

A small country with big wines

Portugal is the small country that flexes its muscles in the wine world. If you're only going on one wine trip in your life, go to Portugal, writes wine writer and photographer Claes Lofgren

If you're only going to do one wine trip in your life, go to Portugal! I've been saying it for a long time, when the question of a suitable destination for wine travel comes up. The Douro Valley is as beautiful as the Moselle Valley, but much quieter. The Alentejo, with its cork oaks and endless vineyards, beautiful towns and picturesque villages, is an unbeatable destination and cheaper than Italy. My first encounter with Portuguese wine on the spot was a trip in 1997. At that time, it was mostly port wine that mattered in the minds of Swedish consumers. But what a trip it was! That visit laid the foundations for a lifelong love affair with the little country at the bottom of the Atlantic coast. I am happy to report that the country has more than tripled its wine sales in Sweden in 15 years. Now we're going to take you on a tour of Portugal's wine regions, but first some basic facts. The country is small, 570 km long and 210 km wide. Its coastal location influences the climate, with cool winds and some rain in winter, but the interior is very hot in summer. It is no coincidence that many Swedes have chosen to settle here. There are 14 different wine-producing regions with around 230,000 hectares of vineyards. Of these, 31 have the slightly finer designation DOC, which places higher demands on quality. In total, Portugal produces around 700 million liters of wine, making it the tenth largest wine-producing country in the world. In addition to the mainland, wine is made on the islands of the Azores and Madeira. Portugal is unique in that it has over 250 grape varieties, with aragonez, touriga nacional, touriga franca, castelão, бага, jaen and trincadeira being among the most common for red wines. Fernando pires, loureiro, arinto, alvarinho and malvasia dominate for the whites. Extra tricky is that the same grape can be called differently depending on the area. When I was young, the old men drank port, young people and ladies liked the sparkling Mateus Rosé which, because of its sweetness, was often contemptuously described as the Coca-Cola of the wine world. Yet it is the world's best-selling wine and in the 1980s it accounted for 40% of Portugal's wine exports. Production was an incredible 117 million liters! The wine was invented in 1942 during the war, the van Zeller Guedes family had started Sogrape, but it was difficult to sell wine to Europe for understandable reasons. Brazil, like Portugal, was not involved in the war and would be a good market to work with. Fernando Guedes thought that a wine should be made that appealed to women and the idea of a pink, pearly, easy-drinking wine was born. The bottle would be reminiscent of the chubby drinking vessel carried by soldiers, fortunately the German "Bocksbeutel" already existed in Franconia, so it had to do. The label used a picture of the handsome Mateus Palace in Vila Real, where some of the grapes for the wine grew. The Count who owned the palace was approached and a small sum was negotiated for each bottle sold. He changed his mind at the last minute and asked for a fixed sum instead, something the descendants bitterly regret to this day! As you know, Portuguese wine has come a long way from Mateus Rosé. Forty years of dictatorship lay like a wet blanket over the country, preventing any development. Large cooperatives dominated and the small family estates were few and hardly profitable. The only exports to speak of, apart from Mateus, were port and Madeira wines. The Carnation Revolution of 1974 put an end to the dictatorship and the political turbulence that followed soon subsided. Portugal became a democracy and the big boost came when the country joined the EU in 1986 and fresh money started flowing in. Infrastructure and industrial investments were followed by an increase in tourism that benefited the whole country. The previously isolated and backward country was given a breath of fresh air. At the same time, things started to happen in the wine industry. Cooperatives declined in importance and private interests took over. But what makes

