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Portugal's Next Frontier

Referred to by some as the "New Portugal," the regions of Lisboa and Tejo are offering affordable, world-class wines.

BY ROGER VOSS



At dawn on the coast of Portugal, just north of Lisbon, the fog rolls in from the Atlantic Ocean. It works its way through the mountain range to the protected vineyards of the Lisboa region, keeping grapes cool in the late-summer heat.

After the fog lifts, surfers come out to catch the legendary waves at the most westerly shore in mainland Europe. Lisboa, less than an hour from Lisbon, is not just one of Portugal's most productive vineyard areas, it's Europe's surf capital (see "Tasty Waves" below) and the connection between sea and vines is palpable here. Adjacent, but farther inland, across the Lisboa peninsula, are the vineyards of the Tejo region, wrapped around the Tagus River delta as it makes its way to the Atlantic. Here, the climate is warmer, and the wines become more powerful.

These two Portuguese regions are not dissimilar to Sonoma in California—the cooler Sonoma Coast is influenced by the ocean, while the warmer Sonoma Valley is influenced by the waters of San Pablo Bay.

Lisboa and Tejo are the pulse of what José Neiva Correia, owner and winemaker at DFJ Vinhos in Tejo, calls "the new Portugal." Producers in the region formerly known as Estremadura began to use its new regional name, Lisboa, on labels beginning with the 2008 vintage. The switch was made to avoid confusion with Spain's Extremadura. Tejo (formerly Ribatejo) transitioned to its new name at the same time.

For both, the name changes reflect the dramatic shift from a bulk wine region to one that produces quality wines at surprising prices (many retailing for \$12 or less), and for an increasing number of top estate wines.

Viticultural Time Warp

The so-called Carnation Revolution of 1974 dramatically changed both regions. As Portugal underwent its gradual move to democracy, big estates were seized and broken up by temporary Marxist governments, while other properties were abandoned or saw production decline.

There was also an exodus of experts to Brazil and elsewhere that essentially sent Portugal into a viticultural time warp. Not until the 1990s did equilibrium return to the region, as estate owners, some of them new, assessed damaged crops, neglected vineyards and traditional wineries that primarily produced bulk wines. New vineyards began to take root, as did improved winemaking techniques and the Portuguese trait of looking across the ocean for the future. Lisboa and Tejo wines are the result of this new, quality-oriented direction.

The local grapes Arinto and Fernão Pires produce crisp, refreshing whites, while Castelão and Alicante Bouschet make fruity and juicy reds. But those few grape varieties are just the start. The regions' modern "anything goes" approach includes planting vineyards with vines from all over Portugal and the world. Alvarinho, Sercial, Chardonnay and Sauvignon Blanc give

richness and complexity to the whites; Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, Cabernet Sauvignon, Pinot Noir and Syrah give finesse, structure and power to the reds.

There is flexibility in the structure of the winemaking companies. Quintas (or estates) are owned by merchant houses and families. Some quintas use estate-grown fruit, while others source grapes from growers—Quinta da Boavista, with its Casa Santos Lima wines, is a case in point.

Individual quintas can be vast—Quinta da Alorna in Tejo controls 540 acres of grapes—while others are boutique, like Quinta de Sant'Ana in Lisboa, with about 24 acres.

Producers of Lisboa and Tejo

Halfway up a steep slope outside the Lisboa village of Aldeia Galega, a modern winery is under construction. It should have been finished for the 2011 harvest, but work is behind schedule. The frustration on the part of Alice and Paulo Tavares da Silva is palpable. They bought the beautiful Quinta de Chocapalha in 1987 and replanted the vineyard. Now, with daughter Sandra Tavares da Silva as chief winemaker (who lives in the Douro and produces Wine & Soul with her winemaker husband, Jorge Serôdio Borges), Chocapalha wines are in top form.

It's a calm place where great wine can be made. "We get the morning ocean fog, the hot sun in the afternoon, the evening cooling winds...and silence," says Alice, admiring the view and dreaming of the future.

