



Tim's Wine Market

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By Tim Varan

Spain and Portugal. The two countries occupy most of the Iberian Peninsula and were both great colonial powers. They also spent decades in the 20th century under dictatorship, emerging into democracy in the mid-1970s. Fifty years later, the two countries are in very different places, both economically and in the wine industry. The economic side is fascinating but not our focus; let's dive into why the wines of Portugal are not as internationally recognized as those from Spain.

There are several reasons why Spanish wines are ahead of Portugal in terms of exports to wealthy countries like the US. The primary reason is that the Salazar government, which created a dictatorship lasting over 40 years, promoted cooperatives for most farming, including wine grapes. The Port wine industry was largely the only category left alone, thanks to its strong ties to England; however, other areas were forced to conform. This created a gap for young entrepreneurs to enter the wine business for decades. The cooperatives also promoted the use of indigenous grapes, which, while interesting, are often hard to pronounce and less familiar to consumers. As a result, much of the wine exported from Portugal was inexpensive, with generic labels that provided little indication of origin or variety. To serious wine consumers, this gives the impression that all Portuguese wines are cheap and of low quality.

While you may not see this written explicitly, I strongly believe the main reason is Portugal's lack of a prominent US importer to champion its wines. Spain had Jorge Ordóñez and Eric Solomon promoting these wines in the 1990s, getting them in front of important wine critics and onto restaurant wine lists. Portugal still lacks that exposure; however, the influx of tourists to the country is beginning to spread the word about its wine quality. This month we will examine two of the vanguard estates of the region and the amazing wines they produce at incredible values.

Esporão Alentejano Monte Velho 2024 | \$19

Our first selection comes from a hundred miles southeast of Lisbon, in the Alentejo region near the city of Reguengos de Monsaraz. The estate of Herdade do Esporão was established in 1232 as King Afonso III waged the Reconquista, pushing the Muslim occupation out of Portugal. Originally a military outpost, featuring a three-story tower that survives today, the property passed through various noble families virtually unchanged until 1973, when it was purchased by José Roquette and Joaquim Bandeira. They immediately began renovating the vineyards and olive oil groves, producing their first wine in 1985.

As the estate entered its second generation, they began a conversion to organic farming in 2007. Today, along with two other estates they own in the Douro and Vinho Verde, the Roquette family farms 29% of the organic grapes grown in Portugal. At all their properties, the goal is to preserve the natural habitats of the local wildlife. They set aside land to create wildlife corridors, encourage indigenous plants, and work to maintain the natural ecosystem of the region. Ultimately, they believe that you cannot produce great, terroir-driven wines if the vineyard is artificially healthy due to man-made chemicals.

The Alentejo region, from which this wine hails, is a vast area that encompasses much of southern Portugal. This region is well suited for agriculture, as the climate is warm, sunny, and dry. Vineyards usually lie on soft, rolling hills, frequently bordered by wheat fields, olive groves, or cork tree forests. Vineyards in this area were first planted by the Romans and thrive in the warm, dry climate. Producers here work with a combination of native varieties and some international ones, and virtually all wines are blended. This bottling is a mix of local favorites: Aragonez (aka Tempranillo), Trincadeira, Touriga Nacional, and one international variety, Syrah. For the Monte Velho line, the wines are fermented and aged in stainless steel tanks to preserve freshness.

When you open this wine, splash it into a decanter for a few minutes before serving. Once you do, the aromas of sage, dried cherries, raspberry jam, toasted pecans, and herbs de Provence evolve quickly in the glass. On the palate, the feel is soft and smooth, with only a modest level of tannins rising in the middle to provide a slight structure to the moderate finish. Enjoy this wine with almost anything, from seared flank steaks to chicken Cacciatore or grilled sausages.

Niepoort Twisted Douro 2022 | \$25

A little over a year ago, we presented another wine from the Douro region of Portugal, Altitudes by João Portugal Ramos. Altitudes was selected because it is different from many of the high-octane, powerful wines being produced in the Douro these days. It is elegant, relatively low in alcohol, and incredibly versatile for food pairings. As a result, it has become a top seller in the Iberian section of the store. When I tasted this gorgeous bottle a few months ago, I found it a worthy follow-up, produced by one of the most dynamic forces in Portugal, Dirk Niepoort.