Portugal and its wines so interesting is that they have retained much of their distinctiveness and are proud of their grapes and their traditions. In most regions, grapes are still crushed in large granite vats called lagares. The reason is considered to be that the soft trampling of the feet is best suited to leaching the grapes before fermentation. Much of the grapes are harvested by hand and modern wine technology is combined with old traditions. Lisbon is a fantastic cosmopolitan city with a wide range of culture, entertainment and gastronomy. Here I thought our journey should start to the Portuguese vineyards. The wine region closest to Lisbon used to be called Estremadura, but was renamed Lisboa in 2009. Much of what is produced here is cheap red stuff from tired old cooperatives, but there are exceptions. Casa Santos Lima in Alenquer is owned by José Luís Santos Lima Oliveira da Silva. The producer has a firm grip on the Swedish market and their Cigarra and Lab(rador) wines are sold in large volumes. The much smaller Quinta do Chocopalha is run by Alice and Paulo Tavares da Silva who bought the farm in 1987. Since then, with the help of their daughter Sandra Tavares da Silva, they have pushed the quality to the top of Portugal's wines. The former top model Sandra also makes fantastic wines in the Douro Valley with her husband Jorge Borges under the name Wine & Soul. She is a great friend of Sweden and often comes here to present her wines. Three small classic areas are of great interest to visitors. Less than an hour from the center of Lisbon is Colares, a unique and historic wine region. Here, the ramisco grape grows on ungrafted roots in the deep sand at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean. The sand means that phylloxera has never attacked the vines. The grape produces a dark, powerful red wine that can be stored virtually indefinitely. Colares's wines have been more or less extinct when land prices caused many to tear up their vineyards to sell the land as vacation homes. Now they are investing in saving the remaining vineyards and replanting some. A must-do excursion to learn about a historic Portuguese wine. Visit the Adéga Regional cooperative, which is happy to welcome you for a tour and tasting, also book in Viúva Gomez, an incomparable place that has old vintages for sale. Also try to get a visit to Casal Santa Maria, a relative newcomer in this context. We wrote extensively about Colares in All about Wine No. 3 2022. Bucelas and Carcavelos are two other exciting historical areas on the outskirts of Lisbon. Bucelas stands mostly for white wines from the arinto grape, while Carcavelos is a strong wine produced from both red and white grapes. Very few of the vineyards remain, but they stretched all the way to Lisbon's city limits in their heyday. Thanks to a grant from the city, Villa Oeiras is where production is concentrated and can be visited. You can think of these vineyards as parentheses, but they have their historical value. We move on to the next wine region, Peninsula de Sétubal, the peninsula on the other side of the Tagus River. Here we meet a very familiar wine for most Swedes! Periquita is Portugal's oldest wine brand and the first table wine to be bottled, something that was previously reserved for port wine. It was the innovative José Maria da Fonseca who, in 1832, gave up a promising career as a mathematician to devote himself to winemaking. Cova do Periquita became his main vineyard and in 1846 the Castellão grape variety was planted. The wine was named Periquita (parrot) after the vineyard and nowadays the grape variety is closely associated with the little bird. In 1850, the first Periquita was bottled and became an instant success and has remained so over the years. Periquita has been sold at the Systembolaget since the late 1970s and is still around. Today, brothers Antonio and Domingos Soares-Franco lead JM Fonseca and the next generation is helping to take the company from strength to strength. A variety of wines are produced here in a hypermodern facility and not least their sweet Moscatel de Setúbal is a fantastic dessert wine available from older vintages. On the regular range we find Alambre 2014 in half bottles under the hundred ring. They have expanded their business to several regions in Portugal. They have a very nice visitor center with wine museum, tasting facilities and shop. In the far south is the Algarve. A favorite destination for many Swedes who enjoy the warm climate. Wine-wise, it is not quite as exciting, although the

