

NEW WINE IN OLD JARS

Winemakers in the Alentejo region of Portugal are reviving a winemaking practice that goes back to Roman times. Stephen Quinn reports.

For two decades, Jose Miguel Almeida, president of the Vidigueira wine co-operative in the Alentejo region in southern Portugal, has argued for a return to making special wines in clay containers.

This year he got his wish. The company started a project using amphorae – known locally as *telhas* – combined with grapes from co-op vines that are at least a century old. “When you have an ancient method, and ancient vines, you have something special,” he says.

A labour of love

Telhas differ from amphorae in not having handles – they are literally big clay pots with pointed bottoms. Georgia is probably the country best known for making amphorae wine, known as *kvevri*. In Georgia, *kvevri* are buried to cope with earth tremors while *telhas* sit above ground.

This year, the Vidigueira co-op followed the traditional method of putting a range of grape varieties into the clay containers. They included 10 varieties in the mix, a result of the “field blend” method of planting a century ago. All varieties were picked at the end of August, meaning some were ripe, with others under- or over-ripe. Under local rules wine must stay in the pots until St Martin’s Day, 11 November.

The co-op expects to produce about 4,000 bottles from its four amphorae when they bottle near the end of this year. This is tiny compared with the 8m bottles the co-operative makes each year, and are more a labour of love.

The Alentejo region covers about a third of Portugal’s landmass and receives more than 3,000 hours of sunlight a year, one of the highest totals in the world. The sunlight means that as grapes ripen they produce high levels of alcohol. Some winemakers have also tended to lavish too much oak on their reds, producing wines high in tannin and alcohol. Modern consumers are



Jose Miguel Almeida, president, Vidigueira co-operative, standing surrounded by *telhas*.

seeking more fruit and freshness. They also want whites with acidity. Whites from hot climates tend to taste flabby unless they are picked early. *Telhas* wines do not need oak, and taste fresh with lively acids.

Telhas winemaking methods also differ compared with traditional methods using tanks and barrels. Fermentation and maturation take place in the clay container, with the mixture stirred each day with long wooden paddles. The residue eventually settles in the narrow bottom of the container, and wine is bottled via gravity from a small hole just above the residue.

The largest *telhas* are almost two metres high, contain about 1,000 litres of wine, and weigh more than a tonne.

Historian and journalist Pedro Luiz de Castro says that it was traditional for local people to make *telhas* wine at home for family consumption. When co-operatives appeared after World War II, these locals sold their grapes to co-operatives, leaving their amphorae to languish in garages and other buildings.

Luiz de Castro believes the Vidigueira

co-operative is leading the revival of a technique the Romans established 2,000 years ago. The co-operative organises an amphorae wine competition in the second week of December each year which usually has about 300 wines from the region. This year is the contest’s 20th anniversary. The jury goes to each house or vineyard to collect bottles for the competition and to ensure the wine comes from an amphora.

The practice spreads

The *Herdade do Sao Miguel* near the UNESCO-heritage town of Beja started its amphora project two years ago. The company produces 5m bottles a year, though amphorae wines represent perhaps 5% of production.

Winemaker Paulo Pecas sourced his 21 amphorae from around the region, buying from families who no longer used them. Most of the containers were at least two centuries old, he says. The largest vessels cost between €500.00 (\$592.20) and €1,000.00 (\$1,184.40), which was good value given that amphorae can last for centuries (though they become fragile as they age and sometimes leak). By comparison, a new oak barrel costs at least €1,000.00 (\$1,184.40) and can only be used for three or four years.

“We are using the amphorae the way the ancient Romans used them to make wine,” he says. “We refurbish them and line them with beeswax and this lasts for 10 years before we need to do it again.”

The Comissão Vitivinícola Regional Alentejana (CVRA) represents winemakers in Alentejo. In 2011, the CVRA recognised *telhas* as a legitimate production method and included the wine in its Denomination of Origin Alentejo wines. That year, according to CVRA data, about 3,200 litres of amphora wine were made. Within four years the CVRA had certified almost 44,000 litres a year. ■



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