

PREMIUM

Alvarinho Vs Albariño: Top wines from Portugal and Spain rated

Championed by winemakers in both Spain and Portugal, this white grape is becoming known for the diverse, high quality wines it can produce. Pedro Ballesteros Torres MW explores a variety on the rise...



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There are already very good Albariños (the name I will use for consistency in this article for the time being) in New Zealand, California, Uruguay and Argentina, and experiments in Australia, Washington and Oregon are showing promise. Bordeaux has even named it as an authorised grape variety – a small revolution, as its adoption marks the first time ever that the Bordelais have allowed a foreign variety in their wines.

This recent success may be a surprise, but it has been a long time coming. Albariño is a noble variety with an extensive history and a distinctive character. Research indicates that it originated in the northwest corner of the

Iberian peninsula. As one might expect, the Portuguese and the Spanish don't agree on exactly where it was born. One reason for this disagreement – aside from the obvious, national pride – is that the variety's history is so long.

Late arrival

There's no written evidence of either Alvarinho or Albariño until the 19th century, but there is a demonstrated secular record of high-quality wines in both regions. It is quite likely that these historic wines were field blends which included the variety, as is the case now in Spain's DO Ribeiro.

Indeed, Albariño performs better in blends in most areas in the Iberian northwest. There are only two zones that specialise in 100% Albariño: the adjacent counties of Melgaço and Monção in Portugal's DO Vinho Verde, and Val do Salnés in Spain's DO Rías Baixas.

Albariño is fairly demanding in terms of viticultural practices and hygiene in the winery. It is sensitive to oidium and mildew, and prone to botrytis, although its thick skins make it resilient. The vines prefer to keep their feet dry, so they grow better in well-drained granite soils. The variety is vigorous and needs constant attention to keep it in balance – it was not possible for its potential to be fully realised until professional approaches and modern equipment arrived in Galicia and northern Portugal. This is another reason for its late renown.

'Albariño is a noble variety with an extensive history and distinctive character'

Albariño was undoubtedly one of the components of the legendary wines from Ribadavia, highly valued in the English court in the 16th century. It was – and is – also a key variety in the wines of Vinho Verde, which in 1908 became one of the first wine regions in the world to be demarcated by law. Despite these uses, the variety was all but forgotten for several centuries.

The facts

Alvarinho in Monção e Melgaço

Vineyard area: 1,340ha

Growers: 2,085

Production: 7m litres

Albariño in Salnés

Vineyard area: 2,320ha

Growers: 4,002

Production: 17m litres

Sources: Comissão de Viticultura da Região dos Vinhos Verdes; Consejo Regulador de la Denominación de Origen Rías Baixas; all figures from 2018

There are two reasons for this: first, in the golden age of wine exports from Portugal and Spain (the 18th and 19th centuries), the market demanded high-alcohol wines like Port and Sherry. Albariño was more comparable with the delicate whites of Rheingau and Champagne, both of which enjoyed much easier access to urban centres. Additionally, Vinho Verde and Rías Baixas were poor and isolated regions at that time. Viticulture was part of a

subsistence economy, developed in extremely small landholdings, where vines usually had to share the land with other crops and animals. There was no incentive to produce quality wines.

The incorporation of Portugal and Spain to the European Union in 1986 changed everything. Markets opened, transport infrastructure reached the regions, governance improved and, most importantly, people could get training, while wineries could receive capital investments. From then on, quality-oriented viticulture and modern winemaking began to develop – and global markets started to appreciate the unique personality and high calibre of Albariño wines.

Much in common

The main appellations of origin for Albariño are Vinho Verde in Portugal and Rías Baixas in Spain. Both are relatively large regions with a number of sub-regions: nine for Vinho Verde, and five for Rías Baixas. Many other varieties are authorised in both regions.

Vinho Verde and Rías Baixas have predominantly well-draining granite soils and an Atlantic climate, with lots of rain and mild temperatures. However, the Portuguese sub-zones are more continental, with a greater variation in temperatures and less rain. Vines are planted at very low altitudes in Salnés and many vineyards are close to the ocean, while in Monção e Melgaço they can be planted at altitudes of up to 350m.