old pop idol Cliff Richard had a vineyard here that attracted many visitors. After 40 years in the area, he sold it last year. Some of the big producers have invested here but there are more exciting wine regions in the country. The Alentejo is a good example! A large sparsely populated area bordering Spain. The vines coexist with cork oaks, the region's main product. The towns of Evora and Estremoz are stately old cities with palaces and Roman remains. This was pure farmland when I was here 26 years ago. It took ages to get here on winding roads, today it takes a little under two hours from Lisbon airport on the well-built highway. In the Alentejo, João Portugal Ramos is king. He started as a wine consultant in the 1980s and was responsible for many of the successful wines that slowly found their way onto the export market. In the mid-1990s he started planting his own vineyards and when we first met in 1997 he was planning the construction of his own winery, Vila Santa, outside Estremoz. Together with JM Fonseca, JP Ramos dominated the Swedish market for fifteen years, mainly with the red Vila Santa, a wine under the hundred dollar mark that was constantly declared a bargain. Today, the wine is languishing on the order range, despite the current 2018 vintage being better than ever. If you want to buy Ramos on the regular range, BiB is the way to go, also very well reviewed and affordable. Son João Maria and daughter Filipa are now active in the company, which now has properties in the Douro and Vinho Verde regions. All the vineyards are gradually being converted to organic farming. A visit to the beautiful winery outside Estremoz is a must for the wine enthusiast. JM Fonseca owns one of the most remarkable wineries in the Alentejo. Here, Domingos Soares-Franco makes wine in large clay jars according to thousands of years old traditions, called Talhas. The method is basically the same as in Georgia, with the difference that the amphorae are not buried and in Portugal it is a legacy from Roman times. The different winemakers have their own recipes, some de-stemming the grapes while others throw in the whole bunch. Fermentation is spontaneous and, in the meantime, the cap of skins must be pressed down twice a day. After about 10 days, it has finished fermenting and is left to settle until November 11 when the new wine is tasted. A wine ready at a time when funky natural wines are celebrated in hip wine bars around the world. It doesn't get more natural than this! Herdade do Esporão and Herdade de Rocim are two other producers known for their talha wines. Esporão in particular is worth a detour because of its superb restaurant and a wide range of very good wines in different price ranges. Casa Relvas has grown big on the Swedish market. A family business that is otherwise a bit anonymous in its appearance. The wine Segredos de São Miguel won double gold in the Vinordic Wine Challenge and they have more affordable products on the company's shelves. Fitapreta is run by innovative winemaker António Maçanita, who, in addition to planting new vines, sought out old abandoned vineyards with local grapes that needed to be restored. In addition to Alentejo, he makes wine in the Azores and Madeira. While paying homage to the past, he wants to modernize wine production with sound environmental aspects and a sustainable business. We head further north and after a couple of hours of travel, we arrive in the wildest part of the Douro Valley. The region is called Porto e Douro and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site for its unique nature and history. We are now in the land of Port, the fortified wine that has been Portugal's trademark for hundreds of years. It was created in the 18th century when Portugal and England had long traded with each other. England fished in the Atlantic and sold codfish 'bacalhau', a Portuguese specialty similar to cod, to the Portuguese in exchange for wine. There was a war between England and France, so the thirsty British were desperate to find substitutes for their beloved Bordeaux wine. The Douro Valley wines were not of the same quality, but the British tried adding spirits to the wine to bring it back to life. The measure was a success in terms of the wine's shelf life, as well as being sweeter and more alcoholic. This appealed to the English and so Port was born. The great Port houses were created by English merchants to control the trade. Strict laws regulated port production and the firms were forced to keep stocks in Oporto's twin city of Vila Nova de

