

Vinho Verde

Written by Terry Connor
Wednesday, 06 September 2017 05:25

Since moving to the Lowcountry nine years ago, I have been made abundantly aware of the fact that the retirees here love to travel. As a matter of fact, I am right in there with them. Every once in a while I am overcome with wanderlust and before I know it, I'm on my way to the airport.

My last serious attack of wanderlust resulted in a trip to Portugal to visit some of the very fine Port Wineries headquartered in the city of Porto. On my way to Porto I discovered another very popular Portuguese wine called Vinho Verde. As a result of this discovery I was compelled to include a side trip to the MINHO wine producing area, which is located in the northwest of Portugal just below the Spanish border. The Minho is a very fertile agriculture area that yields many farm crops in addition to grapes.

Vinho Verde is not a grape variety. It is a DOC (Denominacao de Origem Cotrolada) for the production of wine. The literal translation of Vinho Verde is "green wine." However, that is just semantics; Vinho Verde eventually translated to "young wine." It may be a red, a white, a rose, a sparkler, a Brandy or a Late Harvest. It is usually consumed shortly after bottling. There is a slight effervescence in the wine, which producers would normally try to eliminate. But they discovered consumers liked it and so it remains.

The region where Vinho Verde is produced is characterized by its many small growers, which numbered approximately 19000 as of 2014. Many of the growers used to train their vines high off the ground, up trees, fences, and even telephone poles so that they could cultivate vegetable crops below the vines that their families could use as a food source. The grape varieties that are being produced in the area are Loureiro, Arinto, Trajadura, Avesso, and Azal. VINHO ALVARINHO is made from Alvarinho grapes and is grown in a small designated sub-region of Moncao and Melgaco. This last point is very important because not only is the Alvarinho grape the core grape of Vinho Verde; it is also the grape that gave rise to ALBARINO, the very successful grape grown in the Spanish region of Rias Baixas that gives us the Albarino wine. Looking at the history of Alvarinho, we find that the grape has been growing in Northwest Portugal for approximately 2000 years. I can only assume that at sometime during those 2000 years, a few seeds made their way over to Spain and Voila! Albarino was born. This is an assumption that is reasonable since the soils are similar and the growing conditions are similar . . . proximity to the Atlantic Ocean.

Rachel Signer is a wine writer and teacher based in Brooklyn, New York. She has a very interesting perspective on Vinho Verde, which I would like to pass on to you. She goes back 2000 years to when the Romans arrived on the scene. They found that the local folks were

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already making fermented drinks. So by going back 2000 years we find that the Portuguese Culture is synonymous with winemaking; that it is part of everyday life. Many families have a small plot of land where they grow grapes alongside vegetables and fruit trees. All over the Vinho Verde region you will see grapevines hung in the beautiful pergola style, draped high above where the cool breeze protects them from moisture and cold.

Ms. Signer takes a pause to present a fun fact: while many producers do grow the white grapes that make most of the Vinho Verde we drink Stateside, it is the red Vinho Verde that most Portuguese drink at home. It is drunk from ceramic bowls and it is considered essential accompaniment to any meal. The red varietal is made from the Vinhao grape, is low in alcohol, has medium tannins and it is sour. If the opportunity presents itself; try it. You just might like it.

It has been found that Single-Varietal Vinho Verde is age worthy. Most Vinho Verde is a blend of white grapes, all indigenous to Portugal. There are however, two predominant grapes that winemakers are starting to see as more interesting than the others. They are Alvarinho and Loureiro. Many winemakers in the Vinho Verde region have begun making single varietal Alvarinho and Loureiro, with very good results. It turns out that these wines age very well, and respond nicely to oak aging, developing complexity and character. BUT, and there is always a but, it is very hard to find these wines on the market. Why, you ask? Because the image of Vinho Verde as a young wine has caused importers to pressure Portuguese producers to deliver wines as soon as they are bottled. This would be in the early spring. Perhaps this concept will change in the future. So, if you visit Portugal try to hunt down some aged Alvarinho and Loureiro wine.

Try to remember the next three points and your wine excursion to Portugal will be a success:

* Vinho Verde is a terrific accompaniment with food, especially bacalao (cod).

* There probably is no better wine bargain in Portugal than Vinho Verde in both quality of wine and price. The single vineyard wines mentioned above will be slightly higher, but still very affordable.

* The Portuguese wine producers are making serious efforts in the area of Organic viticulture. Organic wines are made without the use of pesticides or non-natural fertilizers.

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Visiting Portugal is a real treat. There is plenty to do and the people are friendly "to a fault." □ □
As for the Portuguese wine industry, it is being pursued in a very aggressive manner. The Portuguese economy has not done well for many years and winemakers and economists realize that this is one area where Portugal will get some serious help in the categories of jobs and quality products. We all are well aware of the outstanding Port Wine that is produced. Now the product portfolio is being filled with excellent whites, reds, rose, sparklers, and dessert wines.