Another Lisboa producer preparing for a bright future is Luis Vieira of Quinta do Gradil. Vieira epitomizes the transition in Lisboa between bulk wine and quality estate wines. At one end of the winery stand huge tanks that store bulk wine for sale in Lisbon. In the winery itself are smaller tanks and barrels, which house the wines he makes from the 495 acres of his three Lisboa estates, Castello do Sulco, Casa das Gaeiras and Quinta do Gradil. These wines are primarily for export—Vieira has plans to increase exportation from 47% to 70%.

"We are trying to show Lisboa as a blend of Portugal and international," explains Vieira, who has owned Gradil since 1999. "Put the two together and the region can make top quality wines that are still value for money."

As with other wineries in this region, the public tasting room is new and modern. Winemaker Antonio Ventura presents his full range of blends, from the crisp, Arinto-based whites to the reds—ripe blends of Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and even Tannat to go with the juicy Alicante Bouschet.

"We are developing fast," says Ventura. "Now the push is on to add the top quality to the ranges."

That same push is occurring in Tejo. Like so many of her colleagues there, Alorna winemaker Martta Reis Simões likes to try new things. Unfortunately, "we only have two months every year to experiment," she says. She's in sync with the philosophy of the region—she does not believe in rigid blends, and she will combine Portuguese and French varieties, seamlessly putting them together in the spring following harvest. Quinta da Alorna, owned by the Lopo de Carvalho family since 1918, boasts 540 acres of vines in a 7,000-acre estate that includes a Lusitano dressage training center, "grape garden" of experimental clones and wine-tasting center.

Simões has recently created a line of white and red wines (called "What's for Dinner?"), specifically for the American market. Alorna also plans to introduce a mid- to high-end brand called Eagle's Gate, a reference to the gate of the Alorna palace courtyard. At the premium end of the scale is the Marquesa de Alorna range.



Ranging Wide for Quality Fruit

A number of wineries, based in Tejo and Lisboa, source fruit from all over Portugal. One such is DFJ Vinhos, which currently exports between 30 and 40 wines to the United States from a list of "maybe a hundred wines, I'm not sure," admits the winery's owner, José Neiva Correia. This is a big operation, producing six million bottles a year.

"I often create new wines because I wake up in the morning and think, what would happen if I blended that grape with that other one?" says Correia, a winemaker, organic vineyard advocate and true pioneer in Lisboa and Tejo's ascent from bulk to quality wine. DFJ is

probably the only winery in the world to make a specialty of Caladoc (a close crossing of Grenache and Malbec), which Correia blends with Alicante Bouschet.

The firm sources grapes from three family estates and from other growers. The winery is housed in a former distillery, Quinta da Fonte Bela. It's an extraordinary complex—one very recognizable building constructed in 1901 was designed by Gustave Eiffel, the architect of the Eiffel Tower.

DFJ wines regularly earn Wine Enthusiast Best Buy designations for quality-to-price favorability—16 in the most recent batch of reviews. They run from the simple, \$6 Coreto to the ever-expanding top range called Grand'Arte. Best wines include the white Grand'Arte Alvarinho and the red Quinta do Rocio from Correia's family estate.

Another producer that ranges far and wide for fruit is Companhia das Quintas. Nuno do Ó and João Correia are the winemakers of Quinta da Romeira in Lisboa's Bucelas. The pair also handles the red wines of nearby Quinta da Pancas, Quinta da Fronteira in the Douro, Quinta do Cardo in the mountains of the Beiras and Herdade da Farzoa in Alentejo. This quintet of quintas, nearly 1,000 acres in total, are all part of Companhia das Quintas.

It's a considerable range of highly rated wines, but do Ó seems to have a special love for the Arinto white wines of Bucelas. "It is a naturally [acidic] grape, so I look for a balance between the acidity and sugar," he says. Standing on the granite veranda of Romeira and pointing to the steep slopes on either side of the 18th-century pink villa, he says, "These are poor soils, with clay and limestone, just right for a white grape like Arinto. And in this V-shaped valley, we get the breezes straight off the ocean to keep all the freshness in the fruit."

Bucelas has made its name as the Arinto capital. Quinta da Romeira, with 172 acres planted entirely with Arinto, is a leading producer. The volume wine from the estate is Prova Régia, an aromatic and fresh citrus- and tropical fruit-flavored wine. The top wine is Morgado de Sta. Catherina, a wood-fermented Reserva that has a strong resemblance to a ripe Chardonnay.

