

Pure Bliss

YIELDING WINES OF EVER-GROWING COMPLEXITY AND VALUE, **VINHO VERDE** HAS EVOLVED INTO A SOMMELIER'S HAVEN

by Randy Caparoso

AMORIM GIRÃO, one of Portugal's most esteemed geographers, once described Vinho Verde as "a vast amphitheater which, starting at the coast, gradually climbs in elevation towards the interior." Today, at long last, this region nestled in the country's northwestern corner is being recognized not only for its distinct geography but for wines that exhibit a true sense of place.

Vinho Verde translates literally as "green wine," but it's understood as "young wine," as it's meant to be consumed immediately after bottling, when it's bright and prickly. All the same, this is not a "young" region: There are Roman records of viticulture here dating back to 96–51 BC. After it received its first official demarcation in 1908, regulations controlling production and sales were set in 1926 when the DO was established.

Geographically speaking, it's useful to think of Vinho Verde by another of its traditional names, Entre-Douro-e-Minho, i.e., the region "between Douro and Minho"; the Minho River to the north borders Spain's Galicia and its famous DO, Rías Baixas, while the Douro River to the south is lined with vineyards just downriver from the Douro DOC, the home of Port. They're joined by other rivers that "shoot out like fingers" from the region and provide the names for some of its nine official subregions, according to Master Sommelier Alexander LaPratt, owner of Brooklyn restaurant Atrium and brand ambassador for Vinho Verde Wines; because of its proximity to Rías Baixas, he explained, the north is where "you find more Alvarinho," known as Albariño in Spain, while "naturally you find more red wine grape plantings" in the south near the Douro.

Vinho Verde is dominated by an Atlantic maritime climate marked by wet winters (average yearly rainfall is 47 inches) and warm, dry summers with slight humid-

FIVE DISTINCTIVE VINHO VERDE WINES



Soalheiro 2019 Granit Mineral Selection Alvarinho, Monção e Melgaço, Vinho Verde (\$22)

This fascinating wine, organically grown by the Cerdeira family, is all about terroir rather than varietal. While second-generation winemaker Luis Cerdeira plays with multiple iterations of Alvarinho each year—experimenting with French barriques, chestnut barrels, concrete eggs, 900-liter tonneaux, native yeast, and unsulfured bottlings—the Granit is fermented in stainless steel at slightly higher temperatures than other Soalheiro wines and ages on the lees with bâtonnage to accentuate the sensory profile of particularly dense granitic sites on the family estate. It's a true distillation of the Monção e Melgaço subregion, which is located south of the Minho River in the northeast corner of Vinho Verde, farther away from the influence of the Atlantic Ocean and at higher elevations than most of the DOC. The nose is overtly and compellingly stony, all but concealing an inner core of the peach and citrus fruit associated with the grape, and the body is firm and fleshy, its medium weight (13% ABV) kept lithe and vibrant by citrusy acidity. Minerality dominates from beginning to end.



Valados de Melgaço 2017 Alvarinho Reserva, Monção e Melgaço, Vinho Verde (\$20)

This brand was founded in 2013 by a systems engineer named Artur Meleiro, who also comes from a multigenerational winegrowing family. His goal is to raise the profile of traditional grapes like Alvarinho through low-intervention winemaking and the use of ancestral techniques such as aging in Portuguese wood or walnut vats. The 2017 Reserva captures a grippier, fuller style of the grape yet still retains lightness thanks to a moderate ABV of 13.5%. Its fresh character of citrus and white peach is rounded out by creaminess and subtle minerality enhanced by a yeasty fluidity achieved through bâtonnage.

