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Portuguese wine

Portugal is alive with adventure far beyond Port, says Tom Cannavan. He selects from his top 50 wines, chosen in his role as the country's journalistic wine ambassador



It's difficult to avoid clichés when describing what makes Portugal's wines great for me. Diversity is the word that always springs to mind, not just because of the hundreds of high-quality indigenous grapes the country boasts, but because of the range of soils, climates and styles that are crammed into its small footprint.

Portugal is, by and large, a sober, businesslike nation. But there is an adventurous, even rebellious, streak that lurks beneath the familiar surface of regions such as the Douro, Alentejo and Minho (Vinho Verde country). Here, and in less-travelled regions such as Trás-os-Montes to the far north or Setúbal, south of Lisbon, you will find much experimentation: new sensitivity to matching vines to soils, a move into new sub-regions in search of microclimates, and an embracing of biodynamic and natural winemaking. Up and down the country there is thoughtful, sometimes audacious winemaking that can surprise and delight.

“Up and down the country there is thoughtful, sometimes audacious, winemaking that can surprise and delight”

For full details of UK stockists, see p108

One of the parameters in my choice* was freshness. That shouldn't be a problem in this Atlantic country, with almost 1,000km of coastline, but freshness can also be captured in the hot interior if winemakers seek to do so. Portugal's emergence from decades of dictatorship in the 1970s perhaps caused a rush to create 'modern' wines that sometimes erred on the side of being overoaked and overextracted. But the story today is changing fast and Portugal's best producers are alive to the mood of the moment for fresher reds and crisply balanced whites.

Retail availability remains a hurdle, with few merchants carrying more than a handful of Portuguese wines, and only the Douro and Alentejo available in any depth. One bit of good news is that such food-friendly wines tend to have a decent presence on restaurant lists.

*Tom Cannavan is a freelance writer, author and broadcaster and publisher of Wine-pages.com. *As part of being named ViniPortugal's Wine Journalist of the Year 2010, he selected his 50 Great Portuguese Wines (excluding Port and Madeira) which were presented to trade and press in June. The 21 wines here are a selection of that top 50, themselves chosen from tasting more than 1,000 wines during six trips to Portugal between July 2010 and February 2011*

Portuguese wine



Prats & Symington, Chryseia, Douro 2008 ★★★★★ 18

£47.50 Berry Bros & Rudd, Christopher Keller, Noel Young, The Wine Society

Fragrant sandalwood and fresh red and black fruits, with schisty minerality too. No meatiness or earthiness to this wine, which is plush but beautifully pitched. Drink: 2012-2020. Alc: 14%