Viticulture is also different in the two regions. In Rías Baixas many vines are still trained using pergola systems to protect the grapes from excessive humidity; however in Vinho Verde, trellis models are preferred. Today, because of mechanisation (the necessary consequence of modernisation), most new vineyards in both regions are now trained in similar ways. Rías Baixas and Vinho Verde share the same difficult heritage, namely the tiny size of individual vineyards. In Monção e Melgaço, the average vineyard size is 0.83ha; in Salnés, it is 0.58ha.

In the past, this was a major barrier to producing commercially successful wines, as small properties did not have the means or incentive to pursue high quality. In such small vineyards, older, more traditional farmers tended to aim for very high yields to compensate for their poor revenue, resulting in dilute wines of little interest. Indeed, the main challenge for new producers is buying or renting consistent vineyards.

This is why cooperatives play such a crucial role in both regions: they provide expert assistance to growers and structure the grape supply to generate added value, so that the sector can leave behind subsistence economy schemes. Co-ops have been a driver of change, facilitating a qualitative leap forward. Many of the modern improvements in quality are the consequence of simply keeping the vine's balance by reducing yields.

Taste the difference

When it comes to distinguishing between Alvarinho and Albariño, each category has typical characteristics. Albariño from Spain tends to have aromas of stone fruit (apricot and peach), with ripe citrus and restrained floral notes (orange blossom). When picked late or in warm vintages, it is common to detect tropical fruit and even orange-peel aromas. Often, the wines show grass and hay notes, and sometimes a hint of eucalyptus. Many basic wines can be quite herbaceous, even weedy.

In Portugal, meanwhile, Alvarinho must be fresh – often with crisp acidity – and moderate in alcohol, between 12% and 13.5%, with a firm structure. Producers often try to tame its tendency to bitterness on the finish, but I think that in the best wines such an elegant bitterness can be a sign of distinction. While I struggle to imagine a more perfect match than fruity young Albariño and seafood, good Alvarinho has an amazing capacity to yield pleasure and distinction in many diverse situations. It blends extremely well with other varieties, such as Treixadura, Loureiro and Lado, and even with international varieties such as Riesling.

Albariño's flavour profile can also be influenced by a variety of winemaking practices. Once grape quality improved, many winemakers looked to make wines that could develop over longer periods. They realised that some wines could achieve real complexity after long ageing on their fine lees, and today this is the style of some of the best-known wines. The aromatic profile then becomes quite diverse: delicate quince and honey notes appear, along with dried herbs and, in some cases, some toasty notes that could give the illusion of oak ageing. Such wines are denser on the palate, with a long aftertaste.

Other producers are dedicating increasing attention to fermentation and ageing in oak barrels. Only top-quality Alvarinho grapes can withstand such practice, however, since a lot of phenols and fruit character are needed to balance the oak influence and to retain freshness. The best examples are worth the effort: the wines are imbued with smoky and often brioche-like flavours, a slightly tannic texture and a buttery finish.

Old Albariño is a rarity worth pursuing. After eight to 10 years, the wines lose their fruitiness and acquire a complex iodine minerality – not dissimilar to good Chenin Blanc. They keep their freshness on the palate, extend their persistence and develop a multi-layered aftertaste.

Complex expressions

Theoretically, wines from Vinho Verde should be quite different from those of Rías Baixas. The higher elevation and temperature variation in Portugal should give wines of more tension and higher acidity than those from coastal Spain, which you would expect to be mellower and rounder given the milder climate. This theory proves true for basic wines. However, tasting up the quality ladder, the differences are more complex.

In my view, in the best wines, the unique character of each varietal profile outweighs any regional personality. The only downside occurs when, with the aim of enhancing complexity, too much experimentation and influence by the winemaker masks the pure fruit expression.

Wine selection and conclusions

In choosing my recommendations, I intentionally only tasted wines from the two sub-regions that excel in making dry varietal wines: Alvarinho from Monção e Melgaço in Vinho Verde, and Albariño from Val do Salnés in Rías Baixas.

Following the tasting, I came to a few conclusions:

Both regions have top-quality examples and potential for many more great wines; neither region can be deemed better than the other.

Both regions are experimenting with lees contact and barrel fermentation/maturation, in addition to producing pure, unoaked wines. To avoid confusion and help wine drinkers with their choice, producers should indicate winemaking practices clearly on the label.

While the inherent character and balance of top Alvarinho/Albariño wines from Iberia cannot be denied, we should expect – and welcome – many other great examples from the rest of the world.

