The Wine Guy: Albarino or Alvarinho?

by Neil Matias

Tucked away in the northwest corner of the Iberian Peninsula there is a section of land that is part of both Spain and Portugal. In both countries they grow the same type of grapes, but call them by a different name. The grape is known as Albarino in the Spanish province of Galicia, and in the Portuguese province of Minho it is called Alvarinho. It is typically a light, fresh, and crisp grape, and contributes to one of the world's most underrated white wines.

Brought to Iberia by from eastern France by Cluny Monks in the 12th century, the grape's name in both countries means, "white from the Rhine." It is related closely to the Riesling grape from the Alsace region of France.

On the Galician coast there are inlets called 'rias,' or bays, which dominate the landscape. Important for fishing and shell fishing, the Rias have helped make this the most famous region for seafood in Spain. It is in the region of Rias Baixas that Albarino is made into wine. It goes without saying that the wine is a perfect choice for many varieties of seafood, especially shell fish.

Bottles of Salneval, made from Albarino grapes.

Here are two great types of Spanish Albarino to try:

Salneval Albarino is a wonderful light wine with aromas of pear and tropical fruit. You'll also notice the soft citrus and floral flavors, with a slight mineral finish. This wine is an example of the more delicate style that can be made from this grape. Enjoy it for $11.99 per bottle.

Burgans Alabarino has an amazing nose with hints of flowers and lemon peel. On the mouth you will find flavors of peach and lime, with a very crisp mineral finish, which make it ideal with flaky fish courses. This is a very excellent example of what Albarino can offer. Enjoy this wine at two bottles for $25.

In Portugal, the grape does differ slightly along with the pronunciation. In the region of Vinho Verde, located in the province of Minho, the Alvarinho grape is blended with other white grapes to produce wine. Due to its natural acidity and lower alcohol, the wines exhibit a slight sparkle. Vinho Verde, or "Green Wine," should be enjoyed while the wine is young.

A tub of Alvarinho grapes, waiting to be turned into wine.

Terra Antiga Vinho, which is 50% Alvarinho and 50% Trajadura, is a delightful wine. It is bright and refreshing, with hints of grapefruit and a clean, crisp finish. This is certainly a wine that one can call 'quaffable,' and a perfect choice for oily fish, such as grilled sardines or chicharos. Look for it at two bottles for $16.00.

Portugal also does make 100% Alvarinhos. *Andreza Alvarinho* is a full bodied white due to the extended skin contact, providing grapefruit and apple aromas along with balance and structure on the palate. The flavors of grapefruit and apple go along with the typical mineral finish. Two bottles will

cost around $30.

These wines are excellent whites and offer tremendous values. Albarino or Alvarinho, take your pick…you really can’t go wrong with either.

Neil Matias is The Wine Guy. He has worked for years managing wine & spirit shops in the New Bedford and Fall River areas. You can email him with questions about these, or any other wine, at: neilm@cardozas.com