Gaia. The upper Douro Valley began to be planted and many of the large farms, Quintas, were built in the otherwise desolate landscape along the river. Port wine is worthy of its own article, so I thought I'd write more about the fantastic wines now being produced from the classic grapes touriga nacional, touriga francesa, tinta roriz and others. There is also a future for white wines made from gouveio, malvasia and viosinho grapes. More than half of the Douro's production is now table wine, and the rejuvenation of the winemakers has left its mark. Red wine has always been made in the Douro, but mostly for personal consumption. The first wine to become known outside the valley was Barca Velha, created by Ferreira Port's legendary winemaker Fernando Nicolau de Almeida. He was on a study visit to Bordeaux in 1950 and marveled at how they worked with the grapes there and how they were crushed softer than in the Douro. He went home and experimented. He took the grapes from the remote Quinta do Vale do Meão. There was no electricity, so the grapes had to be cooled with blocks of ice, which had to be laboriously transported up the valley. The first vintage produced was in 1952 and when it was released, it was a success and is still a cult wine that commands high prices. The wine is only made in perfect years, so there are only 19 vintages on the market, the latest being 2011. Three winemakers have been responsible for the wine, De Almeida until 1998 when José-Maria Soares Franco took over to hand over to Luis Sottomayor in 2003. Owned since 1987 by the giant producer Sogrape, which has been at the forefront of the red wine revolution in the Douro, Ferreira's director Francisco "Vito" Olazabal resigned at the time of the sale and took over the family's Quinta do Vale Meão to create his own wine. Together with his son Xito, they have created wines that have surpassed Barca Velha and are among the most sought-after Portuguese wines. They work closely with good friends and relatives as the "Douro Boys". In addition to Vale do Meão, the group consists of Quinta do Vallado, Quinta do Crasto, Van Zeller & Co and Dirk Niepoort. All five top producers who together are the main ambassadors of the Douro Valley. Dirk Niepoort comes from a family with a long history in the port wine trade but when he joined the company he wanted to make red table wines. Dirk was on a collision course with his father, who didn't appreciate the wines, but was eagerly encouraged by other greats in the industry. When asked why he wanted to make table wines, he replied - "Red wines have been made in the Douro Valley for 2000 years. 1955 years of crap wines! It was time to do something about it. That's where the red wine revolution in the Douro started. Barca Velha's winemaker until 2003, José-Maria Soares Franco, surprised many when he quit his top job in 2007 and started a new winery way up in the Douro. Together with João Portugal Ramos, he bought and planted Quinta do Castelo Melhor to create Duorum. The focus is on well-made red and white wines in different price ranges and a little splash of port just to show that they can. Last time I was here, just before the pandemic, I got to enjoy a boat ride along the Douro River that was absolutely spectacular. The steep slopes where the vines grow on terraces and all the beautiful courtyards of the large port wine houses along the river are an unforgettable memory. The small town of Pinhão is located in the middle of the wine region and is a good starting point for visits to the area. The city of Porto is located at the mouth of the river to the sea and together with Vila Nova de Gaia a must to spend some time in. Here you can visit the port wine producers' lodges, many with restaurants and tasting rooms. We head a little north, towards the Spanish border, to the Vinho Verde region in Minho, Portugal's largest region. Here it is important not to confuse the region with the wine as Vinho Verde for many means a light sparkling wine with high acidity and low alcohol. A young and green wine, quite simply. Can be good on a hot summer day but is not particularly exciting. Things have happened here in ten years, a whole new generation of winemakers has entered here and improved the reputation by leaps and bounds. You might think that only white wines are made here but the whole color scale is represented even though 80% is white. Grapes that are common are azal, loureiro, arinto and trajadura. But it's alvarinho that has been responsible for the big increase in quality. The

same grape as albarino north of the border in Galicia, the wines are really trendy in today's wine world. Producers Anselmo Mendes and Soalheiro, run by the Cerdeira siblings, have been hugely successful both in Sweden and the rest of the world. A proof of success is when producers from outside crowd the door to get in. João Portugal Ramos came here ten years ago and makes a brilliant alvarinho and recently the big port producer in the Douro, the Symington family, announced that they had invested in Vinho Verde with a new project where superstar Anselmo Mendes will be responsible for the wines. Quinta do Ameal was started by Pedro Araújo who, with razor-sharp precision, succeeded in creating wines from the loreiro grape that showed what can be achieved with that grape. For various reasons he sold the company to Esporão from Alentejo who continues to run the winery with the same high quality. Quinta do Aveleda is the largest in Vinho Verde with 150 years of production behind it. They produce a variety of wines from different areas but the Casal Garcia wine has been a benchmark for the region and is probably almost as big a sales success as Mateus Rosé. An easy drinking wine that has been modernized and has a nice price tag but nothing to remember. An absolute must if you visit Vinho Verde is a visit to Palacio da Brejoeira in Moncaro, a fairytale castle built in the 19th century and open to visitors. They make a brilliant wine and also produce a clearly drinkable aguardente. Heading south, we enter the Beiras region. The region includes Dão, Beira Interior and Bairrada. The surrounding high mountains give this region slightly different conditions, the vines grow from 200 meters up to a thousand meters altitude. Touriga nacional is the main grape but, as usual in Portugal, there is a whole range of grapes used. Readers may remember a sour and cheap wine sold at the Company for a few dollars in the 1980s. The Dão region suffered badly from the dictator Salazar's laws that gave all power to the cooperatives. Things didn't really turn around until Portugal joined the EU and money started pouring in. Sogrape, Portugal's largest wine producer, was quick to establish itself in Viseu in 1988. Their Quinta dos Carvalhais facility became a state-of-the-art competitor to the cooperatives, producing clean, stylish wines. Today, the whole of the Dão has evolved and has become a bit trendy in recent years. One of the best producers is Alvaro Crasto who, with his daughter Maria, runs Quinta da Pellada and Quinta da Saes. He started out as an engineer, but inherited the family vineyards and changed his mind. A philosopher who lets nature rule and makes the wines he likes himself, without looking at trends and markets. Not represented in Sweden but has a very high reputation. Julia Kemper is another fighter who switched from law to winemaking twenty years ago when she inherited her family's Quinta do Cruzeiro vineyard. After replanting and renovating the production facility, the first wines arrived in 2008. She has only 20 hectares under biodynamic cultivation, but has a wide range of both white and red wines that are considered among the best in the Dão. Dirk Niepoort is one of the masters of the Douro Valley with his red table wines and Ports. Not content with that, he has bought land in both the Dão and Bairrada. Here he experiments vigorously, reviving endangered grape varieties and making natural wines, among other things. Beira Interior is the most mountainous area in Portugal, with a rather messy climate. Freezing cold in winter (it can snow) and very hot in summer. In other words, an inland climate and no water nearby. Cooperatives still thrive here and no exciting wines have reached us yet. Bairrada, on the other hand, is a region to keep an eye on. Its proximity to the Atlantic Ocean has positive and negative effects on the climate. It rains a lot but does not get extremely hot. The бага grape is the one that counts here. A grumpy bastard that ripens late and is generally rowdy with lots of tannins. The grape is used for most wines, red, sparkling and rosé. It is unusual for Portugal that one grape dominates so clearly. The person who has succeeded best in taming бага is Luis Pato, who has put Bairrada on the map. He was the first to de-stem the bunches and age them in French oak barrels. He was criticized for not being typical, so for a while he left DOC Bairrada and just wrote Vinho Regional on the label. Now he has made peace with his colleagues but is still seen as a rebel. His daughter Filipa has

