



# ENCHANTING AND SENSUAL

REFRESHING Vinho Verde white wines at the beautiful Covela Winery. (Quinta da Covela)



• ADAM MONTEFIORE

A new initiative has been born to twin Israeli and Portuguese wineries. The prime reason is for tourism, but it is also to encourage academic cooperation and a sharing of ideas between winemakers. The prime person to push this vision was Jonathan Koren of Lotem Winery, and he received support from Wild Douro, a tourism specialist in Portugal, and of both the president of the Israel-Portugal Chambers of Commerce and the Economic Department of the Embassy of Portugal. Seven Israeli wineries will participate: Lotem, Amphorae, Bat Shlomo, Dalton, Jezreel Valley, Tulip and Stern wineries.

Israel and Portugal do not have much in common, but there is one coincidence that brackets them together. In both the *Wine Spectator* and *Wine Advocate*, the wine-tasting expert for Israeli and Portuguese wines is the same person. The two countries are together, along with Greece, among “others.”

When I was invited by the economic attaché at the Portuguese Embassy to join a visit to learn about Portuguese food and wine, I jumped at the chance. The visit was hosted by Wild Douro.

I found a country rich in beauty, history and culture that was incredibly advanced in wine tourism. Every winery I visited had a restaurant, and most also had accommodation. Service everywhere was stylish, respectful, correct and pro-

fessional. Old World European. Wines of Portugal had all the information you could need in booklet form or online, and there are even wine-tasting centers for tourists. Portugal sets a high bar for Israel in wine culture and wine tourism!

The Alentejo region, toward the southwest of the country, is flat with rolling hills, a hot, rural landscape covered with cork oak forests, olive groves and wheat fields. Joao Portugal Ramos built his Vila Santa Winery in 1997. Their hall of marble lagars (where they tread the grapes), with soft lighting, was impressive, as was the vertical hydraulic Bucher press in the corner.

Old and new technology under one roof seemed very Portuguese. The open fire was homey and welcoming. Everywhere in Portugal I smelt the warm, sweet, spicy aromas from domestic fires burning wood. The winery has an original concept where they allow tourists to make and bottle their own blend, which was a great idea. Most of the wines in the region were blends, and the grape varieties were always in the background, often not even on the back label. So different from Israel. As for the specific wines, the Marques de Borba 2017 was round, full-flavored and quite bold. Slightly “New World” in taste.

We visited the graceful medieval village of Monsaraz. The Ervideira Winery shop was situated in what was once a school classroom! Most interesting here was the Conde D’Ervideira 2017, a blend of Touriga Nacional, Aragonez, Alicante Bouschet and Cabernet Sauvignon. The same wine was bottled

with two different labels. One was aged in the winery cellar, and the other 30 meters underwater. As gimmicks go, it was fairly original! If anything, the second bottle was smoother and more advanced, but there was not a lot in it.

THEN WE travelled northwest of Lisbon, to what was known as the Estremadura region. Quinta do Gradil was striking with the grand-looking mustard-yellow building, surrounded by red and yellow autumn vine leaves. Here I liked their fresh Maria de Carmo sparkling rosé, the toasty Quinta do Gradil Brut, and they also had an intense varietal Tannat balanced with Touriga Nacional. In the winery itself, the absolutely round, ball-shaped concrete tank was a talking point.

We were introduced to the Atlantic wines of Bairrada, at a quality food and wine pairing dinner at the Arcadas Restaurant, in the luxury hotel Quinta Das Lagrimas. The wine of the evening was for me the Messias Baga 2017. It was medium bodied, with good blackberry fruit and a rasping acidity. A great food wine. This was edgy, unique and was very much to my liking. I will remember the Baga grape variety.

In the central hilly, even mountainous Dao region, we visited the refined, exclusive Quinta de Lemos. It was a winery I left with mixed feelings. First, at their Mesa de Lemos Restaurant we received a Michelin-standard lunch of outstanding originality and quality, prepared in an open kitchen in full view and served immaculately. During this meal we tasted seven wines. It was a memorable experience. However, my efforts to receive information on the winery and wine were notably less successful. If I had to pick one wine, it would be the Jaen 2013. Jaen is a grape variety almost unique to the Dao region. The wine was deep-colored, with raspberry and floral notes and a concentrated ripe-plum flavor. It had a good balancing acidity. Like so many Portuguese wines, it represents great value.

