

WHAT TO DRINK



WHAT TO DRINK

Portugal Is Making The Red Wines You Want To Drink Right Now

Don't call Portuguese wines up and coming. They've arrived.

BY JASON WILSON

William Wouters, who makes wine in Bairrada with his wife, Filipa Pato.

AUGUST 7, 2024



Let's have a show of hands: Who knows someone who's traveled to Portugal over the past few years? I'm guessing there's a lot of hands in the air, especially among readers of *The New Wine Review*. Lisbon, in particular, has been one of the hottest destinations for American travelers since the pandemic. So much so that, unfortunately, Lisbon has become a poster child for “**overtourism**” and the Portuguese government is cracking down by banning new Airbnbs, trying to curb cruise ship visits, and denying visas to Americans. So far, that has yet to stanch the flow of tourists to Lisbon.

Given how many people visit Portugal, I find it surprising that Portuguese wines, which I love, haven't made more headway in the U.S. Well, maybe “surprising” is the wrong word. In the half-decade since I published *Godforsaken Grapes*, I'm intimately familiar with how wine's gatekeepers sideline lesser-known wine regions and grape varieties. Even some of my colleagues here at *The New Wine Review* fear that Portuguese wines are too obscure for you, dear reader.

Wine gatekeepers love to call places like Portugal “**up-and-coming**.” They also use that term for wine regions like

LATEST

1. **High Proof Is The New Age Statement For Bourbon**

2. **The Best Way to Visit Lisbon**

3. **The Week in Wine: August 16, 2024**

4. **Whiskey Grad School: Bourbon Mashbills Explained**

5. **Forget Provence. Austrian Rosé Is The Best In The World.**

perpetually in second class. But after my latest trip to Portugal (trying my best to avoid the crowds) I can no longer ride along with the idea that Portuguese wines are up-and-coming. They have arrived.

Portuguese white blends, from indigenous grapes like Arinto, Encruzado, Viosinho, Alvarinho, and others have gotten more attention to date. Portuguese red wine, however, still has the lingering perception of big, oaky, high alcohol, and jammy from the Douro Valley or Alentejo—what many in the Iberian peninsula have taken to calling “Mediterranean” reds, as opposed to so-called “Atlantic” reds.

That perception is quickly changing, as Portuguese winemakers embrace the coast and focus more and more on cooler, fresher, lower-alcohol “Atlantic reds.” Whether it’s Baga from Bairrada, or Castelão and Ramisco from the coastal areas surrounding Lisbon, these wines are very different from the Portuguese reds that an American wine drinker likely encountered even five or 10 years ago.

But there is still work to do in spreading the word about the new wave of Portuguese wine. “The new generation of Portuguese wineries is still paying the price of the past,” said Luis Gil of **Marinho Vinhos**, a terrific



The

Filipa Pato, in her biodynamic vineyard.

evolution of wine in Portugal has been similar to many regions. It's an ancient wine culture with more than 300 native grapes. But at the end of the 20th century, growers were pushed to “modernize,” and made the misguided decision to rip out the native grapes and plant well-known “international” grapes. After several decades trying to make middling, derivative wines from ubiquitous grapes like Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot, Portuguese winemakers have returned to the unique, indigenous grapes of their grandparents, which better express the terroir.

“After Portugal joined the European Community (in 1986) many people from outside came to ‘modernize’ things. But a lot of times, they just planted the

producers. “When I started in 2001, a lot of people were abandoning their vineyards, or else they were planting Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot. People thought the problem was the native grapes, and they started to replant other grapes.”

Things have changed. As Pato told me, “This is a good moment in Portugal, because people are proud once again of their traditions.”

Baga: Portugal’s Top Red?

When it comes to obscure grapes, a name means a lot. Baga, with four letters and two easily pronounced syllables, make this red wine eminently easy to order in a wine bar. Which—let’s not pretend otherwise—goes a long way toward acceptance.