Alvarinho in the vineyard.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF VINHO VERDE WINES



Quinta das Arcas 2020 Arca Nova Loureiro, Vinho Verde (\$10) António Esteves Monteiro established this winery in 1985, consolidating some 494 acres of vineyards farmed by his family for generations primarily in Vinho Verde's inland Sousa subregion, located just north of the Douro River. Grown on modern-style VSP (i.e., vertical shoot position)

trellises, this pure Loureiro honors the light, slightly effervescent, and tart-edged style of traditional Vinho Verde, albeit with elevated intensity and body at 11.5% ABV. Flowery, citrusy, and minerally, with a touch of leesiness (the wine sees some bâtonnage in steel tanks), it's buoyed by a trace of residual sugar (8 grams per liter) that a crafty sommelier could have a lot of fun with by pairing foods with sweet-and-sour or semi-spicy elements.



Quinta da Lixa 2020 Aromas das Castas Grande Escolha Alvarinho-Loureira, Vinho Verde (\$12) This estate, operated by the Meireles family since 1986, has come to personify a drier, more contemporary style of Vinho Verde. It also illustrates the beauty of traditional blending, with two classic grapes combining at equal proportions to produce

effusive notes of citrus, tropical flowers, and stony minerality underlined by a light-medium body at 12.5% ABV. Showing slight leesiness and touch of effervescence, it finishes with fresh notes of citrus and orange peel.



Quinta da Raza 2020 Dom Diogo Padeiro Vinho Rosé, Vinho Verde (\$15) Made entirely from the black-skinned native Padeiro grape grown in the hot, dry Basto subregion located on Vinho Verde's easternmost, highest-elevation slopes, this wine is grown by the Teixeira Coelho family, who have farmed these hillsides since 1769. Yet it's thoroughly modern and nuanced, featuring an exuberantly fresh nose of strawberry and watermelon and a silken, fine, and zesty yet rounded light-medium body (12% ABV). Its slight aperitivo-like phenolics and natural acidity balance out the faint residual sugar (8.4 g/L), and the wild-berry qualities ring true.



Harvesting Vinho Verde's signature grape, Alvarinho.

ity. Soils consist primarily of decomposed blue granite and quartz from the base rock of the mountain range that dominates the northeastern corner of Portugal and extends into northeast Vinho Verde. "As the granite weathers, the quartz stones remain intact, and some of the decomposing granite can form clay, which holds water well," LaPratt says. "The result is soils that are fertile yet very well drained on top, with clay subsoils with some water retention."

Currently totaling about 39,536 acres, the Vinho Verde DO now allows 45 of the 68 varieties grown there to appear on labels. The three most widely planted grapes—Loureiro (representing about 9,874 acres); Alvarinho (5,787 acres); and Arinto (5,540 acres)—are all white, representing the region's association with the aforementioned "green" wines that, once upon a time, were always picked early to be light in alcohol (8.5–11% ABV) while exhibiting both effervescence and smidgens of residual sugar to balance the high acidity. The fourth most widely planted grape is the black-skinned Vinhão (4,578 acres), a red cultivar that is genetically close to, but still distinct from, Seção (aka Souzão).

The good news for sommeliers is that Vinho Verde is no longer a predictably light, fluffy, tutti-frutti white: It can now be a *serious* wine. Improved viticultural practices, combined with the introduction of high-tech production methods used by new generations of vintners, have recently borne drier, fuller-bodied expressions that are more likely to showcase the character of not only the subregions from which they come but of individual estates or vineyards—not to mention, of course, the artistic sensibilities of their winemaker.

"Today's top producers run the gamut," LaPratt remarks. "Although most of the wines are still crisp and light, some are experimenting with oak and some with more natural winemaking. Consequently, for example, you'll find some Alvarinho with more power and structure, distinct minerality, and fewer fruit-forward qualities, even compared to most Rías Baixas Albariño."

The "mainstay" Loureiro, meanwhile, was long featured primarily in blends but is now frequently being bottled as a monovarietal. "It produces aromatic, floral wines, often with notes of jasmine and honey, [that are] occasionally tropical and almost always minerally," LaPratt explains. "These should be no-brainers for sommeliers. ... As far as I'm concerned, nothing else in the world can touch Vinho Verde insofar as uniqueness, value, and quality." 



Vinho Verde's soils are primarily decomposed blue granite with large amounts of quartz.