followed in Luis's footsteps, but has developed her own profile. The Bussaco Palace Hotel is a completely unlikely hotel set in the middle of the forest south of Bairrada. It was built as a hunting lodge by the last king of Portugal but was not completed before the kingdom collapsed. The state has leased it to a hotel chain and it's probably one of Europe's most insane and magnificent buildings. They make their own wine which is only available in the hotel, the grape is Baga, and there are vintages to the 1950s left on the wine list. I have stayed at the hotel once and when I asked about the wine they invited me into the cellar where a poor lonely uncle sat and bottled the wine by hand! I have a bottle of 1968 that I go and tap sometimes. The Tagus region comes next and is a bit problematic. Flat landscape around the Tagus river. The region was called Ribatejo before the name change in 2009. Big producers and cooperatives, more international grapes, wines for the mass market at low prices. Some good wines come from here but it is not the most interesting area in Portugal. Now we are back where we started. Lisbon is a great city. Restaurants and wine bars abound and a visit to a fado bar is a strong recommendation. The languorous, emotional singing goes well with the soul of Portugal and its wonderful wines.

Captions:

1. Cemitério de São Miguel in Alenquer, Casa Santos Lima.
2. The star duo Jorge Serôdio Borges and Sandra Tavares da Silva make great wines in Lisboa and in the Douro
3. the owner of Casa Santos Lima, José Oliveira da Silva in his vineyard at the residence. 4. By the Wine, JM Fonseca's popular wine bar in Lisbon's old town. 5. Don't miss a visit to Colares, where Adéga Regional welcomes you with open arms.

Previous page 1. New plantings of the castelão grape in Fonseca's Periquita vineyard.

2. Cork oak is only harvested every nine years, providing material for the important export product. This page
3. JM Fonseca offers tastings and a well-stocked shop in the beautiful visitor center.
4. Wine made in Talhas is an old tradition that Domingos Soares Franco nurtures at José de Sousa. 5. the old castle of Estremoz where you can stay in the stately Pousadan.
6. João Portugal Ramos is one of the country's leading wine producers.

This page 1. Harvest time at Quinta da Castelo Melhor. Next page

2. At Quinta do Noval, the grapes are still trampled, a task increasingly taken over by robots.
3. Stately Palacio de Brejoeira in Monção, where superb Alvarinho is made.
4. Harvest at high altitude at Quinta do Vesuvio, owned by the Symington family.

Previous page 1. Palace Hotel Bussaco in Coimbra makes its own wine for its guests, long bottled by hand in the cellar.

This page 2. The beautiful Palace Hotel Bussaco was intended to be the hunting lodge of the last Portuguese king.

3. Maria Castro works with her father Alvaro Castro, making some of Dão's best wines.