Acceptance is something that’s taken a while for Baga. It’s always been the main red grape of the Bairrada, in north-central Portugal, near the city of Coimbra. But in the past, it had a mixed reputation. I first wrote about the grape a decade ago, right around the time the landmark 1,280-page tome *Wine Grapes* (by Jancis Robinson, Julia Harding, and José Vouillamoz) was published. In *Wine Grapes*, the authors call Baga “controversial” and say it’s “either loved or loathed” and makes



Luis Pato checking on the Baga in the cellar. Credit: Grossberg/Kopman Selections

I love it. Baga is a finicky, thin-skinned, late-ripening variety with high acidity and serious tannins that can make complex, savory, mineral wines with similarities to Nebbiolo, Cabernet Franc, or Syrah. Wines made from Baga feel very much of the moment. “When I started making wine in 2001, people didn’t want Baga,” Filipa Pato says. “Nowadays, it’s the fashion.”

Filipa Pato’s father, **Luis Pato**, was the first to advocate for Baga in Bairrada as a world-class grape. “When Luis Pato had the dream to make Baga the main grape of the region, people said he was crazy,” said Maria Pato (Luis’ daughter and Filipa’s sister). “Baga was forgotten for decades. People were still drinking it here, but they weren’t talking about

father's winery to make wine with her husband, William Wouters. Maria Pato also makes her own wine under her **Duckman** label; Pato means "duck" in Portuguese.)

Bairrada, only about 20 kilometers from the Atlantic coast, has always been known for its sparkling wine, made with Baga. In fact, everyday sparkling Baga is the classic pairing with the local specialty leitão, or suckling pig roasted on a spit. "Bairrada may be the only place that sells more sparkling wine than beer," says Maria Pato. But Luis saw an opportunity to make top-flight still red wines from the grape.



Rui Lucas of Prior Lucas in a 100-year-old vineyard.

Of course, the Pato family are not the only

winemakers in Bairrada. "I truly believe Baga is one of the most interesting varieties and it can compete with the

wines under his **Giz** label (pronounced *jhEEz*. “I think I will have to change the name in America,” Gomes said, with a chuckle).

A wave of new winemakers has emerged in Bairrada. Rui Lucas of **Prior Lucas**, whose first vintage was 2013, is one of them. “I was having a midlife crisis and I decided to start making wine,” Lucas said. He took over his grandfather’s vineyards, along with some others that belonged to older neighbors. “Winegrowers were abandoning their vineyards. I saw an opportunity to preserve our heritage,” he said.

“In the early years, it was hard to sell Baga. But over the past seven years it’s changed,” he said. “Now people come to me asking for Baga.”

Castelão: A Historic Grape With A Fresh New Outlook

The first time I went to Portugal was in 1992, when my parents, my brothers, and I drove around the country after I graduated from college. Today, it is hard to envision how profoundly different Portugal was three decades ago. At that time, the only Portuguese wine most Americans knew (beyond Port) was Mateus, the sweet fizzy rosé in the goofy flask-shaped bottle.

half of the table wine exported from Portugal in the late 1980s.

One night, my family stopped in the port of town called Setúbal, on the peninsula south of Lisbon and ate dinner at some random, traditional restaurant on a side street. In 1992, we may have been the first American family of five to have ever set foot in this restaurant.

At



Luis Gomes, who makes Baga wine in Bairrada; we'll see if that name will actually turn up on the version exported to the U.S.

first, the server was gruff, especially as we pantomimed in bad Portuguese. The unsmiling owner brought over a carafe of astringent and nearly undrinkable red wine that smelled like a wet dog. With great contempt, he asked, “You are British?”

amazing happened. The owner's face brightened into a big smile, and he called his wife and son over. "They're Americans," he said, seemingly relieved we were not part of the hordes of boozy, sunburned Brits who overrun Portugal in the summer. The whole mood swiftly changed. Complimentary plates of meats and cheeses came out. The owner whisked away the carafe of cheap plonk, and his son brought over a bottle from the cellar and uncorked it for us. It was wonderful: dry, tannic, smoky, dark, rustic. For us, it was the taste of old Europe in the glass. I believe when the bill came it was less than \$4 a bottle.

What the owner had opened and poured for us was **Periquita**, Setúbal's most famous wine, and historically Portugal's first bottled red wine. Periquita, 30 years later, is now imported by giant Palm Bay International, and is one of the most widely available Portuguese wines that you can find in the U.S.—it still only costs around \$12. For me, Periquita's quality has dipped over the years (or my palate is more sophisticated than it was at 21) but that bottle will always have a soft spot in my heart.

