

# Historical Wines of Portugal

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Portuguese culture did not escape the “wave of progress” that devastated the viticultural world in the end of the 20th century but contributed to affirm the wine as a global drink of prestige. Besides the *Port*, *Madeira*, and *Mateus Rosé* wines, which were already globalized, the *Green wine*, the *Alentejo*, the *Douro*, and the *Dão* reached international maturity. However, not everything has been positive. The powerful force of new technologies and the anxiety to produce more and lower-priced wine caused irreparable damages to regional originalities, the soul of world cuisine, especially in its millenarian grape and wine-growing patrimony. It is in this context that it has become urgent to speak about old European historical wines, so that one of the most important symbols of the Mediterranean World and Western civilization is to be understood as more than merchandise or business.

wine produced using ancestral grapes and ancient wine-growing techniques and knowledge, presenting its own peculiarities, which consumers in our century should not ignore if they want to understand these wines. The most relevant Portuguese historical wines are *Green wine (vinho verde)* produced with grapes from vines cultivated in tall forms such as the ‘*Enforcado*’, ‘*Arjões*’ or ‘*Ramadas*’, sandy soil *Colares*, Medieval *Palhete* from Ourém, and *Pot wine* from Alentejo and Azores wine.

## Green Wines (Vinho Verde)

Produced in the Northwest of Portugal, cultivars producing green wines are very popular in the Minho region, and are cultivated by many small grape growers. Their distinctive characteristics result from being produced in elevated trellises (Fig. 1) and by being sparkling (gaseous peak), as a result of the activity of lactic acid bacteria. The ‘*Enforcado*’ and ‘*Ramadas*’ grapevines may be of Etruscan origin, and are freely found in the Minho landscape. The ‘*Arjões*’, developed from the ‘*Enforcado*’ vine, is more recent and became common from the end of the 19th century.

## Sandy Soil Colares

Both white and red wines from Colares, 30 km from Lisbon and next to the Atlantic coast, are jewels of Portuguese oenology. Although of remote antiquity, they reached a peak during the 19th century phylloxera epidemic that devastated the vinifera industry in Europe, since the vines, planted in sands with great depth, resisted the plague. Culture is unusual with the

of the vine and led to abundant consumption and commerce. Cistercian friars coming from Burgundy brought in an original way to cultivate the vine and to make the wine. Other religious orders helped to spread grape culture, and raised wine into a religious symbol.

This millenary inheritance we are so proud of although struggling is still alive and uninjured in some grape-growing regions, due in part to the slow rhythm of both viticulture and oenology. It is important to maintain this patrimony, even when forces finance its destruction without even perceiving it. It is the duty of people devoted to wine and culture to join efforts to defend this heritage.

## HISTORICAL WINES

There is no unanimously accepted definition for “historical wine” but in the present context, a definition will be used that has been adopted by the Association of Historical Wines of Portugal, created in 2008 to protect a cultural heritage in risk of extinction. Thus, “historical wine” is the

## VITICULTURAL HISTORY

Vine and wine have been constant for millennia in the territory that is now Portugal. This economical and cultural inheritance was bequeathed by people from the Mediterranean basin and from the 6th century BCE onwards; Phoenicians, Greeks, Jews and Romans left in this area their practices and techniques, technologies, sets of dishes, and customs as well as grape cultivars. In a second period dating from the Moorish conquest of Iberia in the 8th century another legacy of grape growing was bequeathed. Arab viticulture was enhanced with new grapes, more for table use or raisins than for the production of wine or vinegar, although vinegar was regularly produced and very appreciated in cookery. In the medieval period during the origin of national identity, a third acculturation period occurred. The Roman Catholic mass, based on the rite of the Eucharist and the transubstantiation of wine into the blood of Christ, was the original stimulus to medieval grape-growing that spread the culture

Figure 1. Pruning the tall grapevines, often trained to trees, that make up the typical Green Wine landscape. Photograph by courtesy of CVR Vinho Verde.



Figure 2. The “sandy soil” of Colares, with the grapevines crawling on the soil. Photograph by courtesy of V. Loureiro.



**Figure 3. A typical medieval style cellar from Ourém region.** Photograph by courtesy of A. Mil Homens.

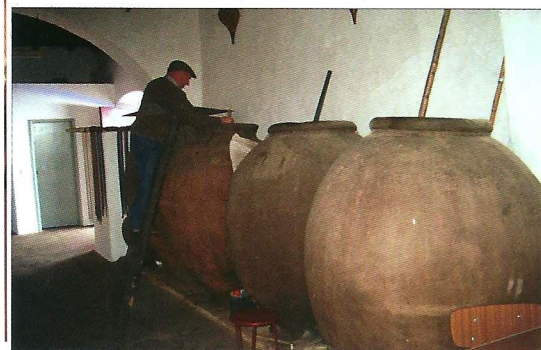


untrellised vines crawling on the sand, resembling a giant octopus with thick tentacles (Fig. 2). The heat radiating from the sand that serves as a thermal accumulator ripens the grape. The small area of the vine parcels, the manual culture, and the cane fences to protect the grapevines from the strong maritime winds, confer a unique and archaic distinct appearance to the Colares landscape. The grape cultivars include white 'Malvasia' and red 'Ramisco' whose quality is unanimously recognized and appreciated. The wines, of striking acidity, low alcoholic degree and surprising mineral characteristics, have an exceptional aging capacity.

