



On Pico, the main island of the Azores, located 850 miles off the coast of Portugal, intrepid winemakers are bringing long-abandoned vineyards back to life and experimenting with extremely rare local varieties such as Terrantez. The volcano Ponta do Pico, the highest mountain in Portugal, offers tantalizing *terroir* for plantings.

Known as Albariño in Spain, where it produces high quality whites in the Rías Baixas region, Alvarinho has traditionally been a component in the light and spritzy blends from the Vinho Verde appellation, which lies north and west of the Douro. Quality in Vinho Verde has improved over the past decade, as vintners have modernized grapegrowing and cellar practices, benefiting both blends and varietal bottlings.

An excellent Alvarinho from Vinho Verde is the Soalheiro Primeiras Vinhas 2014 (90, \$25). It's made from old vines and features Riesling-like flavors of green apple and citrus, with minerally notes. With its richness and power, it should gain complexity over the next five years. For a lighter-style white from Vinho Verde, try the Aveleda Alvarinho (88, \$13); its ripe apple and grapefruit flavors offer hints of richness.

Beyond the Douro and Vinho Verde, the region with the most interest for white-wine drinkers is the Dão, with its granite-rich and well-watered uplands in the central part of the country. The leading grape here is Encruzado; top bottlings are buttery, with ripe apple flavors and notes of beeswax and spice resting on powerful structures. One of the pioneers of Portuguese whites lies nearby at the Buçaco Palace, today a hotel and also home to a winery that makes a long-lived blend of Encruzado, Maria Gomes and Bical.

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of dried peach and honeycomb. Casa de Santar, Álvaro Castro, Quinta de Cabriz and Quinta da Pellada are also among the region's producers who make noteworthy whites.

To the south lies the Alentejo. This is another vast red wine realm where the climate is even warmer than the Douro and where whites are gaining a foothold. A breakout white made from local grapes is the Fitapreta Branco de Talha 2012 (90, \$26), with white raspberry, Fuji apple and ripe melon flavors. Visionary vintner António Maçanita, an Alentejo native, used 400-liter amphorae to ferment this blend of Roupeiro (70 percent) and Antão Vaz (30 percent).

Farther afield there are more tantalizing glimpses of emerging white wine quality from

Portugal. On the Azores Islands, 850 miles west of the Portuguese mainland, Maçanita is reviving long-abandoned vineyards and grapes varieties, such as the extremely rare Terrantez. On the main island of this volcanic archipelago, Pico, he has bottled several varietals, including the Azores Wine Company Verdelho Pico Original 2014 (90, \$50), with custardy notes that accent the ripe pear, mango and toasted-coconut flavors.

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*Managing editor Kim Marcus is Wine Spectator's lead taster on the wines of Portugal.*

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## Magazine Archives: Aug. 31, 2016

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### Breaking the Mold

Portugal's white wines surge in quality as vintners exploit older vineyards in the Douro and beyond

*Kim Marcus*

Issue: August 31, 2016

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Portugal's Douro River Valley contains an amazing mix of terroirs where native grapes have adapted to searing summer heat to produce world-class red table wines. And when it comes to making intensely flavorful and concentrated Ports in the deepest reaches of the Douro gorge, the hotter the better.

But Douro vintners are now exploring the highest regions of this vast realm of 125,000 vineyard acres for new wines—and their color is white, not red.

In the cooler climes of the Douro rim's higher altitudes, as well as on its sheltered north- and east-facing slopes, thrive a wealth of formerly unheralded native white grapes—Viosinho, Arinto, Gouveio and Rabigato, among others—that are typically blended. In deft hands they can be complex, rich and creamy-tasting, with impressive minerality reminiscent of white Burgundy. Portuguese vintners are using Burgundian techniques such as barrel fermentation and aging to realize these flavor profiles. They are a far cry from the simple, sometimes flabby styles and the deliberately spritzzy bottlings that have commonly come from Portugal in the past.



Vanguards in this new Douro quest include whites such as the Wine & Soul Guru 2014 (92 points, \$45), offering concentrated baked pear, apple tart and crème brûlée flavors. A blend of equal parts Viosinho, Rabigato, Códéga do Larinho and Gouveio, it comes from a north-facing vineyard high above the Douro and is fermented and aged in new French oak for five months. It delivers richness and complexity despite containing just 12.5 percent alcohol.

Another trendsetter is the unctuous Niepoort Redoma White Reserva 2014 (92, \$48), loaded with rich flavors of dried apple, pear tart and glazed apricot. It comes from 80-year-old vines planted at 2,000 feet. The Redoma Reserva was aged for 10 months in barrel and is a blend mostly of Rabigato, Códéga, Viosinho and Arinto. Dirk Niepoort, one of the first vintners in the Douro to take white wines seriously, has long been a champion of saving old vineyards threatened with uprooting in the rush for more productive younger plantings; he has made the Redoma white since 1995.

