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The consumer's passport to fine wine

New Releases from Portugal

By [Josh Raynolds](#)

Mar/Apr 06

A surprising number of the top table wines coming out of Portugal today, especially from the Douro Valley, are priced at a level approaching and sometimes surpassing that of top Bordeaux crus and many of Napa's cult cabernets. While the quality of these wines, at least the ones that don't suffer from overoaking, can be truly world-class, I have not seen much evidence that the American market will accept such pricing. Is the average wine collector really itching to drop \$100 or more on a wine he or she has likely never heard of, from a country whose exports to the U.S. generally sell for \$12 or less? Even the top wines of Spain's Priorat region, after which some of the most ambitious Portuguese projects appear to be modeled and priced, have been meeting consumer resistance on these shores, which cannot bode well for the most expensive table wines from Portugal.

The good news, though, is that dozens of genuinely outstanding wines from the Douro, Dão and Ribatejo regions of Portugal are available here for less than \$40. In fact, many are closer to \$20, making them terrific values compared to wines of similar concentration from the New World. And, in a sense, Portuguese wines are a new world for American wine lovers, thanks to the fact that the wines are overwhelmingly made with indigenous Iberian varieties such as touriga nacional (by most accounts Portugal's most complete red variety), touriga franca (previously called touriga francesa), tinta roriz (tempranillo), tinta barroca, trincadeira preta and periquita that are rarely planted outside Portugal and Spain, if at all.

Current vintages in the marketplace. Portugal's 2004 growing season was on the brink of disaster following an excessively rainy August (with the most precipitation in over a century in the north), which slowed the maturing of the grapes and triggered some rot in white varieties. But the weather turned perfect in September, allowing a somewhat later-than-normal harvest of good to above average quality. The Dão and Douro appear to be promising, as sound levels of acidity have produced balanced and aromatic wines.

This vintage is in direct contrast to 2003, a year of extreme heat as in the rest of Europe. Vintage '03 has proven to be a boon for port producers and, based on my extensive tastings, for many but not all producers of dry red wines as

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well. In the best cases, these are rich, ripe, almost porty wines with high alcohol and full body. My suspicion is that their ripe qualities will become more pronounced in the next five years or so, so winos who prize finesse and elegance in their wines will probably be better served by drinking these wines on the early side. Heat was especially a problem in the southern sector of Portugal, as well as in Alentejo, Dão and lower-elevation sites in the southern part of the Douro appellation. Touriga nacional was generally more successful than the later-ripening tinta roriz, which lost acidity in this extreme vintage. Vintage 2002 witnessed a very dry summer, causing some vine stress, and then the entire country, like Spain, was hit by an extended period of heavy rainfall in the middle of September, followed by on-and-off precipitation into October. With rare exceptions—and there are some listed here—this is a vintage to approach with extreme caution.

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Portugal's white wines. It is the rare 2003 white that has (or had) the freshness and balance for interesting drinking. The heat of the vintage was simply too much for wines that rely on brightness and cut for their personality and drinkability. On the other hand, I tasted many 2004 white wines that are drinking well right now, though most Vinho Verdes have taken the turn downhill and lack life. Far better to start looking for 2005s, which are beginning to come into the market (many Vinho Verdes will be in the pipeline by the time this report is published) and look to be excellent candidates for early drinking. I review a number of the 2005s below. The best of these brisk, shellfish-friendly, low-alcohol wines will be perfect for guzzling this summer.

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