



The wineanorak's guide to **PORTUGAL'S WINE REGIONS**



Part 2: Alentejo, Ribatejo and Estremadura

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Alentejo

The Alentejo has led the way in Portugal's wine revolution. It's a region that has enjoyed tremendous success over the last decade, producing red wines in two distinctive styles. On the one hand, there is the traditional Alentejo style. This is typified by José Maria da Fonseca's José de Sousa, part of which is fermented in clay pots, and which displays leathery, herby, sweet-spice complexity. Another traditional style producer is Cartuxa (from Evora), best known for the brilliant but unusual cult wine Pera Manca. On the other hand, there is the modern, fruit-forward, almost new-world style that has been such a huge commercial success and which has propelled this region forward so fast.

The Alentejo is huge, with its flat plains covering almost a third of the country. Much of this area is given over to cereal production. It's also hot, and irrigation is common. In contrast to the northern regions, with their fragmented smallholdings, production is dominated by large, professional outfits.

Two of Portugal's most high-profile winemakers have been key in developing the reputation of Alentejo wines. First, João Portugal Ramos, celebrated consultant winemaker and now with his own estate at Estremoz. He makes impressive yet still-affordable red wines that successfully combine ripe, concentrated fruit flavours with carefully managed oak. The second is David Baverstock at Esporão, who also consults for a number of estates in the Douro. Ramos and Baverstock have concentrated on local grape varieties, but in recent vintages both have been making a Syrah, the only foreign grape to so far to have made much of an inroad into the region. The great success of the Alentejo has been in making thoroughly modern, concentrated wines that still retain a distinctly Portuguese character. Demand exceeds supply here, and large companies such as Caves Aliança and Sogrape have invested in the region. Other names to watch out for include Cortes de Cima and Mouchão.

Ribatejo

For a long time the provider of bulk wine, the Ribatejo is now emerging as an exciting

source of modern-styled commercially astute red wines. The fertile alluvial soils on the banks of the river Tagus produce soft-textured, ripe, drinkable reds in the sorts of quantities and at the price points that excite supermarket buyers. Further up, on the stonier soils more serious wines can be made. Unlike most other Portuguese regions, foreign varieties such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot are quite common here, and seem to do well. João Ramos has a thriving venture here under the name of Falua, which makes half a million cases a year and is soon to be relaunched under the label of João Portugal Ramos Ribatejo. Ramos' ex-deputy, Rui Reguinga, is another high-profile winemaker who consults for a number of producers in the region, including Quinta do Lagoalva, a large estate owned by the Campilho family. The future looks relatively bright for the Ribatejo.

Estremadura

A long, thin region running up the Atlantic coast from Lisbon, Estremadura has struggled in the past as a producer of bulk wine from tired cooperatives. While the region is still quite a mixed bag, there are some impressive wines emerging at both the quality and volume ends of the market. As in the Ribatejo, it's not uncommon to find international grape varieties planted here. The dominant figure in Estremadura is winemaker José Neiva, of DFJ Vinhos. Dubbed the João Ramos of central Portugal, his company makes a broad range of overtly commercial red wines characterised by their ripe, accessible fruit, lush textures and good concentration, all at very affordable prices. Neiva is quite open about the interventionist winemaking techniques that he uses to wring every drop of flavour from his grapes. Some appealing fruity whites are also made here.

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