



DIRECT PRESS

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PORTUGUESE POSSIBILITIES

It's official: natural wine has come to the western reaches of the Iberian peninsula. There is a lot of wine coming out of Portugal that is a stylistic departure from the oceans of cheap Vinho Verde and massive, inky reds that were the staple of most wine shops' Portuguese sections for decades. But beyond the cool-kid clichés of chillable reds and funky oranges, there is a renewed interest in restoring neglected regions, preserving near-extinct varieties, and embracing the charm of local wines that were deemed too angular and quirky for export for many years. All that is great news, and it's the main reason I was drawn to take a closer look at Portugal. That, and I needed to do a deeper dive and update my knowledge on the country. I took my first trip to Portugal in early March, and can't wait to go back. But I'm still no expert, so I reached out to a few of the importers we work with to get their take on these developments.

Importer Savio Soares, who now lives outside the Vinho Verde region, has been working with

Portuguese wines for a long time now and has seen the changes up close. "Besides its people, historic legacy and gorgeous landscape, when it comes to wine, it is a bit of a paradox," says Soares. "I say that, because, believe it or not, the majority of wine producers are still producing wine on the basis set forth by Robert Parker, thirty-some years ago! For decades, wine producers have been wealthy families and/or financial institutions who own land and vineyards all over the country and the result is that Portugal is known, for the most part, for mass produced, uninteresting cheap wine".

Naama Laufer, who started NLC Wines a decade ago to exclusively import small Portuguese projects, echoes this, saying that "in Portugal, the larger projects still dominate the winescape (predominantly in supermarkets), which has left export markets as the main avenue for the smaller/niche projects. The niche projects tend to have significantly more limited quantities, but the styles are fresher and targeted towards a younger audience, positioning Portugal, at last, among wines to take note of.

This group of younger winemakers have more space to 'play' with each vintage."

We certainly are featuring the more playful side of Portugal this month with wines from Duckman (*Press 4 mix/white*), Reguengo (*Press 4 mix/red*), Humus (*Press 4 red*), and Boavista (*Press 4 white, Press 2*). We've also included producers that are older but have stuck to their guns over the years, occupying a rare middle ground. It's still the case that most wines in Portugal fall into either "very rustic or very modern" winemaking, with both extremes reflecting a general lack of traditional knowledge that has been passed down in the best wine regions of Europe.

Luckily there are a handful of producers like João Tavares de Pina of Quinta da Boavista (*Press 4 white, Press 2*), who have inherited the pride and traditional techniques of previous generations. He believes that the Dão region

is the "Burgundy of the South," as people called it back in the 1800s. He and his father have been making low-intervention wine for decades on their family home that was built in the 1700s, working with Jaen (aka Mencia), Rufete, Cerceal, Encruzado, and Touriga Nacional.



Laufer describes those like Tavares as "old-school winemakers who have been making the same style of wine for generations — the true heart of Portugal — who

we look to for unique gems." Another in this crew is Luís Pato (*Press 2*) who took over his family's vines in 1980 and staked his name on Baga, an often-astringent grape variety, going so far as to leave the Bairrada DOC in 1999 when they permitted international varieties like Merlot and Syrah to be planted. He was one of the first to make an old-vine *Vinhas Velhas* wine from Baga, and they are quite special and deserving of extended aging. Those willing to wait can tap into depth and profound complexity usually only found in wines like Barolo.

Luís' daughter Filipa Pato has her own well-regarded winery focusing on classic, refined expressions of Bairrada wine, and his other daughter Maria has taken over a lot of the old family operation and is also making wine under the more irreverent 'Duckman' label (*Press 4 mix/white*). She is keeping true to the family's

Pictured above: Maria Pato with her father, Luís Pato. They exemplify Portugal's changing dynamics in just one generation. (Tina Meyer)



long-held belief in Baga as well as varieties like Fernão Pires (aka Maria Gomes), Bical, and Cerceal. After many decades in obscurity, the Pato family has been central to the renewed interest in Bairrada wines. Through dedication and, likely, sheer stubbornness, Luís successfully kept the uniqueness of his home region alive for later generations to appreciate.

