful wines.

To craft the Alvarinho João takes 10% of the grapes and presses them directly to new French oak barrels for fermentation. The majority is destemmed and dumped into stainless steel tanks where the juice macerates with the skins overnight before being drained and pressed to another tank. After both lots are dry the wines are combined to create a very textural example of this variety.

We recommend serving this wine above refrigerator temperature, maybe 10 minutes on the counter, and do not be afraid to decant it either. Like all good Alvarinho/Albariño this wine hits you immediately with notes of sea spray, followed by lemon zest, peach skin and lemon grass. When the wine hits the palate it is textured to start, then turns vivid and crunchy, with a flash of minerality zipping through the wine. Serve with seared scallops drizzled with olive oil and lemon or baked sea bass.

2021 João Ramos Portugal “Altitude” by Duorum | \$19 per bottle

This bottling comes from what is arguably the most famous wine region in Portugal, the Douro River valley. For centuries the production of red wine from this region has focused on fortified red wines known as Port. With rapidly changing consumer preferences most of the region has transitioned to dry table reds but it has been a bumpy road. The wines of this extreme growing region are well suited to powerful, tannic red wines but even that trend is changing. In the past half dozen years the new buzz word for Douro producers is “freshness” and in the Douro that is achieved with grapes grown at high altitudes.

“DUORUM” is the Latin expression that means “from two” as this project was started in 2007 as a joint venture between João Portugal Ramos and José Maria Soares Franco. Soares has a long history of producing wine in the Douro and Ramos has the resources to put the project together. The vineyards for this wine are located in the regions of Cima Corgo and Upper Douro, two exceptional terroirs, on slopes between 500 and 1500 feet above sea level. Cima Corgo is located at the geographic center of the Douro, having low rainfall around 24 inches and a high diurnal temperature swing. On the other hand, the Upper Douro is characterized by a Mediterranean climate with warmer days and nights, but only 15 inches of rain per year. This combination creates very ripe grapes that the pair pick early to preserve freshness and ensure the alcohol will not be too high. For this wine all the fermentation and aging are in stainless steel tanks.

The blend for this wine is only local varieties, 40% Touriga Nacional, 40% Touriga Franca, and 10% Tinta Roriz. The nose is a berry bowl blend of summer blackberries and blueberries, graphite and bay leaf. The feel on the palate is plump and juicy, with a veil of minerality that wraps around the fruit along with a soft dusting of tannins. Serve this wine as you would a Côtes du Rhône, with everything from burgers to pot roast.

Recipe below...



Ceviche

This month it finally dawns on me that I no longer have to abide by the 2 page limit since we are no longer printing the write ups. Finally I no longer have to edit out important information about the wines to make the recipe fit the page. So I am breaking this seal with a fantastic dish to go with the Alvarinho feature this month. For those looking for something to pair with the Duoro bottling, it literally will go with anything.

For this recipe you can also use shellfish, although it is recommended that you par boil shrimp for a minute or two before marinating for the recipe. I have often used quartered sea scallops as well but those are fine marinated raw.

1 pound very fresh, firm fish, such as bass, snapper or fluke, skin removed, cut into 1/2-inch pieces

Salt

1/2 cup fresh lime juice (from 4 juicy limes)

2 medium tomatoes, cut into 1/2-inch pieces

2 Persian or mini seedless cucumbers, cut into 1/4-inch pieces

1/4 medium red onion, coarsely chopped and rinsed under cold water

2 jalapeños, seeded and finely chopped

1 large avocado

1/4 cup chopped cilantro leaves and tender stems

Tortilla, plantain or sweet potato chips; tostadas; or Saltines, for serving

In a wide, shallow bowl, toss the fish with 1 teaspoon Diamond Crystal kosher salt or a heaping 1/2 teaspoon fine sea salt until dissolved. Add the lime juice and stir to coat. Add the tomatoes, cucumbers, red onion, jalapeños and a pinch of salt; stir to combine.

Cover with plastic wrap and refrigerate for 10 to 45 minutes, stirring about every 5 minutes. This timing is dependent on preference; the longer you leave the fish in the citrus, the more “cooked” and opaque it will be (longer than 45 minutes could end up dry and chewy, like a well-done steak), whereas a shorter marinade will result in fish that is opaque and firm on the outside and soft and juicy inside, like a medium-rare steak.

When ready to serve, remove the pit from the avocado and dice into 1/2-inch pieces. Add the avocado to the ceviche and gently stir to coat in the lime juice, then drain off the liquid from the bowl. Stir in the cilantro and season to taste with salt. Serve spooned onto tortilla, plantain or sweet potato chips, tostadas, or Saltines.