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Vinho Verde - wines for all seasons



Don't wait for spring to drink Portugal's 'green wine' - there are plenty of styles worthy of a place at the table even in winter. Above, the Lima River, which gives its name to one of Vinho Verde's nine subregions (© Fabrice Demoulin - CVRVV).

There is a deeply held view that all Vinho Verde wines are white, light, relatively low in alcohol, possibly not quite dry, with a slight spritz. The only truth in this view is that they are mostly white: only 20% of 95 million litres of wine produced annually in this region is red or rosé. Vinho Verde is a region, not a grape variety or a style.

The other stereotype is that Vinho Verde should be drunk young, an impression reinforced by the wine's very name: *vinho verde* means 'young wine', even if the literal

translation is 'green wine'.

As noted in the Vinho Verde entry in the latest edition of *The Oxford Companion to Wine*, 'Since the 1980s a shift towards better viticultural practices and more protective winemaking has challenged the old stereotype, resulting in a middle tier of fruitier wines and a top tier of dry, complex wines'.

Journalist and Portuguese specialist Sarah Ahmed, who last year presented two masterclasses in London alongside Vincenzo Arnese, Raffles wine director and UK best sommelier of the year 2022, credits Vinho Verde with having spearheaded Portugal's white-wine revolution, describing the region as the vinous equivalent of 'a Swiss army penknife'.

Ahmed and Arnese set out to crush these stereotypes in these tastings, unveiling 12 wines made from various varieties and subregions in the first masterclass and matching them with small dishes to demonstrate the wines' gastronomic versatility; then showing seven wines from Vinho Verde's most northerly subregion, Monção e Melgaço, most famous for the more full-bodied Alvarinho and until recently the only region allowed to produce varietal Alvarinho wines and the only one to have its own subregional *selo de garantia* (seal of guarantee) on the label. While the light and refreshing style that many tourists encounter on their Portuguese holidays remains important to the region, these tastings showed that it's now easy to find complex, ageworthy wines best served with food – even in winter.

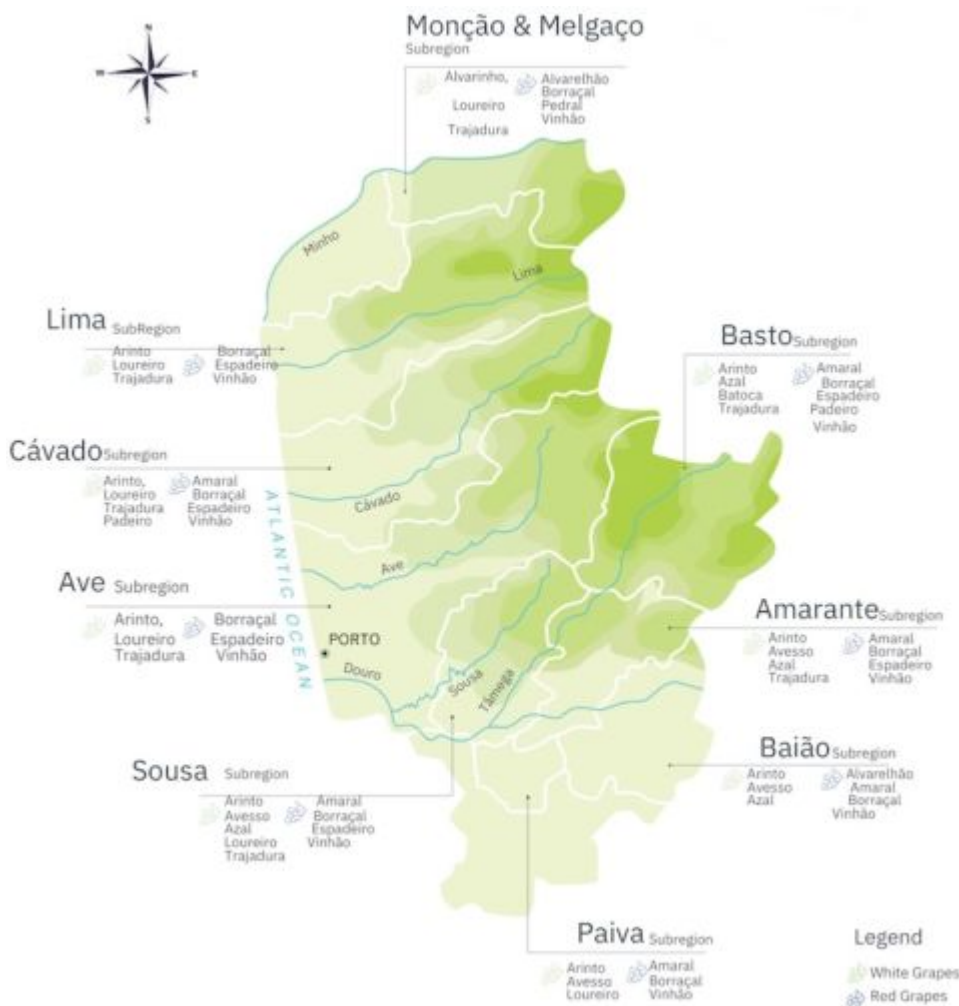


The official seal of the Monção e Melgaço subregion, which can be seen on back labels of wines guaranteed to come from there

