

# Is Portugal the Most Exciting Wine Place on the Planet Today?

It may well be. That's why I moved there

---

[Matt Kramer](#)

Posted: March 18, 2014

---

PORTO, Portugal—If you've read my stuff over the years, you may recall that I like to dive into places that grip my wine imagination. So in the past I, and my wife, Karen, have lived in Buenos Aires, Melbourne, Venice and Piedmont for varying lengths of time, our minimum residence three months. If there's a privilege to being a wine writer, this is it.

Deciding where to go is not an entirely rational thing. Although all sorts of places appeal, the decision to set up house elsewhere is fundamentally emotional. Something about the culture, the landscape, the people and, not least, the wine, has to exert a siren call, an irresistible pull.

That, in the proverbial nutshell, is what happened with Portugal. For all the time I've spent in Europe over the decades—we've bicycled for months at a time in France alone, never mind living for long stretches in Italy—I have to confess that we never bothered with Portugal. The wines, apart from Port, for so long seemed lackluster. You could taste the lack of ambition.

But in the course of tasting, I began to receive different messages in the bottle, as it were. Something seemed to be stirring, or so the wines suggested. So in the past year or so, we visited Portugal twice. I loved what we saw, who we met, what we ate and, above all, what I tasted.

So I began to investigate Portuguese wines more closely. What at first appeared promising—and extremely enjoyable—turned out to be nothing less than revolutionary. I came to what I freely confess is an emotional conclusion: Portugal is arguably the most exciting wine place on the planet today.

Now, whether that's demonstrably, provably so is beside the point. It's how I as a wine lover, a wine taster, a wine drinker, *felt*. And that's all that matters for any of us, isn't it?

“Let's live in Portugal for a few months,” I proposed to my wife.

“Why not?” she agreeably replied.

So now, as I write this, we're newly settled into pretty nice digs in the Ribeira district of Porto. (And, yes, everything about this jaunt is on my own dime, just in case you were wondering.)

Much as we enjoyed Lisbon, there was no question that for us Porto would be “home.” It’s just the right size (1.3 million people in the larger urban area); it’s an ancient city that has retained much of its architecture intact (the Ribeira zone where we live is a UNESCO World Heritage site); and not least, it’s the closest city to the great Douro wine region.

That last fact is not insignificant. In the same way that you’ve really got to see the Grand Canyon sometime before you die, the same—for wine lovers, anyway—applies to the Douro wine zone. It is, in a word, boggling. Really, I’ve never seen anything quite like it: more vast than I had imagined, more forbidding in its endless stone vineyard terraces, and just plain more improbable than any other wine area I’ve seen. I mean, what kind of a wine area has growers using dynamite just to create a hole in which to plant a grapevine? It’s scary beautiful.

And now it’s changing. The Douro has famously been consecrated for more than three centuries to just one wine: Port. But the past few decades have not been kind to the Port business. The modern mass palate turned away from it, although there’s still a sizable number of drinkers who enjoy at least a sip from time to time. Make no mistake: Port is hardly about to disappear.

That noted, there’s no question that the Douro zone is changing. One (rough) fact tells all: In the past 15 years or so, about half of the wine production from the larger Douro zone—an area that extends beyond the boundaries designated for Port production—is now table wine. That’s really incredible. I know of no other historically significant wine zone that has transformed to anywhere near that degree.

So I wanted to be close to the Douro action. The table wines emerging from the Douro can be thrilling. Many—most even—are still works in progress. After all, nobody knew how to make table wine in the Douro. But they’re learning mighty fast. The best wines are stunners, truly world-class in their originality, flavor distinction, character, depth and finesse.

The dry white Douro wines can be surprisingly compelling. It’s surprising because the place is take-your-breath-away hot in the summer. (One winegrower said to me: “The Douro is eight months of paradise and four months of hell.”) So how can the white wines be so crisply good? Elevation. The best whites come from old vines grown in elevations upwards of 2,000 feet.

