

Vinho Verde

Vinho Verde is the biggest DOC of Portugal, up in the cool, rainy, verdant north west. The vines grow in fertile, granite soils along rivers that flow from the mountains of the east to burst out into the ocean between golden surfing beaches.



The outer boundaries of both the “Vinho Regional” Minho and DOC Vinho Verde are the same, stretching from the River Minho in the north, which forms Portugal’s border with Spain, as far down the coast as the city of Porto (Oporto), but inland extending a further 30km south of the river Douro.

Cool, wet weather always makes ripening more difficult, but the climatic problems were long compounded in the region by the tradition of training vines along pergolas on the edges of fields, and sometimes up trees, in order to gain space and free up the centre of fields for other crops.

There are many smallholdings (many are really small), and grapes are still often trained in this way, but modern vineyards, and certainly the vineyards of major estates, are now low-trained on wires, giving better exposure to the limited sun, and better ripening.

Vinho Verde is still distinguished by its high acidity. Flavour depends on the grape varieties used - floral Loureiro, steely Trajadura, mineral Arinto (known here as Pedernã), creamy and mineral Avesso, and the fine, mineral, subtly fragrant Alvarinho. Azal Branco is hard to ripen and declining in popularity, and in any case tends to get blended with more aromatic grapes. Most white Vinho Verde can be relied upon to be light, crisp and aromatic, often with a light prickle of fizz, sometimes with a touch of sweetness.

The fine Alvarinho grape rules around the towns of Melgaço and Monção in the north, along the Minho river. The climate here is warmer and drier, the maritime influence partially blocked by hills, and the combination of grape and climate makes for richer, fuller, subtly complex wines, made dry and totally still.

The DOC Vinho Verde has also permitted fully sparkling wines since 1999 – a growing and promising venture. And there is a lot of red Vinho Verde, too - dark, high in acidity, low in alcohol, made principally from the late-ripening, red-fleshed Vinhão grape.

There are nine sub-regions to the DOC, named after rivers or towns: Monção, Melgaço, Lima, Basto, Cávado, Ave, Amarante, Baião, Sousa and Paiva.

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Some say the designation "Verde" (green) owes its origin to the wine's acidity and freshness, resembling unripe (green) fruit. Others affirm that "Verde" comes from the region's vegetation, which imparts a green tone to the soil, even in winter.

First export

From the 17th Century onwards, exports of "Vinho Verde" to England have become regular. It is likely that the first wines to be exported were from the area of Monção and that the transaction was made through Viana do Castelo.

Vine growing

In the 12th Century there was a great incentive to the growing of vines. In the foral (royal document) granted by D. Afonso Henriques to the men of Bouças (1172) it was declared that the plantation of vines was free of any duties for a period of five years, after which the duty would correspond to the 6th part of the wine harvested.