Vinho Verde is a big region, with more than 17,000 ha (42,000 acres) of vineyards bounded by the Minho River and Spain's Galicia in the north and extending beyond the Douro River in the south, as shown in this [*World Atlas of Wine* map of Portugal](#). So it is hardly surprising that it cannot be defined by one wine style.

The Atlantic influence spreads from the west, blocked by the mountains in the east that form the border with Trás-os-Montes. Annual rainfall is high – around 1,200 mm a year, which is more than twice that of the Alentejo in southern Portugal. The soils are mainly fertile, well drained and of granitic origin. Traditionally characterised by polyculture, with vines growing up trees or on pergola, the region is now dominated by so-called 'continuous planting' (ie monoculture), although producers such as Constantino Ramos have rescued some of the old vineyards to make inspiring wines such as his Zafira field-blend red. (I was sorry to find that this was the only red shown because I am particularly fond of the equally diverse styles of red Vinho Verde, and especially the Vinhão grape variety.)

The first selection of 12 wines highlighted wines from all nine Vinho Verde subregions, which are mostly arranged around and named after the many rivers that criss-cross the Minho region: Amarante, Ave, Baião, Basto, Cávado, Lima, Monção e Melgaço, Paiva and Sousa. (Minho is the name of the province, coterminous with the Vinho Verde appellation, and of the IGP used for wines that are not, by constitution or choice, classified as Vinho Verde.)



Subregion map courtesy of the Comissão de Viticultura da Região dos Vinhos Verdes (CVRVV)

There's no restriction on which of Vinho Verde's astonishing 45 permitted varieties (67 in Vinho Regional Minho) may be grown where; but in the last decade or so there has been an increased focus on varietal wines from specific subregions, as producers try to find the best matches between site and variety. For example, the bay-leaf-scented Loureiro, the region's most widely planted variety with 35% of the light-skinned plantings (Alvarinho comes in second at 19%, followed by the versatile, grapefruit-scented and ageworthy Arinto, also known as Pedernã, with 18%), seems to be particularly well suited to Lima, Cávado and Ave, whereas Avesso, until recently not as highly regarded as the two more-aromatic varieties, comes into its own in Baião and now also in Amarante. Azal (8%) does best in inland areas and prefers drier soils, producing fresh, citrus-dominated wines.

A highlight of this first tasting was the opportunity to try the wines with food. For each of the first 12 wines listed below, they suggested a food pairing and offered small samples of some of the dishes (or an alternative that was easier to serve in the masterclass

setting). Some of the combinations were fairly predictable, such as those featuring smoked salmon or crab; others were unexpectedly good (eg the mushroom-and-truffle broth with Lima & Smith, Covela Avesso Reserva, or Quinta do Louridal's Poema Alvarinho Reserva 2015 with duck and mango vol-au-vent).

On paper, the second masterclass looked to offer less diversity: one variety (Alvarinho, the same grape as the Albariño of Galicia), one subregion (Monção e Melgaço). But this was not the case. With variation in viticulture and winemaking, particularly the latter, the range of styles was impressive, from the light-bodied but deeply fruited and dry-tasting Deu La Deu from the excellent Adega de Monção co-operative to Soalheiro's cloudy, salty and slightly chewy Terramatter or the mature, golden, rich Extra Bruto sparkling wine from Valados de Melgaço.



Pergola-trained Alvarinho vines in Soalheiro's vineyards in Monção e Melgaço
(© Fabrice Demoulin – CVRVV)

When two expert Portuguese wine lovers select 19 of the region's best wines, it is almost inevitable the scores will be high. However, as another lover of Portuguese wine, I was thrilled to find such high quality across the board combined with extremely reasonable prices. Three of the most mature wines – Casa de Cello's Quinta de San Joanne Brut Nature 2011 (Avesso and Arinto), Sem Igual 2016 (Arinto and Azal), and Aphros's Daphne Loureiro 2011 – were masterful vindications of the ageability of some of the region's most exciting wines. UK prices were not available for every wine but there are no overpriced wines here and some real bargains (note the rash of GVs for good value).

The 19 wines are presented in the order tasted in the two masterclasses, first 12 wines from different Vinho Verde subregions, then 7 Alvarinhos from Monção e Melgaço.