So the Douro is mighty interesting. But it’s not the real reason why I’ve chosen to take time to live in Portugal. It’s because of the grapes. Portugal is home to a dazzling number of indigenous grape varieties that create wines of supreme originality. You’re looking at red grapes such as Touriga Nacional, Touriga Franca, Tinto Roriz, Baga and hundreds of others, and white grapes such as Arinto, Viosinho, Rabigato, Códéga do Larinho and Gouveio, among many others.

Until very recently, the Portuguese did a pretty poor job with this patrimony. Too often the wines were dirty-tasting, from old, unclean barrels. The winemaking was crude, the ambition for greatness non-existent.

No more. Portugal is now gushing with stunning wines—and yes, stunning deals. Call me a value hound, but except for a tiny handful of reach-for-the-sky wines (and every wine nation needs those, too), Portugal very likely now offers some of the greatest wine values on the market

today. The reason is easily grasped: Portugal's achievement is still recent, and the word hasn't quite made the rounds.

That's why I'm here. And that's why you'll be hearing yet more. (And no, we don't have a guest room.)

## Goodbye to All That

At the end of our three-month stay, some thoughts about Portugal

---

[Matt Kramer](#)

Posted: June 3, 2014

---

PORTO, Portugal—The Portugal jaunt has now come to an end. As many of you know, I've done this sort of extended-stay thing before—in Buenos Aires, in Melbourne, in Venice—and the phenomenon is always the same. You arrive with seemingly infinite time stretching out luxuriously before you. Then, all of a sudden, it's time to leave.

“So what was it like?” I can hear you asking. “Should I do it? Is Portugal worth my time, my money, my interest? What did you learn about Portuguese wines?”

There's no seamless, cohesive way to answer such questions, but allow me to offer some random observations.

**It's a (Wine) Revolution.** Really, that's the only word for it. Revolution may seem a provocative word, and is surely overused. Yet it's the right word for what's occurring in Portuguese wine today. It's hard to overstate the degree of change in the past decade alone. Anyone (and everyone) in Portugal will tell you this.

Simply put, for a variety of reasons—economic, political, cultural—Portuguese wine in the early 1990s was still moribund. There was little ambition, and even less investment. After all, Portugal had only joined the European Union in 1986. There was no freeway system. Cities such as Porto, a gloriously old place with magnificent buildings, was literally falling down.

Too many wines were oxidized, dirty-tasting and dilute. Portugal is the last Western European nation to experience the wine quality transformation that has already swept through France, Italy and Spain.

But now it's happening—with a vengeance. The past decade has seen such sweeping changes in tastes, ambition, winery facilities and sheer worldliness as to make the “old Portugal” seem like a distant memory. Whereas, for example, the Douro Valley was confined solely to making Port wine well into the early 1990s, today at least half of its vast production is table wine—some of it truly great, most of it at least tasty.

Regions such as the Alentejo, the country's largest, have become vitalized to the degree that the wines are now easily the most popular in Portugal. Other regions, such as Dão and Bairrada, are seeing renewed popularity. Portugal and its wines have come brilliantly alive, with new producers and new wines arriving in the market seemingly every day.

**Touriga Nacional Is Not the Savior.** If you've heard anything at all about Portuguese wines, then you've doubtless heard about Portugal's most famous red grape variety, Touriga Nacional. It's invariably proclaimed as Portugal's greatest red grape type, the country's indigenous rival to Pinot Noir or Cabernet Sauvignon. You now see varietally labeled Touriga Nacional, as well as Touriga Nacional rosé. It's the local hero.

There's only one problem: Good as it is, Touriga Nacional is not *that* good. Here's the backstory, as they say in Hollywood. When Portugal's wine producers were starting to pull themselves away from the old ways, they were looking for a vehicle that would help them jump-start a new sort of wine goodness.

University researchers had already initiated a clonal selection program starting with you-know-what. The "best" clones of Touriga Nacional were identified and declared ideal. These recommended clones of Touriga Nacional (from among hundreds of strains that were identified) offered much higher yields than the traditional "old" strains, more disease resistance and deep color. (Does this story sound familiar?)

So of course these "best" clones were planted seemingly everywhere in Portugal. "We have Touriga Nacional!" proclaimed newly ambitious producers. It was a signifier of Portuguese wine modernity.

