

Quatro Grandes Uvas para a Enenofilia Portuguesa

Four Great Grapes for Your Portuguese Oenophilia



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By [Mark Thompson](#) on September 12, 2018

Decades ago, during a very brief stint as a waiter at a restaurant that catered to a well-heeled Ivy League crowd, patrons would order bottles of Mateus Rosé or Lancers, a reflection of Portuguese viticulture that was dominated by mass-produced wines from post-War cooperative wineries initiated by the dictatorship of Salazar.

Fortunately for Portuguese oenophiles, the years following the Carnation Revolution in 1974 and [Portugal's](#) entrance into the EU in 1986 have been a boon for Portuguese viticulture. In the past few decades, numerous independent wine estates have opened in former *quintas*, the Portuguese term for large land estates originally used for agricultural purposes.



Clusters of Alvarinho grapes (photo by ©Quinta de Soalheiro)

As a center of viticulture since the Bronze Age, Portugal is Europe's fourth-largest wine-producing region. Roughly the size of the state of Indiana, Portugal cultivates more than 250 native grapes in 31 designated DOCs. The country's varied topography, from verdant plains to cork forests, with a maritime climate to the west and dry conditions in the east, provides a diverse terroir that produces a broad range of wines from the lightly effervescent green wines of Vinho Verde to rustic reds and hearty port.

For more than 800 years, Portugal has been exporting wine, perhaps most notably the wines of the Douro Valley, home to the world's finest Port. Amidst such an abundance of indigenous grape varieties, Portugal viticulture is far more than port—and today's winemakers are showcasing wines from lesser-appreciated DOCs such as Bairrada and Dão. Today's revolution in Portugal is marked less by carnations than by fine wines.



Alvarinho: While many wine lovers have been clamoring for dry Rieslings, enamored of the grape’s distinctive floral botanicals, savvy oenophiles have turned their focus to Alvarinho (or Albariño, as the grape is known in Spain).

When the grape first arrived on the Iberian Peninsula in the 12th century, the aromatic white grape was thought to be a relative of Riesling—thanks to its floral profile and high acidity. One of the first grapes to be bottled in a single variety, Alvarinho is grown in the cool, hilly region of Vinho Verde, where, increasingly, it is blended with Loureiro.

At the family-run winery [Quinta de Soalheiro](#), the Alvarinho is produced in Melgaço, the northernmost point of Portugal. Protected by a mountain range, the region produces a favorable microclimate for Alvarinho’s intense freshness. At Soalheiro, which is named for the brilliance of the sun on the vineyards, the Alvarinho is a classic example of the wine’s elegant balance. Founded in 1982, Soalheiro is committed to organic viticulture and a desire to protect the ecosystem by sustaining environmental biodiversity—and in 2017, the winery launched its first Alvarinho produced without the addition of sulfites.

Soalheiro Alvarinho Primeiras Vinhas 2014 opens on the nose with pineapple and kiwi alongside Alvarinho’s distinctive hints of minerality. Harvested by hand from vines as old as 40 years, this “first vines” classic captures the epitome of Alvarinho’s graceful equipoise. Pale yellow in color with tints of green grass, this beauty behaves with perfect posture on the cusp of tropical and mineral, with the slightest salinity in the finish. Winner of the Gold Medal at Mundus Vini Summer Tasting 2015 in Germany, this full-bodied Alvarinho scored 90 points with *Wine Spectator* and retails for approximately twenty-five dollars.

Splendid as an aperitif alongside seafood and shrimp cocktails, this is a wine that could work equally well with fried clams or even fish and chips—given the wine’s well-balanced acidity.
