



TOP 20 ATLANTIC WHITES FROM PORTUGAL

From tiny Colares and Palmela up along the Iberian west coast into world-renowned Vinho Verde, and out to the islands of Madeira and the windswept Azores, **Sarah Ahmed** takes a tour of Portugal's Atlantic-influenced wine regions, selecting fresh, characterful whites to try

As Portugal's white wines have risen to prominence, so have her Atlantic-facing regions. The best wines deliver remarkable intensity and character, with the (acid) backbone for ageing; sometimes a salty sea tang. Unobtrusive oak use – if any – with lees ageing for mouthfeel, lets the ocean hold sway.

Atlantic exposure was key to my selection, in locations not more than 20km from the ocean, making the wind and wave-whipped Azores and Madeira islands an obvious starting point. A flurry of activity in the last decade has produced salty, piquant, mineral wines from volcanic soils, whose influence John Szabo MS, author of *Volcanic Wines*, evocatively describes as imparting 'a weightless gravity'. Verdelho, with its tropical citrus and succulent nuances, is king in Madeira and, in the Azores, in Biscoitos and Graciosa but not in Pico, where it shares the turf with Arinto dos Açores (citric/stone-fruited) and Terrantez do Pico (savoury).

On the continent, Portugal's west coast takes the brunt of the Atlantic ocean's swells and storms (unlike the Algarve's sheltered, Mediterranean-influenced southern coastline). This 675km stretch, a hotch-potch of grapes and terroirs, traverses Vinho Verde, Bairrada, Lisboa, Península de Setúbal, Alentejo and the Algarve.

Latitude inevitably impacts on style, with milder weather and higher rainfall in northernmost Vinho Verde. Milder and higher still for those sub-regions directly exposed to the Atlantic, which typically make simple, light, fragrant wines. Site selection is critical for premium wines.

In the middle, a climatic sweet spot, the maritime-influenced chalky clay vineyards of Bairrada and Lisboa produce lovely finesse, balance and minerality (including some of Portugal's best traditional-method fizz in cooler Bairrada). Grape varieties Bical and Maria Gomes (aka Lisboa's Fernão Pires) major in Bairrada, the former typically stone-fruited, the latter introducing citric and herbal notes.

Well structured, they reward ageing. In warmer Lisboa, Fernão Pires tends towards rounder, vegetal characters.

Star variety Arinto brings backbone, ramping up the citrus/freshness factor in blends and showing great verve solo, notably in its heartland, Bucelas DOC. Styles range from lemony to stone- and tropical-fruited, the acidity always persistent. Much rarer is Vital – my top-scorer (Casal Figuera, right) is as much a showcase for the exposed limestone-strewn slopes of the Serra de Montejunto.

In Sintra, spitting distance from the ocean, Malvasia de Colares thrives, producing iodine- and salt-flecked wines. Austere, ageworthy examples hail from ungrafted vines on sand in Colares DOC; new plantings from Lisboa VR's chalky clay have flesh on the bones.

With a sunnier and drier climate further south, especially on Península de Setúbal's heat-soaked sands, the wines are generally richer and riper. However, proximity to the ocean, together with old vines (Horácio Simões, see p61), moisture-retentive soils (Herdade do Cebolal, p60), or even ageing wines in the ocean at Quinta Brejinho da Costa, all lend backbone and persistence.

Finally, the surprisingly fine-framed and saline Alvarinhos and Sauvignon Blancs from the Costa Vicentina in Alentejo are the epitome of Atlantic influence. Contained within a narrow coastal strip by a range of hills, the cool, humid conditions here, plus ocean breezes and fogs, bring summer temperatures down by 10°C, according to Anna Jorgensen of Cortes de Cima.



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‘The maritime-influenced, chalky clay vineyards of Bairrada and Lisboa produce lovely finesse, balance and minerality’

Barbeito, Verdelho, Madeira 2018 92

£29.99 Raymond Reynolds

Pretty blossom, mirin and peapod notes to the nose and palate, with fresh cut apple, apple core, tropical fruit and crunchy acid driving through to the briny, bosky finish. A judicious blend of terroirs, with a sophisticated splash of the structuring Sercial variety and oak. **Drink 2020-2025 Alc 11.5%**