If the Mesa de Lemos and Quinta Das Lagrimas restaurants were the height of fine dining, the Restaurante De Raiz was a welcome return to home cooking. It is situated in the city of Viseu, the birth place of the Dao wine region. Unpretentious, homey, with authentic wholesome cooking, it is run by a young couple, and even the parents were roped in to provide support front of house. Here we were fortunate to meet Patricia Santos. She is what I call a “touch and feel” winemaker, with a fair bit of spontaneity and instinct in equal measure. Her Rosa da Mata 2017, from the Alfrocheiro grape variety, was a very individual signature. It had lashings of cherry berry fruit, a medium body in the mouth, and the refreshing acidity I am beginning to associate with the region.

Then we drove northeast to the Douro, one of the most spectacular wine regions in the world. The views of plunging, terraced vineyards were breathtaking. Quinta Nova de Nossa Senhora do Carmo is a winery with an amazing landscape. We ate at the fine Conceitus Winery Restaurant and toured the Wine Museum. I particularly liked the film showing how hard it was to navigate the barrels up the fast-moving Douro River in times past.

The Grainha Reserve Red and White were each blends of over four varieties. They are fruity, full of flavor and both have a clean, well-balanced finish. Amusingly, the word Grainha is written clearly in Hebrew on the front label! Their Grande Reserva 2016 was a plush, rich, velvety wine. This reminded us that table wines in the Douro are becoming more important, though the niche of Port still remains the calling card of Portuguese wine. A highlight was opening the excellent Quinta Nova Vintage Port 2000 with red-hot tongs.

WE WERE received by Francisco Ferreira of the Ferreira family at Quinta do Vallado in the Douro Valley. The winery was built in 1716, and refurbished in the 2000s. Here you will find in their words “history, modernity and discreet luxury.”

Though this is one of the great Port families, this is one of the wineries leading the advance of Douro’s table wines. The refurbished schist-covered winery hosted us for a tasting. The Prima Douro White 2018 was a dry Muscat, grapey, spicy, floral and refreshing. Apart from Alsace, there are not many dry Muscats about.

The entry-level red, a blend, was fruity, bright and mouth-filling in flavor with a refreshing finish. Priced at the

winery at €7.50, it emphasized the low prices we discovered throughout Portugal. I loved the Touriga Nacional 2017. It was fruity, with a hint of violets, soft yet mouth-filling and refreshing. Fresh and bright, and very drinkable.

My favorite wine was Vinha da Coroa 2017. This is a field blend with enchanting, sensual red fruit, a spiciness, elegance and a long complex finish. It was possibly my favorite wine of the whole visit. We also tasted a varietal Souzao, one of the parents of our own Argaman. It was very deeply colored with a harsh, unforgiving acidity. The 20 year-old Tawny Port was rich and complex, with dried fruit notes that reminded me of brandy-soused Christmas cake.

We moved up the Douro into the Minho region. Schist changed to granite. We were in Vinho Verde country. The Covela Winery is a British-Brazilian partnership. It is a most beautiful dreamy setting, surrounded by orchards, vineyards and forests. The Vinho Verde made from the Avesu variety was delicately aromatic, with freshness and minerality. The Reserva 2015 was in a different style. It was an expressive, fuller-bodied, slightly creamy blend of Chardonnay, Aveso and Arinto. It was probably the best white I came across in Portugal.

The second Minho winery we visited was the Quinta da Lixa. A large commercial winery with a modern tasting room, each place has its own spittoon-cum-sink set into the table. They have the splendid Monverde “wine experience hotel.” Look out for the striking sculpture of 365 hanging wooden grape leaves. My favorite wine was their Alvarinho Reserva 2016. It had classic peach and apricot aromas, mouth-filling flavor and a long steely finish. I also tasted a Vinhao, which was their local name for Souzao. Certainly, it would be a good wine for grilled sardines in season.

The week ended with a visit to Amorim, the giant cork producer. It was interesting to see the scale, attention to detail and pursuit of quality.

Overall, I found an enchanting, sensual country, with fascinating wines to taste, beautiful historic places to visit, old quirky villages, and amazing views and countryside. The people are warm, friendly and equally curious about Israel. The twinning wineries concept is a splendid idea which will bring our two countries closer to one another. ■

*The writer has advanced Israeli wine for over 30 years and is referred to as the English voice of Israeli wines.*

*The writer was a guest of the Portugese Embassy in Israel, Wild Douro and El Al Airlines on a visit to the wine regions of Portugal.*  
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(TOP) THE modern, state-of-the art Quinta do Vallado in the Douro. (Quinta do Vallado)

STOMPING ON grapes in a lagar at the Joao Portugal Ramos Winery. (Joao Portugal Ramos Wines)

BARREL CELLAR at the Joao Portugal Ramos Winery. (Joao Portugal Ramos Wines)