I first started hearing about Dirk two decades ago when he began to spearhead incredible table wines from the Douro Valley. The eponymous family winery he assumed control of was, and still is, a leader in aged Tawny Ports, specifically a style called Colheita. Recognizing that consumption trends were changing and fewer people were drinking Port after dinner, he began to focus on producing more table wine. The challenge is that the Douro Valley has extreme grape-growing conditions: hot, dry, and planted with varieties selected to produce deeply colored wines. His early efforts were fairly high in alcohol, but he quickly realized that the vineyards best suited for Port-style wines were not ideal for table wines.

To craft great table wines in the Douro, Niepoort had to break with tradition and look beyond what normally qualified a vineyard as a “great” site. Understand that after WWII, the governing body that regulates Port production, the Instituto dos Vinhos do Douro e Porto (IVDP), implemented a system called the Cadastro point system. This 1200-point scale was established for all vineyard sites, grading them based on physical and agricultural factors. Criteria include altitude, slope/gradient, soil type (e.g., schist vs. granite), sun exposure, vine age, and grape varieties. Vineyards are then assigned a letter grade, A-F, which determines their Beneficio Quota. The grade dictates how many grapes a vineyard owner is allowed to fortify into Port wine. Top-rated “A” vineyards are given the highest quotas, while plots graded below “F” are not permitted to make Port at all. Niepoort discovered that, in many instances, A-rated vineyards produced poor table wines, while those that scored an F were preferable. From there, he began a new process of producing table wines, specifically focused on sites that achieved lower alcohol levels.

Today, Niepoort produces several tiers of wines at various price points. While not exclusive to the US, his Twisted Douro series was crafted with the US market in mind. There is a white and a red, both produced exclusively from local varieties, that demonstrate freshness and drinkability over any other goals. Our feature, the Tinto, is a blend of Touriga Franca, Touriga Nacional, Tinta Roriz, and Tinta Amarela. All of the Niepoort vineyards are also farmed using organic practices. Fermentation takes place in stainless steel tanks, then a portion of the wine is aged in older French oak barrels for six months before blending.

To serve, we recommend a splash in the decanter and chilling to cellar temperature. The grapes used in the Douro benefit from a little oxygen to open up and express their flavors. After a few minutes, you are greeted with a lovely bouquet of cooked black raspberry, fresh blueberry, mulberry, dried orange peel, and cold black tea. Despite the ripeness indicated by the nose, the palate is bright and fresh, with light tannins and acidity framing the ample fruit. This is an incredibly versatile wine for food pairings, so enjoy it with everything from a cold lentil salad to beef roulades.

Recipe Below

One Pot Ratatouille Pasta

As if you need another reason to love Portuguese red wines, aside from their amazing quality and value, they also pair well with a wide range of cuisines. This hybrid French Provençal/Italian Amalfi Coast recipe is a great example. I found this recipe on the New York Times Cooking page, and with a few modifications based on the comments, it turns out amazing with both wine selections this month. I also discovered that it tastes great cold the next day!

¼ cup extra-virgin olive oil, plus more for drizzling

3 tablespoons tomato paste

2 teaspoons Italian seasoning

1 small globe eggplant, cut into 1-inch pieces (about 5 cups)

1 medium onion, coarsely chopped

3 medium plum tomatoes, cut into 1-inch pieces

4 cloves garlic, finely chopped

Salt and black pepper

1 pound short pasta, such as rotini

2 medium zucchini, cut into 1-inch pieces

1 medium red or orange bell pepper, cored and cut into 1-inch pieces

1/4 cup pitted Kalamata olives, cut in half

1 tablespoon capers, rinsed and lightly smashed with the side of a knife

2 basil sprigs

Freshly grated Parmesan

Pour ¼ cup oil into a large, wide pot or Dutch oven over medium. Add the tomato paste and gently fry, stirring occasionally, until slightly caramelized, 3 to 5 minutes. (The oil will become a bright shade of orange.) Add the Italian seasoning and stir until combined.

To the pot, add the eggplant, onion, half the tomatoes, all the garlic and 1 teaspoon salt. Toss until vegetables are coated with the tomato-infused oil. The eggplant will absorb most if not all the oil. Add 3 cups water, the pasta and 1 teaspoon salt. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to medium, cover and cook the pasta for half the time listed for al dente on the package directions, 4 to 6 minutes.

Remove the lid and stir well to combine pasta with the sauce. Add the zucchini, peppers, remaining tomatoes, olives, capers and a few grinds of black pepper. Fold to combine, and reduce heat to medium-low. Cover and cook until pasta is al dente and peppers are crisp-tender, 2 to 3 minutes, adding a little water if too dry. Remove lid, and turn off heat. Taste and season with salt and pepper as desired. Serve in shallow bowls and top with torn basil leaves. Drizzle with olive oil and sprinkle with Parmesan.