At every level in Tejo and Lisboa, producers make an enormous variety of wines. What visitors discover is that tastings are not brief—an array of bottles will be lined up on the tasting bench—but the wines are always fascinating. Winemakers of Lisboa and Tejo have perfected the art of blending, while also preserving the characteristics of single-variety wines.

"They are very approachable and can be somewhat exotic," Joe Veselko says of the wines. Originally from California—and a surfer for 30 years—Veselko started in the wine business in California and moved to Portugal in 2003. He now exports a portfolio of estates through his company, Wine Project Portugal.

"The surf in the Lisboa region is some of the best in Europe," adds Veselko, a man who knows his waves as well as his wines. Sea and vines, vines and winemakers: The connection is always there.

Tasty Waves

There are plenty of wine regions around the world where you can combine a wine and surf vacation. But how many are protected? World Surfing Reserves is an organization that identifies, designates and preserves outstanding surf zones and their surrounding environments around the world. The first such designation in Europe is the Lisboa wine region's Ericeira coastline, half an hour from the nearest vineyards. (It was dedicated October 14, 2011; worldsurfingreserves.org.) Malibu was the first designated area, and scheduled to follow are Santa Cruz, California and Manly Beach in Australia. The object is to protect key global surfing areas from pollution and shore development that can ruin waves and the tourism that comes with surfing.

The world-class Ericeira surf zone is 2.5 miles of seven quality surf breaks. The cliff coastline is punctuated by small bays, black rock beaches and significant upswells that nurture the coastal waters. Added fishing benefit: Fresh fish restaurants and their wine lists are terrific. Start with Marisqueira de Ribamar (marisqueiraribamar.com) near the Ribeira d'Ilhas beach and Furnas on the beach at Ericeira (restfurnasericeira.com). Nick Uricchio, a California surfer and founder of the Semente global brand of surfboards (semente.pt), arrived in Portugal in 1978, got a taste of the waves and decided to stay. Uricchio, whose workshop is a block from the ocean, is now what he calls a "guardian" of the Ericeira protected surfing reserve.

While we give you the best advice about wine, we asked Uricchio, a surfing legend, for the surf report. "California has long flat spells. It is good here all the time," he said.

A Mixed Case from Lisboa and Tejo

Red Wines

92 Caves Velhas 2007 Cabeça de Toiro Reserva (Ribatejo). Editors' Choice. Admiral Imports. abv: 13.5% Price: \$17

92 Quinta da Alorna 2008 Reserva Touriga Nacional-Cabernet Sauvignon (Tejo). Cellar Selection. Grape Moments. abv: 14% Price: \$18

92 Quinta de Chocapalha 2008 Reserva (Lisboa). Cellar Selection. Solstars Inc. abv: 14% Price: \$36

91 Companhia das Quintas 2008 Quinta da Pancas Reserva (Lisboa). Aidil Wines & Liquor. abv: 13.5% Price: \$NA

91 Fiuza 2008 Premium Touriga Nacional-Cabernet Sauvignon (Tejo). Aidil Wines & Liquor Inc. abv: 14% Price: \$25

91 Quinta de Sant'Anna 2007 Baron Gustav von Fürstenberg (Lisboa). Cellar Selection. Laurel Im- porters. abv: 14% Price: \$47

90 Casa Cadaval 2008 Vinha Padre Pedro (Tejo). Best Buy. VOS Selections. abv: 13.5% Price: \$12

88 Parras Vinhos 2008 Castelo do Sulco Reserva. Grape Moments. abv: 13.5% Price: \$11

White Wines

90 Quinta dos Loidos (Lisboa). Best Buy. Admiral Imports. abv: 12.5% Price: \$15

89 Vale d'Algares 2009 Guarda Rios Branco (Tejo). Best Buy. Artisan Vines Distributing. abv: 13% Price: \$13

89 DFJ Vinhos 2009 Consensus (Lisboa). Best Buy. Dionysos Imports. abv: 12.5% Price: \$13

87 Casca Wines 2009 Cape Roca Fisherman (Lisboa). Laurel Importers. abv: 12% Price: \$13