

BOOK AND FILM REVIEW

Richard Mayson: *The Wines of Portugal*

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A key merit of quality books covering a single topic is their ability to provide an in-depth perspective. Richard Mayson's *The Wines of Portugal* is no exception. He offers a sweeping view of one country's wine industry from its origins to the present. The book is a welcome addition to the literature, particularly since Portuguese wines have been underappreciated historically in the United States.² Their recent surge in popularity offers more American palates a taste of their charms.

Mayson, a pro-chancellor at Sheffield University in England, does an admirable job of organizing a great deal of information in a fashion accessible to readers. It is a rare manuscript that focuses mainly on table wines and leaves the discussion of Port to a separate volume written by the author.³

I appreciate the care given to describing the social history of the Portuguese wine industry in Chapter 1. It provides helpful context for the current state of the industry and helps explain some of its idiosyncrasies. This chapter includes some basic economic content, mainly descriptions of wine trade flows, phylloxera- and conflict-related supply disruptions, (de)centralization of production, and labor supply. This history is marked by numerous events that influenced wine production and trade, including, for example: warfare, geopolitical alliances, colonialism, national and subnational wine industrial policies, a movement toward wine cooperatives, a period of privatization, and the interactions among them. Each event held sway over the development of the wine industry. For instance, the 1960s revolutionary uprisings in former colonies Angola, Mozambique, and elsewhere drove labor market shifts, as large numbers of Portuguese men went abroad to fight in the wars. The associated domestic labor shortages resulted in the abandonment of the traditional practice of foot treading of grapes in the winemaking process.

Perhaps more than in any other major wine-producing country, the grapes of Portugal are little known and poorly understood beyond the Iberian Peninsula, even among aficionados. This sets Portugal apart from leading wine producers

¹The views and opinions expressed in this review reflect those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the FDIC or the United States.

²For example, the 2001 edition of Karen MacNeil's 900-page *Wine Bible* devoted just six pages to Portuguese table wines.

³See Richard Mayson, 2018, *Port and the Douro*, 4th ed., Infinite Ideas Ltd.

such as France and Italy, where the dominant grapes are widely recognized and strict rules limit the use of unsanctioned grapes. The book's detailed discussion of the principal grapes, including ratings of their suitability for wine making, helps to fill this knowledge gap and builds a foundation for readers to appreciate them. For those seeking further information, the appendix provides a more complete list of grapes.

A noteworthy point is that many grape varieties are native and capable of making quality wine. In contrast to other countries, the familiar international grapes, such as Chardonnay, Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, and others, are not widely produced nor believed to yield consistently high-quality wines in Portugal. One exception is the ascendant Syrah, which grows well and produces exceptional wines in Portugal.

The heart of the book details the characteristics of the wine regions and highlights a small sample of leading producers in each. It does readers a service by candidly assessing the quality of the wines made in each region and subregion, and recommending those worth a visit and those lacking such appeal.

When my wife and I visited vineyards in the Douro Valley some years ago, I recall struggling to retain the names of the numerous grapes used to produce the wines we tasted. I was also struck by the recurrent plots of "field mix" grapes, wherein even the vineyard staff were unsure of the precise varieties planted. The unique grapes and their combinations made profound impressions on us, and we have savored Portuguese wines ever since. It certainly would have helped to have read this book before visiting the region.

As a practicing microvineyard manager and home winemaker, I appreciate the author's commentary on soil characteristics, weather, vinification techniques, and grape quality. These insights, tailored to specific subregions and even vineyards, add another layer of interest beyond the typical wine guide and help bring the book to life. The fact that Mayson himself owned a vineyard in the Alto Alentejo adds an authentic perspective and insider knowledge.

My limited familiarity with Portugal's wine regions made reading the book a true learning experience—more so than volumes on more popular regions in France or Germany or California. This educational element enhanced my reading pleasure.

A few minor critiques merit mention. First, a lack of detailed maps of wine regions sometimes makes it challenging to visualize their locations or the way mountains, rivers, and oceans converge and influence terroir. Their inclusion would undoubtedly enhance the book, but their exclusion must help to contain production costs. Also, the author occasionally mentions the potential impact of climate change in a way that seems like an afterthought. Given the centrality of climate and weather on grape production generally, and the rising temperatures and increasingly early harvest timelines in Portugal, it would have been interesting to read a fuller analysis of the role of the changing climate on these wines.

These quibbles aside, I thoroughly enjoyed my tour of Portugal's wines at the hands of a master researcher, writer, and storyteller. As my first sampling from the publisher's Classic Wine Library series, I am confident that if its other volumes are this instructive, it will not be my last. I highly recommend it to anyone interested in an eventful jaunt through Portugal's fine wines, accompanied by the eyes and palate of a gifted guide.