Though having a vineyard to inherit helps, there are opportunities for younger winemakers because land prices are still relatively low compared to other countries. Lewis Kopman, who started a Portuguese import company last year, feels that "Portugal is, in many cases, only a few generations removed from a more pastoral economy, so lots of young people, even if not coming from wealth, have vines and land in their family." Not just any vines, either. Savio Soares

says that "Portugal, like no other country I know, has thousands of hectares planted with old vines, with many of them being a century old". Combined with a renewed interest in cleaner farming and rediscovering older ways of wine making that rely less on technology or chemical intervention, the results can be "phenomenal," says Soares.

The recurring theme of everyone I talked to was that Portugal has untapped potential. It has astounding terroir, a huge diversity of soil types and microclimates, long lists of high-quality indigenous grapes, reserves of pre-phylloxera vines, and the ability to create wines that rival even Burgundy and Piedmont in terms of authenticity, finesse, and age-worthiness. Encouraging the next generation to see this heritage will hopefully be motivation to take on the intense work it requires to make wine in Portugal. It is a "very mountainous country that is pressed right into a pretty violent part of the Atlantic, so good farming is often very labor intensive and yields are often very low," as Kopman puts it.

Above: The breathtaking and backbreaking Cima Corgo vineyards of Mateus Nicolau de Almeida in the Douro. (Mateus Nicolau de Almeida)



The challenges of making wine in Portugal are part of the reason many left viticultural areas for less physically-demanding jobs in cities. In many cases, this void was filled by the big, conventional producers. Though they may still dominate, even they can't escape the conversations around natural wine. Kopman believes that "regardless of how extreme a producer ends up along the spectrum of natural/low intervention, all of the best producers in the country are at least in dialogue with the movement. The next step is creating a healthier market for the wines."

The majority of Portuguese natural wine is still for export, and in Portugal the wine scene is "embryonic," according to Savio Soares. "It's way behind France, Italy and Spain in terms of common knowledge and consumption. There are very few natural wine bars, restaurants and shops in the country. Much like NYC in the early 2000s." I disagree with Savio only in that he makes it seem like it might be tricky to find places with natural wine. That was not my experience when visiting Lisbon and Porto in March of this year. We had no trouble finding spots all over those two cities, from casual lunch spots to high-level tasting menu restaurants, to crowded wine bars with wait

lists for seats. The staff at the restaurants and wine bars we visited were excited to be a part of the changes that were catching like wildfire. We were utterly spoiled by the wine and the meals we had there.

José Leão of Louis/Dressner Imports was a key figure in NYC's natural wine development in the early 2000s, most notably at the Ten Bells, Balthazar, and Restaurant 360. José is Portuguese, born and raised in Lisbon. He is unflinchingly optimistic about his home country. He describes the growth in the Portuguese scene as happening "faster and quicker" than in other countries. "In the past five to six years that I've been coming here I've witnessed the movement just growing up and up along with restaurants, shops, and markets. And it's here to stay!" If Portugal had been sleeping on its heritage to the wider world of wine, consider it wide awake to the possibilities that await.

Saúde!

Jonathan Kemp

Kirk Sutherland

Above: Scenes from Lisbon's emerging natural wine culture. (L-R) Alana Mostachio of VdB Bistronomie (Alana Mostachio); 2014 Humus at an outdoor market (J. Kemp); Cafe Tati in the Penha de França neighborhood (J. Kemp).

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João Pato Duckman Vinho Branco 2020

Bairrada • Portugal

[Press 4 Mix + Press 4 White]

Maria Pato pretty much comes from a winemaking dynasty. The daughter of the legendary winemaker Luís Pato — who put the Bairrada region on the map and is featured in our 2 bottle club — and sister to Filipa Pato, a wildly successful winemaker as well, Maria branched out on her own to make natural wines under the name João Pato Duckman a few years back and has had a huge impact on the new wave of

Portuguese wines hitting the international wine market. Today Maria splits her time between making the Luís Pato wines with her father and the Duckman wines, with the goal for her to eventually fully takeover the family's estate.