Periquita has always been predominantly made with **Castelão**, a native variety that's widely planted in Portugal, particularly around the coast

But these days, there's been an incredible quality revolution with Castelão wines. I've been tasting a bunch of Castelão wines this summer, and I'm hooked. They're fresher, cooler, less oaky. They range from perfectly drinkable, zippy glou-glou wines to more complex, mineral- and acid-driven reds that pair so well with all kinds of food.

As with Baga, the coastal Castelão wines, from producers such as Marinho Vinhos, **Baías e Enseadas**, **Hugo Mendes**, and **Adega Viúva Gomes**, feel very of the moment.

Ramisco: A True Unicorn Wine

Wines made from Ramisco grapes are the most idiosyncratic and hard-to-find of the three. True unicorn wines, in fact. Ramisco is particularly tannic and acidic, and requires long aging. It's only produced in Colares, an area near Lisbon consisting of a precious few dozen vineyard acres perched on cliffs above the Atlantic Ocean, near the castle of Sintra.

Colares is one of the world's oldest wine regions (once known as "the Bordeaux of Portugal") boasting some of the few remaining pre-phylloxera vines in Europe. These vineyards are in



Daniel Alfonso of Baías e Enseadas, overlooking the Atlantic in Colares.

danger of being snatched up by real estate developers eager to build beach homes, which means Colares could, some day, cease to exist as a wine region.

So, basically, Colares represents everything a modern wine geek seeks out and loves: an obscure grape; an endangered region; in-your-face tannins and acidity; a wine that will age forever; and a wine that's almost extinct.

Currently, **Adega Viúva Gomes** makes the only bottlings of Ramisco that you'll likely find in the U.S. And even then, there are only four vintages: 1965, 1967, 1969, 2015. I can tell you from my own tastings that the 2015 is amazing, and the 1969 is transcendent. I am still looking for the 1965 and 1967. Good luck, unicorn hunters!

Absolutely Have To Try

STILL BAGA

2021 Filipa Pato “Nossa Calcario” Tinto (\$42)

From 100-year-old vines, farmed biodynamically, this 100 percent Baga is fresh, zingy, and super drinkable. Aromas of wild berries, pepper, oregano, earth, and flavors of juicy dark fruit, cherry tomato, and an underlying briny quality. It's no wonder you see this on a lot of wine lists, because it's great with all kinds of food. While in Bairrada, I tasted the 2010 vintage, which veered into Nebbiolo-like territory, with notes of rose, dark minerality, cedar, black cherry, and an underlying meatiness and savoriness.

2019 Luis Pato Vinhas Velhas (\$35)

From 40-year-old vines, and aged 12 months in used casks, this is Luis Pato's classic Baga bottling. It's hit or miss which vintages you'll find in the U.S., but as a rule of thumb, the younger vintages are juicy, floral, and spicy, and grow richer and more intense and vivid as they age. The 2007 I tasted had meaty, velvety, leathery, and chocolate notes. I've half-bottles of the [2000 Luis Pato Vinhas Velhas](#) available, and that vintage is magical: dark, complex, with aromas of cedar, lavender, dill, and

2018 Luis Pato “Vinha Pan” (\$50)

From old vines in a single clay-limestone site, and aged in large oak barrels, this is rich, intense, and savory, with deep, juicy red fruit, great structure, and a long finish. I’ve also seen [2013 Vinha Pan](#) available, for those who want to see how exquisitely Baga can age.

2021 Filipa Pato “Nossa Missão” (\$175)

From 130-year-old, pre-phylloxera Baga vineyards and aged 18 months in large neutral casks. Gorgeous, like aged Bourgueil. Leafy, savory, and herbal with Cabernet Franc-like notes of tomato and black olive, Difficult to find, but worth checking with the [importer](#) for availability.