Alvarinho/Albariño is quite sensitive to terroir and the quality improves with old vines. Single-vineyard wines will be the benchmark
in the future.

Alvarinho/Albariño's identity is built upon limited yields and careful viticulture. You get what you pay for; stay away from discounted wines.

Ballesteros Torres recommends six top Alvarinhos from Vinho Verde and six top Albariños from Rías Baixas, Galicia



Pazo Barrantes, La Comtesse, Rías Baixas, Spain, 2016

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The know-how of one of Spain's top white winemakers, Marqués de Murrieta, shows in this, one of the most genuine, complex Albariños. Fermentation and four months' ageing in large oak vats has conferred aromatic complexity, with just a hint of wood, alongside ripe...

Points 96



Quinta do Louridal, Poema Alvarinho, Monção e Melgaço, 2016

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Intense, complex aromas with a genuine style. Spicy and smoky lees influence notes combine with restrained tropical fruit and orange peel. Unctuous, almost velvety, and very open on the palate with great freshness. A very serious wine of top quality.

Points 94

Pazo Señorans, Selección de Añada, Rías Baixas, Spain, 2010

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

Intensely perfumed, with quince notes dominating apricot and floral aromas. There's a



rounded spicy touch from the 30 months this wine has spent ageing on its lees in stainless steel. It has a creamy, dense palate with a lingering finish – and it will get even better afte...

Points 94



Quinta de Soalheiro, Terramater, Monçao e Melgaço, 2018

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

Delicate – more floral and grassy than fruity, showing discreet spiciness and lively citrus fruit. Round and elegant aromas on the nose, perfectly balanced, with both power and agility. The finish is subtle and very complex. A magic combination of delicacy and...

Points 94

Raúl Pérez, Sketch, Rías Baixas, Spain, 2017

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This wine conveys its sea-facing landscape through saline and iodine aromas. The palate shows restrained yet precise fruit, with a slight spiciness and a nutty touch from 12 months in oak. Appetising, with a lingering saline flavour, it has a style all of its own, honouring the genius of Raúl...

Points 94



Adega de Monçao, Deu-la-Deu Fernando Moura 30 Anos, 2016

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A classic, developed style that shows deft maturation. The aromas and flavours of dried apricots and sweet spice are very particular and distinct. Deep and generous on the palate, the wine has impressive elegance and shows magisterial winemaking.

Points 93



Bodegas Gerardo Méndez, Do Ferreiro Cepas Vellas, 2018

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A benchmark for the purity of Albariño fruit in Salnés, from vineyards between 50 and 200 years old. It's fresh and lively, with flavours of apricot, peach, dried grass, spice and acacia, with roundness from 12 months' lees ageing and a multi-layered finish.

Points 93



Quintas de Melgaço, Vinhas Velhas, Monção e Melgaço, 2018

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A restrained nose that boasts lovely grassy, spicy notes and well-defined white fruit. It's elegant, tight and stylish on the palate, with a lingering finish. A single-vineyard wine that shows a pure expression of its terroir: a Vinho Verde benchmark.

Points 92



Lua Cheia, Lua Cheia, Nostalgia, Monção e Melgaço, 2018

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Precisely defined, textbook Alvarinho aromas and flavours: ripe peach and bright citrus, with a slight lees-contact smokiness. Round and firmly built on the palate, but smooth texture and appealing bitterness on the finish.

Points 91



Attis, Embaixador, Rías Baixas, Spain, 2016

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A pergola-trained, single-vineyard wine redolent of the soil, aged for two years in granite vats. It's rich and open, balanced and dense. This is the new wave of Albariño: long, concentrated and very gastronomic.

Points 91



Bodegas del Palacio de Fefiñanes, Albariño de Fefiñanes III, 2016

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

This has a mineral character, vaguely reminiscent of aged Riesling, together with intense peach aromas. With suave balance and soft texture, it has lots of personality and was reductively aged, spending seven months on its lees and two years in bottle.

Points 91



João Portugal Ramos, Alvarinho, Monção e Melgaço, 2018

[+ Add to My Wines](#)

Delicious in its approachability – full of friendly peach and citrus, with a slight green apple overtone. It's clean and precise, with crisp acidity and a slight bitterness on the finish that enhances the aftertaste.

Points 90