You know what happened next: Too many Touriga Nacional wines proved to be dull, one-dimensional wines of deep color with a vague, if pleasing, blackberry fruitiness. The savior proved to be nothing of the sort.

Not long ago, I was the guest at a private lunch with several very prominent Portuguese winemakers and technicians. I said to them that I had reached a conclusion about Touriga Nacional and wanted to run it past them, a sort of "stop me before I kill again" reality check.

I said that I had come to the conclusion that good as Touriga Nacional can be, it is not a standalone grape. Simply put, the variety is not sufficiently complex to be presented on its own. Was I wrong about this?

Their answer was unanimous: Touriga Nacional is indeed lacking in completeness. It should not be presented except as the backbone of a blend of grapes, and although it is indisputably one of Portugal's best red grape varieties, Touriga Nacional is no savior in itself. Not least, they noted that the newly isolated "best" clones so recently popularized are anything but "best."

**And What About Portuguese Food?** To be honest, it's a very mixed thing. Too much Portuguese food is overly heavy and, to be blunt, not well-prepared. This is a pity because it's not as if Portuguese cooks are defrosting frozen ingredients and microwaving them; they really

do put in the time and labor. But a certain rigor is lacking. The Portuguese are not especially fond of vegetables and too often when they do appear, they're woefully overcooked.

That said, the fish can be great. It's always very fresh and, if simply grilled, a guaranteed winner. And yes, they really do love their bacalhau (salt cod). You see it everywhere.

Allow me to say that if you go to Porto (and you absolutely should), you will eat some of the best food of your life in three restaurants that are not to be missed:

**O Gaveto.** This is a classic, old-fashioned fish restaurant in the town of Matosinhos, which is a former fishing village on the ocean near Porto. Here you'll find Portuguese seafood in its pristine glory—impeccably fresh, perfectly cooked and more than fairly priced. Not least, O Gaveto has a superb wine list with many of Portugal's best white wines at modest prices.

**O Papparico.** Here, traditional Portuguese cuisine is elevated to a level of refinement that shows just how good the food can be. Everything at O Papparico, which is located in a residential district well away from the usual tourist venues, is presented with almost exquisite care: fish, meat, Portuguese cheeses and, not least, wines. There's no place else in Porto that even remotely celebrates and elevates traditional Portuguese cuisine like O Papparico. It's a truly great restaurant.

**Restaurante Pedro Lemos.** It has to be said: Chef/owner Pedro Lemos is, without question, the finest chef in Porto and, more than that, a great European chef full stop. Only 35 years old and extremely modest, even shy, Mr. Lemos is one of those fanatics who lives for his ingredients and his guests. He goes to the fish market every day at 5 a.m. His cooking is ultrarefined yet simple—the fish tastes exactly like what it is, yet better than you've ever had that same fish before.

I took an Italian friend with a very demanding palate to Restaurante Pedro Lemos and he was so bowled over that he demanded that we return a second time. He was as satisfied the second time as he was the first. Restaurante Pedro Lemos is a very small restaurant with huge ambition and accomplishment. The wine list, accordingly, is a refined presentation of everything you could hope for in a selection of Portuguese wines.

**And One Final Conclusion.** If you miss Portuguese wines, you will be missing out on what is arguably the most exciting new wine chapter in 21st-century wine modernity. Are all the wines great? Of course not. But most Portuguese wines are at minimum pretty good. And not least, they're usually terrific deals, even downright cheap.

The best Portuguese wines are glorious. A disproportionate number of these wines is currently emerging from the Douro, thanks to the remarkable schist soil and centuries of cultivation. And they're not all red, either. Douro whites, because of the schist soil—it's really more rock than soil—can be unusually characterful as well as long-lived.

Wine lovers everywhere love a deal. (Me too.) And we love being on the inside. After three months of exploring the place, I have to say that Portugal is, at least to me, the "insider" wine

deal of the moment. After spending some real time on the ground, I'm more sure of that now than ever.



Matt Kramer has witnessed a wine revolution in progress while living in Portugal.

Photo by: Jon Moe