The Duckman Vinho Branco is, for lack of a better term, Maria's entry level white. 85% Bical, 15% Fernão Pires given a short maceration before being pressed and fermented in stainless steel. Hazy, zesty and nothing short of crushable. Jonathan described the wine as alcoholic Vitamin Water, and I couldn't agree more. Mango, pineapple and white flowers on the nose, and packed with juicy pink grapefruit,

lemon curd and maritime salinity. Early summer in a bottle. **KS**

Casal do Ramilo Arinto 2017

Mafra • Lisboa • Portugal

[Press 4 Mix + Press 4 White]

Ramilo is an example of a younger generation going back to the land. Brothers Nuno and Pedro Ramilo left their comfortable office jobs to take over their family's four-generation estate in 2013; they only agreed to it if they could do it their way, however. Now they have

converted to organic farming and are replanting near-extinct varieties like Vital. They also hold the rare distinction of making one of the only estate-grown wines from Colares, likely the smallest



wine DOC in the world, a unique appellation with vines planted on the beaches near Sintra. Closer to the town of Mafra, they also have vines planted on rugged limestone hills. All the wines are made in old granite lagars with an old handpress. Nuno is not as into the mystical side of natural winemaking but has seen the soils and the wines improve markedly since they converted to organics. In the cellar, he has also found that the wines require very little sulfur.

Above: Nuno Ramilo left a successful career as a civil engineer to take over his family's estate between Sintra and Mafra, an area lush with abandoned, hard-to-work vineyards that have been reclaimed by nature. (J. Kemp)

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Their 100% Arinto from 2017 is striking and distinct. The ocean, barely 10 miles from the vines, lends a strong, salty note to the wines. Opulent, complex, and waxy, it has Chenin and Riesling vibes with sea breeze, spruce, and peppermint notes. This is a very impressive wine that rewards aging. The importer holds these back before release, so the 2017 is ready to drink now, but I'd be curious to stash some away for even longer to see how it develops. **JK**

Cabecas do Reguengo "Respiro Clarete" 2020

Alentejo • Portugal

[Press 4 Mix + Press 4 Red]

Alentejo is Portugal's largest wine region, covering some 30% of the country. The area is mostly known for producing bulk wine, and if we're being totally honest, there has never been much of a cohesive style that binds the region together - considering the region is 27,272 square kilometers, it makes sense that there would be a great diversity in the wines produced there. I had never tasted any natural wines from Alentejo until recently, and the cream of the crop is clearly Cabecas do Reguengo. Located just 30 minutes from the Spanish border, Reguengo operates as an organic vineyard and pretty swanky hotel. I've looked at some pictures of the place, and it's made me want to buy a plane ticket and take a nice long vacation there. Anyway, the Reguengo wine are quite different from other Alentejo producers in that they are all lower in alcohol and favor finesse over power, a direct result of the high altitude these 100+ year old vineyards are planted at (some around 600 meters above sea level) and the slow, thoughtful approach to winemaking in the cellar.

Respiro, which means breath, is the wineries line of no sulfur bottlings. Like the Clarette

wines from Spain, this is a field blend of 14 different red and white grapes fermented together to create a super light red. Fermented in concrete vats and aged in old barrels. Bright and fresh, light-bodied and supremely easy drinking. The nose is mouthwatering with tart raspberry and blood orange notes, the palate is lively, with cranberry, red pepper and a slightly smoky finish. **KS**



Mateus Nicolau De Almeida "O Tinto Perfeito O Clarete" 2019

Douro • Portugal

[Press 4 Mix + Press 4 Red]

Selection Massale, one of our favorite importers, launched a special line of everyday drinking, bistro-inspired red wines they called 'The Perfect Red' back in 2018. The first bottling was done by Jaugueyron, their famed Bordeaux producer, but the line now has offerings from American (via our friend Chris Brocway, which was recently featured in the wine club) and Portugal. The Portuguese rendition was done by Mateus Nicolau de Almeida, a fifth generation winemaker from the Douro.