SPARKLING BAGA



2019
Prior

This sparkling rosé, made entirely from Baga, is like sunshine in a glass. Notes of pink grapefruit along with something tropical—let’s call it guava—balanced by crisp, razor-sharp acidity. In Bairrada, sparkling Baga is the classic pairing with suckling pig slow-cooked on a spit. So I’m sure this will work just fine with your backyard barbecue. I’m told by the importer, **Nossa Imports**, that Prior Lucas’ still Baga, which is magnificent, will soon be available as well.

2022 Filipa Pato “Dinamica” (\$19)

The slogan of Filipa Pato and William Wouters is “authentic wines without makeup” and that’s what you get from this sparkling Baga aged solely in steel. A crowd pleaser with a nose that’s more complex than you’d think—cherry, fresh herbs, and black pepper—and flavors of strawberry and blueberry, great acidity, and a crisp finish.

Giz by Luis Gomes (\$33)

This was my favorite sparkling wine of last summer. And I love it this summer, too. Gorgeous, floral nose, tart and fruity, with great acidity, with the underlying heft, savoriness, and meatiness of the Baga. Pronounced *jhEEz*, by the way—get your mind out

Grossberg/Kopman Selections, has one of the best Portuguese portfolios in the U.S.

CASTELÃO

2023 Hugo Mendes Lisboa Castelão (\$22)

Bright, zingy, and lovely. I'd file this one under "dangerously drinkable." Especially nice with a bit of a chill. Pretty herbal, floral nose and juicy red fruit on the palate, but with good structure, and an attractive stoniness on the finish. A great Tuesday night wine.



2021 Baías e Enseadas Castelão (\$32)

Winemaker Daniel Alfonso is part of a movement to rebuild Colares, the unique region right on the Atlantic

complex Castelão with a beautiful nose of herbs and flowers and flavors of strawberry, blood orange, and cherry tomato on the palate, with spicy, peppery notes throughout leading to a long finish.

2020 Adega Viúva Gomes “Pirata da Viúva” (\$38)

A cool mix of serious and glou-glou, aged only in stainless steel. Aromas of blackberry and forest floor, with a palate bursting with bright red fruit, and lively notes of pepper, cocoa, and sea spray throughout. Vibrant and fun to drink.



Marinho Vinhos “Bro” (\$39)

One of my favorite wines to drink in Lisbon, by Luis Gil, a surf dude turned natty winemaker. (His other wines have names like “Punker,” “Dude,” and

vines. Light, mineral-driven red that's great chilled, full of juicy cherry and earthy notes, complex and drinkable. By the way, I met Gil at [Cave da Estrela](#), my favorite natural wine shop in Lisbon.

2021 Espera Castelão (\$25)

Bright, fruity, with a pretty nose of herbs and violet and notes of intense, bright cherry and hints of smoke on the palate, and a cool, mineral finish. Really good value for a super drinkable wine.

2020 Filipe Palhoça "São Filipe" Tinto (\$14)

This budget bottle has Castelão blended with a bit of Syrah and Cabernet Sauvignon, and is aged solely in stainless steel. Vibrant, structured, and a little more full-bodied. But still youthful and fresh, and a good value.

OTHER PORTUGUESE REDS

2015 Adega Viúva Gomes Colares Ramisco (\$56/500 ml)

Colares is one of the most unique wine regions in the world, with its pre-phylloxera rootstock planted in the sandy soils near cliffs overlooking the Atlantic. And this is one of the great unicorn wines of Portugal. A profound

2015 is amazing. But if you can afford it, the 1969 is not to be missed.

2020 Textura “Pretexto” Tinto (\$28)

From Dão, this is among my favorite Portuguese wines from the last couple of years, and it’s turning up more and more on American wine lists. Made from a blend of Jaen (aka Mencía), Touriga Nacional, Touriga Roriz, and other native varieties, and aged in large casks for 11 months. Effusive and bright, bursting with tart cherry and blackberry and zingy acidity, but there’s good structure here.

2020 Adega Mayor Dizeres Tinto (\$17)

From the Alentejo in south-central Portugal, a blend of Aragonez (aka Tempranillo) and Trincadeira. Drinks a bit like a classic Rioja, with layers of cherry (Bing and black), balanced by floral and baking spice notes. Super drinkable, and good value.

Tags: Portugal, Red Wine