#### Medieval Palhete of Ourém

Produced by innumerable small grape growers, a few kilometres from Fátima, Medieval Palhete of Ourém is one of the few Europe wines that continue to respect the techniques of the Cistercian friars, which had been installed in Alcobça in the end of the 12th century. Its two main particularities are the form and density of the vine culture that provides an authentic medieval style to the landscape as well as the medieval process of production in small cellars (Fig. 3). The white wine is mixed (4:1) with the *tint*, a red wine fermented for a week in a small stone press or a wooden vat.

**Figure 4. An Alentejo wine cellar of jars.** Photograph by courtesy of V. Loureiro.



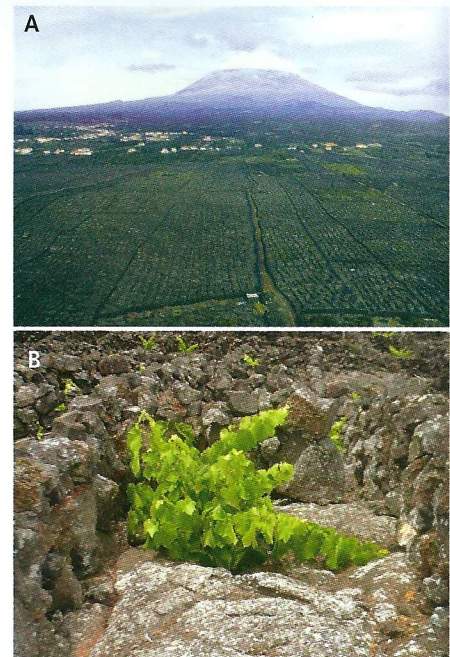
#### Jar Wines

White, red, or pale wines made in great clay jars, hence their name, have a long tradition in the Alentejo, the southern part of the country, and these wines continue to be made according to this Roman process (Fig. 4). The special taste conferred makes it the preferred one to all Alentejanos, who only drink another wine when jar wine ends. The jar manufacturers, that did not use the potter wheel, have disappeared, and the *gateadores*, that placed the patches (cats) in the jars, as well as the *pesgadores*, that waterproofed the interior of the jars with pitch, are almost gone. Among jar wines, the *Palhetes* of Vila de Frades assume particular relevance and are locally known as *petroleiros*. They are a variety of the jar wines that originated in the Saint Cucufate Convent. The friars, having used one of the largest Roman *villae* in Lusitania, now in ruins, created a petroleum color jar wine called *palhete*, made from a blend of about 80% white grapes and 20% red grapes.

#### Azores Wine

Most of the Azorean wines produced in Pico, Graciosa, and Terceira Islands, fit in the definition of historic wines, as they are made with grapes grown in the famous plots, built with basaltic stone, according to a grape-growing technique invented by the first colonizers in the 15th century. But it is the wine of Pico, whose fame is of World renown, that impresses the most. It was here, on one stretch of rough rocky ground that later would be called thick soil or biscuit, or on the smooth surface of the petrified drained lava – the *lajido* soil, that the Portuguese and the Flemish "invented" a unique World wine. They started by trying to introduce some grapevine roots into the dark rock fissures and soon perceived that, with the aid of the wet climate, the vines would extend their roots searching for nutrients. Influenced by Franciscans and Carmelites, resident in the neighbouring Island of Faial, they selected the early ripe aromatic '*Verdelho*', the most appropriate grape cultivar of the region. Basaltic rock shelters were thought to protect plants from the salty wet winds coming from the ocean. With rock collected from appropriate places, walls still continue to be constructed to delimit the famous squared or rectangular plots with an average area varying between 9 and 12 m<sup>2</sup>, where, as a rule, three vines are planted. As a result, a cyclopean reticulate of black rock walls has been created throughout the centuries (Fig. 5). These rocky walls, about 1 m in height, if juxtaposed, would have an extension equivalent to double the circumference of Earth measured at the Equator. According to credible estimates, these walls contain more rock than the famous Wall of China and are the best testimony of Portuguese belief and of human ability to both understand and dominate Nature by converting supposedly useless rock into a source of life and sustenance. UNESCO has recently declared the

**Figure 5. A. The cyclopean landscape of Pico Island vineyard, with the characteristic plots.** Photograph by courtesy of FOTOPICO. B. Detail of "lajido" soil. Photograph by courtesy of V. Loureiro.



Pico Island vineyard landscapes as a World Heritage.

Visiting Pico, searching for the trimmed dark stone walls, hidden strains, small wine-cellars, medieval alembics, and searching for the hospitality and authenticity of its inhabitants is to withdraw hundreds of years in history and to understand European culture, which continues to have in wine the great symbol of its identity. And if you are lucky enough to taste the great Pico wine, you will then know what it is like to enter Paradise.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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