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WINE ENTHUSIAST®

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PORTUGAL'S GREEN REVOLUTION

While the spritely, low-alcohol versions of Vinho Verde are perfect for warm-weather sipping, some producers are aiming for more richness and complexity. It's an exciting time for Portugal's "green wine."

BY ROGER VOSS

Nothing says summer like Vinho Verde, from northern Portugal.

With their crisp fruitiness, low alcohol levels and off-dry styles, the big-production, brand-name wines are Portugal's answer to Pinot Grigio—with a spiral of bubbles to give them a lift on the palate. Delicious and thirst quenching, buy them today, and drink them outdoors as the temperatures climb.

That's one aspect of Vinho Verde.

The other side of Vinho Verde is only just becoming known and appreciated.



These dry wines are sophisticated, mineral and elegant, while remaining fruity and relatively low in alcohol. They are new takes on traditional styles, the wines that were made to go with the region's seafood well before the arrival of the off-dry brands. These wines have the same polished, sophisticated feel as top-class white wines from Austria or France's Loire Valley.

The Vinho Verde wine region, (also known as "the Minho"), is Portugal's greenest, a complete contrast to the beaches of the Algarve or the harsh mountains of the interior. Watered by frequent cool rains that come off the Atlantic Ocean, it is a region where agriculture rules. Dramatic forested mountains alternate with lush river valleys that broaden out at the coast.

Visitors to the region fly into Oporto, then travel by land to Guimarães, the country's first capital, and Braga, one of the oldest cities in Portugal. They surf the white-sand ocean beaches in the morning and taste wine in the afternoon. They stay in private manor houses where the owners provide historic accommodations and terrific meals. And they eat *caldo verde*—the local potato and collard greens soup—grilled sardines, duck with rice or amazingly fresh fish of every shape and description.

The landscape and cuisine provide the background for the delicious, always inexpensive—you'll rarely pay more than \$20, even for the best—wines labeled Vinho Verde or the regional designation Minho.

And while the large production of red Vinho Verde tends to stay in Portugal, rosés that have the same crisp, fresh, low-alcohol character as the whites are now appearing abroad, ready to brighten up any summer moment.

Choices for summer

Anybody in search of light, fresh and not-quite-dry white wine should make a stop at Vinho Verde's brand-name wines. They are my favorite white wines for the summer months, because they are so accessible.

"They are part of the new lifestyle for young people, people coming to wine," says Antonio Guedes, CEO of family-owned Aveleda.

Seasoned wine drinkers will also enjoy the light froth as the wine is poured and the



Near Melgaço in Portugal's Minho, the vines are grown on pergolas.

prickle on the tongue these young wines provide. They are the wines that give us the true meaning of Vinho Verde—not literally "green wine," but wine to be drunk in the year after harvest.

The winemakers, generally large-volume wineries or cooperatives, make a virtue out of the naturally low ripeness of many of the grapes in Vinho Verde. They add sugar to give sweetness to the wines, although it is never cloying. The crisp acidity cuts right through, making the wines refreshing. And low ripeness brings low alcohol levels—sometimes as low as 9%, but never more than 10.5%—producing wines that are great as summer apéritifs, or perfect for a lazy day spent by the pool or patio.

Back to the future

There was a time in the 18th century when Vinho Verde was more than sweetness and light. It was a time before grapes were trained on trees and trellises to save land for food crops and treated more like a food crop themselves.

That's the era that top producers of es-

tate wines in Vinho Verde are returning to. Adding modern viticulture and winemaking techniques to tradition, they are crafting serious white wines.

As these dry wines come to the fore, so do the grapes they are made from. White Vinho Verde can be made from a blend of 15 grapes, but only a few of them truly stand out. According to consultant Anselmo Mendes, Alvarinho, Loureiro and Avesso are the stars of the region. Alvarinho and Loureiro are increasingly found as varietal wines, while Avesso more often appears in blends.

In the far north of the region, Alvarinho makes the richest and priciest wines, creamy and ripe, but always with more lift and acidity than its Spanish counterpart, Albariño.

In the central area, in the Lima Valley, Loureiro is the grape of choice. The wines are round, full of citrus and mineral flavors and textures. Elsewhere, blends reign supreme.

Bone dry—just taste that freshness—fruity when young and capable of aging for several years, these are world-class wines that stand in complete contrast to the branded wines. These represent an exciting wine style that's awaiting discovery.

NICK ROCK/CEPHAS



Top-Rated Branded Wines for Warm-Weather Sipping

Purists may dismiss these wines as not true Vinho Verde. I'm not sure I care—I just enjoy drinking them. Look for the most recent vintage available.

85 Aveleda 2012 Casal Garcia Branco (Vinho Verde). One of the most popular Vinho Verdes, this is made in a light, medium-sweet style. It's very fresh and crisp, with some attractive citrus acidity. Screwcap. Aveleda Imports. **Best Buy.**
abv: 10% Price: \$8

85 Casca Wines 2012 Cape Roca Fisherman (Vinho Verde). An off-dry, very fruity wine that is deliciously light and fresh. It has flavors of pear laced with citrus, and just a touch of spritz to give it an extra lift. Screwcap. Laurel Importers.
abv: 10.5% Price: \$11

85 Caves Aliança 2012 Aliança (Vinho Verde). This is typical, light, fruity lemon-driven Vinho Verde. It has a light spritz, and is exuberantly fresh with just a touch of ripeness and crisp, cool acidity. Tri-Vin Imports. **Best Buy.**
abv: 10% Price: \$8

85 Vinhos Norte 2012 Cruzeiro (Vinho Verde). Medium dry, with a creamy petillance that gives a lift of freshness, this wine is fragrant with green apples and citrus. Lively and fruity. Value Vines LLC. **Best Buy.**
abv: 9% Price: \$9





Top-Rated Vinho Verdes in the Modern Classic Style

Unlike the branded wines, many of these wines will actually improve with a year or two in the bottle. The 2012s reviewed here should be at peak.

91 Casa do Valle 2012 Grande Escolha (Vinho Verde). This is an impressively rich wine, full of creamed apple and ripe apricot flavors. It has weight, a good amount of flesh, and acidity adding dimension to the concentration. Massano Imports. **Editors' Choice.**
abv: 13.5%

Price: \$17

91 Wines & Winemakers 2012 Toucas Alvarinho (Vinho Verde). A superior Vinho Verde, elegant and full-bodied. The creamy texture is partnered with ripe apricot and pear fruits, a touch of green plum and a feeling of opulence along with the acidity. Iberia Wine & Spirits LLC. **Editors' Choice.**
abv: 12.5%

Price: \$19

90 Anselmo Mendes 2012 Muros Antigos Alvarinho (Vinho Verde). This is a rich and full-bodied wine that's ripe and generous. It has spice, ripe apple and crisp pear-skin flavors along with tight, mineral acidity. Aidil Wines/Old World Import.
abv: 13%

Price: \$16

90 Quinta do Ameal 2011 Branco Seco (Vinho Verde). This is a fruity, floral Vinho Verde that's very crisp and citrusy. It has bright acidity, a light, dancing character, and green fruits, grapefruit and a mineral texture that should come together deliciously for the summer. Oz Wine Company. **Best Buy.**
abv: 11%

Price: \$15