O Tinto Perfeito O Clarete is a field blend, based on Tinto Roriz, Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, Tinta Barroca and Malvasia Fina. The grapes are all fermented together, given a gentle 10 day maceration with short pump

Above: Mateus Nicolau de Almeida has two wines featured this month, both exploring the terroir of the Douro. (Filipe Santos)

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overs to keep extraction minimal, then fermented and aged entirely in tuck. The wine comes in the most adorable Port-shaped bottle and is super fun and easy. The most full-bodied red wine in the club this month, but still extremely friendly and ready to drink. A joyful nose of violet, eucalyptus and black pepper is met by juicy blackberry, plum and savory herbs. **KS**

Mateus Nicolau de Almeida "Trans Douro Express - Cima Corgo" Tinto 2019

Cima Corgo • Douro • Portugal

[Press 4 Red]

Mateus Nicolau de Almeida is a fifth generation winemaker in Portugal's Douro region. Hailing from a family with a deep history in Port production, Mateus has branched out to explore the different subzones of the Douro through the lens of dry red and white wines. He his newest project, Trans Douro Express, focuses on three unique microclimates utilizing each areas native grape varieties. Farming is organic and biodynamic across the board, the wines are incredible values, with each bottling telling a different story.

Cima Corgo is a blend of Touriga Franca, Touriga Nacional, Sousão, and Tinta Amarela. The grapes come from the schist soils of mid-Douro region, which has an almost Mediterranean climate. Fermented and aged in concrete, it is pure and harmonious. Typically this is one of the more powerful wines in the Trans Douro line up, but the 2019 vintage



presents a more elegant side, with juicy red berry fruit, and bright acidity. Medium-bodied, but well structured but it's plush tannins, notes of eucalyptus, white pepper and fresh herbs balance the dark fruit profile. **KS**

Humus "Palheto" Vinho Tinto 2020

Lisboa • Portugal

[Press 4 Red]

Lisbon is having a moment. A region that was overlooked for decades is now providing a space for young, innovative vignerons and

winemakers to experiment and explore different stylistic choices in the vines and in their cellars. One winemakers that's been leading the charge of this new and refreshing movement is Rodrigo Filipe, who took over his fathers estate in 1999. He now farms the family's estate organically (certified since 2006) and produces wines that reflect the cool microclimate of his lands,

with low alcohol and refreshing acidity.

Palhete or *Palheto* wines are similar in style to Spain's Clarete's, field blends of red and white grapes that result in wines that sit somewhere between a dark rose and super light red.

Composed of Touriga Nacional, Arinto, Fernão Pires, and Moscatel, the Palheto is decidedly darker than it's rosé counterpart we've had in the shop recently. With rooibos tea, bright cranberry and pomegranate aromatics and marked by tart strawberry and salty, ripe citrus tones, this is perhaps the most "funky" wine in

Above: Rodrigo Filipe's Humus wines have been instrumental in bringing attention back the viticultural regions surrounding Lisbon. (Rodrigo Filipe)

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the line up this month. There is a touch of Brett and VA, without being overpowering or too wild. Zero sulfur added. Drink this cold and pair with anything from shrimp to stir fried vegetables to fried chicken. **KS**

Quinta da Boavista "Rufia" Branco Dão 2018

Dão • Portugal

[Press 4 White]

The Dão, in north-central Portugal, has a more temperate climate compared to the coastal regions, and it has the potential to make some of Portugal's most elegant, finessed wines. João Tavares de Pina's wines are based around pre-modern winemaking philosophies, using "grapes, water to clean his equipment and a touch of sulfur at bottling," according to his importer. This was the way his father made wine, too.