For well-priced versions that provide a good entry point to what the Douro has to offer, try the rich and powerful Caves Transmontanas Douro Vértice Grande Reserva 2013 (91, \$26), the crisp and juicy Lavradores de Feitoria 2015 (89, \$12) and the lush and spicy Casa Ferreirinha Planalto Reserva 2014 (89, \$15).

Although these bottlings and the more powerful examples listed above are interesting to drink on their own for their freshness and depth of flavor, they are also well-structured enough to pair with rich seafood, vegetarian dishes and creamy pastas.

These are among the more than 100 Portuguese whites wines I have tasted in the past year. Overall, I sampled more than 300 Portuguese table wines in our New York office, of which 100 scored outstanding, the majority of them reds. (A free alphabetical list of scores and prices for all wines tasted is available.) Though the reds continue to improve in quality, whites ("branco" in Portuguese) have really come on strong, meriting a special report for the first time.

For the near future, whites will remain a small part of the Douro's output, as only 10 percent or so of the region's vineyards are planted to white grapes. But the upswing in quality is even more impressive because until recently these grapes were grown mainly for the production of white Port, a small and almost forgotten category. Many of the older vineyards were largely overlooked because of the sagging fortunes of white Port, but they now represent an untapped treasure trove that the region's vintners are beginning to explore.

Most of the leading Douro producers who branched out from Port to red table wines over the past few decades are excited by the region's potential for whites. Among them is Quinta do Noval, a leading Port house that also makes high quality reds. Managing director Christian Seeley is working on crafting a white blend. He is intrigued by the natural acidity the indigenous grapes can provide.

"They have a lovely natural freshness, like Chablis, which is a function of the terroir and the grape varieties. They are not what I would think of as whites from a hot climate. Whites are something I intend to keep an eye on," says Seely, who has planted Gouveio and Viosinho at the Noval estate.

"We are going very deep with our research with white varieties," says Pedro Silva Reis of Real Companhia Velha (RCV), one of Portugal's oldest wine companies. "The knowledge we have about the old grapes needs to be expanded. The plans will hopefully rescue a sleeping giant."

RCV's best white comes from its flagship Quinta das Carvalhas estate, in the center of the Douro's most famed growing district, the Cima Corgo. The Quinta das Carvalhas Douro 2014 (92, \$35), powerful, refined and minerally, with rich, smoky notes. It's a mix of Viosinho, Rabigato and Códéga.

The wine was overseen by the talented Jorge Moreira, who also made this report's highest-scoring white, the Poeira Duriense 2014 (93, \$55), rich and full-bodied, with concentrated flavors of brioche, ripe pear and baked apple. It is 100 percent Alvarinho and was barrel fermented for added richness.

Last year, Alvarinho was recognized as an authorized grape in the Douro, meaning that wine made from it will no longer carry the more generic regional Duriense moniker; expect to see more Alvarinho bottlings from the region.

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## CORNUCOPIA OF WHITES

Portugal is home to a wealth of native grapes. Here is a guide to some of the leading white varieties. When in doubt, look for "branco," which means "white" in Portuguese, on the label.

**ALVARINHO**

The low-yielding Alvarinho produces aromatic wines of complexity and richness, characterized by flavors of peach, citrus zest and passion fruit. Known as Albariño in Spain.

**ARINTO / LOUREIRO / TRAJADURA**

In addition to Alvarinho, these varieties are found in the light, crisp, mildly fizzy bottlings from the northern Vinho Verde DOC. Arinto (or Padernã) is vibrant and minerally; Loureiro is aromatic and floral; and Trajadura steely and higher in alcohol.

**ENCRUZADO**

The headliner in the Dão, Encruzado balances sugar and acidity to create ageable and structured wines. Floral and citrus notes dominate, resulting in rich, minerally versions. It is a leading component in many blends.

**GOUVEIO**

High-yielding and widely planted, its citrus aromas and peach and aniseed flavors produce bright wines with lively acidity. Once called Verdelho in the Douro, this variety is unrelated to the Verdelho of Madeira.

**RABIGATO**

Primarily used for blending and known for its acidity, this variety is powerfully minerally and bright, with a vegetal undertone and floral aromas.

**ROUPEIRO / CÓDEGA / SÍRIA**

This high-volume, low-acid variety, known as Roupeiro in Alentejo and Códéga in the Douro, offers aromas and flavors of citrus, peach and melon.

**VIOSINHO**

Once overlooked for its low yields, it is now gaining a following in the Douro, adding body, fragrance and freshness to a range of white table wine blends and Ports. Low in acidity, it performs best at high altitudes.

**See Also**

[Portugal Alphabetical Listing](#)