The Rufia Branco is a cloudy white, not orange, but textural and earthy. Marcona almond, salt, meyer lemon, and apricot notes with a stony, fresh edge. A blend of indigenous varieties Bical, Encruzado, 25% Cereal Branco and 15% Malvasia, fermented in steel and aged with extended less contact. No filtering, vegan, and less than 15 mg/L of free sulfur. **JK**

Quinta da Boavista "Torre de Tavares" Branco

2019

Dão • Portugal

[Press 2]

João Tavares de Pina's wines are getting double billing in this month's wine club mostly because his wines have that special something that is hard to put your finger on but stand out in a crowd. He is a big believer in the Dão's potential to be one of the great wine regions of the world. It's a granite plateau with vineyards found in rugged outcroppings surrounded by pines and bare rocks. In the 19th century, Dão was called

the "Burgundy of the South" but the 20th century was marked by a huge drop in quality, as a law forced all grapes to be sent to cooperatives that made clunky, overbearing wines. In a region whose strength is finesse and elegance, this was devastating, and it lasted until the 1990s.

With growers like João, you can once again see the delicate, Burgundian sparkle in the region's wines. Torre de Tavares is a blend of Cerceal and Bical with about a week of skin contact, not to make it orange, but to add a tactile component. While I wasn't surprised to find notes of apple skin and salinity, I was surprised at the lip-smacking cut of acidity that lifted the wine up and created a deeply satisfying tension between all the elements. The precision and detail in João's winemaking is palpable. The cleansing, rocky elements would make this a great choice when you need to cut through rich, fatty dishes like pork belly, but it has enormous gastronomic potential. Beyond that, it's simply a soulful, elegant wine that I can't wait to open another bottle of. **JK**



Above: The vineyards at Quinta da Boavista are planted with chamomile, clover, serradella, grass, lavender and wildflowers. (João Tavares de Pina)

Luís Pato "Barrosa" Baga Vinha Velha 2016

Bairrada • Portugal

[Press 2]

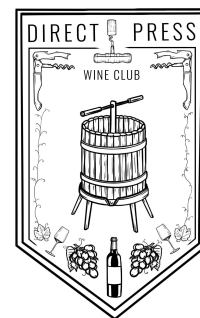
Does Baga have the potential for greatness that Nebbiolo is known for? Luís Pato certainly thinks so, and has fought hard for this unique grape that is planted in the rural Bairrada region, located mid-coast between Lisbon and Porto. Baga certainly has the tannin and the astringency needed for extended aging, though in some cases this is so pronounced as to make it as angry as an old man returning soup at a deli. As an admitted contrarian, Baga has always appealed to me with its ornery attitude and meaty, iron funk.

If there was a convincing argument to support the belief that “we should all come to our senses and recognize Baga as one of the world's great grape varieties,” as Pato's importer Lewis Kopman puts it, the 2016 Vinha Barrosa may be it.

Made from vines over 100 years-old, head-trained and planted the ‘old way’ — unevenly spaced and mixed in with fruit trees in an outcropping of lime-rich reddish clay surrounded by pine and eucalyptus — it is indeed a tannic wine built for the long haul. 24 months in barrel and additional time in bottle has integrated the tannins so they are not harsh, they prop up some beautiful, sumptuous black cherry fruit. Sage, iron, cranberry, and a touch of vanilla red tea are overlaid on the wine's viscous, rich body.

Definitely decant this! Don't be afraid to drink it now but it is a reductive wine that needs air — not unlike Nebbiolo. I would recommend trying one now and if you are as smitten by Baga as me and the rest of the converted, grab a few more to age even longer. Pato bottlings from the early

2000's that I've recently tasted had plenty of life left in them. Baga will reward your patience and your sympathy for its difficult nature. For the moment it's still possible to find library releases of old Baga that will blow your mind for a fraction of the price of old Nebbiolo, so that's another perk of joining the cult of this cantankerous cultivar. **JK**



Above: Luís Pato is as feisty as his beloved Baga and has been steadfast in his advocacy for the variety's place in the canon of the world's finest grapes. (Luís Pato)