

An Old Alliance. The vinous legacy of our shared history with Portugal

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By Danny Cameron

Phrases such as ‘oldest ally’ or ‘special friendship’ have been bandied around between nation states throughout history, often more as a marriage of a moment’s convenience, rather than to reflect anything supportable by something as trivial as a fact or two. But the relationship between England (and later, Britain) and Portugal stands up to historical scrutiny as deeper than most, if not deeper than any.

The oft-quoted treaty which seals England and Portugal as the oldest political and military allies anywhere in the world is the Treaty of Windsor, which was signed in 1386. No ancient scrap of parchment this, for it was most recently dusted down when Portugal offered the use of the Azores, when Britain needed an Atlantic refuelling post during the Falklands conflict in 1982, before the Armed Forces decided Ascension Island was a more practical option. Although, during another time of 20th century national crisis, it was actually an earlier treaty (of 1373) between the two countries which Churchill presented to Portugal’s then premier, Salazar, in 1943, to stop Portugal submitting to pressure to join the Axis.

However Portugal’s relationship with our country is older than even that, for English crusaders certainly assisted in the re-conquest from Moorish occupation, before the kingdom of Portugal was recognized by Pope Alexander III in 1179. An interesting vein can be pursued here, as author Freddy Silva claims, in his recent book *First Templar Nation*, that the nation state of Portugal, already known as having the oldest national boundary on continental Europe, was actually founded through the efforts of the Templars to establish the mainland continent’s first nation state. It makes for an interesting read. One can only guess if Dan Brown has a copy on order. But we do know that Henry the Navigator, instrumental in Portugal’s later Age of Discoveries, was the Governor of the Order of Christ, successors to the Templars in Portugal. And the English connection continues, because Henry was the son of King John I of Portugal and Philippa of Lancaster, John of Gaunt’s daughter.

Of course, wine weaves in and out of the story of the two countries constantly. After the founding of Portugal, nearly two hundred years of relative stability saw trade flourish, with English wool and Portuguese wine proving some of the most stable currency. Later in this period, salt cod from our northern waters became a valuable commodity to exchange against wine from the north of Portugal, later to be known as Vinho Verde. And just as bacalhau (salt cod) remains an often misunderstood gastronomic delicacy to this day, so, indeed, Vinho Verde is one of Europe’s most misunderstood wine regions. While we usually think of Vinho Verde as a white wine, most wine from Vinho Verde was in fact red, not only in the 1300s, but at least as late as the mid 1980s.

It is hard to know when these vineyards, north of Porto, were first established. Whilst it is broadly agreed that it was the Phoenicians, some 3,000+ years ago, who

brought the grape vine to Iberia, they may never have got this far north. Thus this is probably another cultural victory which the Romans will happily take the credit for. Whilst they defined their occupation of the western part of the peninsula as the land south of the River of Gold (Douro), as *Lusitania*, they certainly tried to tame the Celtic tribes they found further north of here too. In fact, they reckoned the River Lima, in the heart of the Vinho Verde region, to be the mythical (in Greek) river of Lethes, which induced anyone who crossed the river to lose their mind. The Roman bridge at the appropriately named *Ponte de Lima* still stands (with just a little reconstruction).

South of Porto, though the Romans certainly valued the wine of the Bairrada region (it is likely that vineyards already existed when they arrived). It was the only wine in *Lusitania* which the occupying forces deemed worthy to be sent back to be drunk in the Imperial Court in Rome, and so firmly establishes Bairrada as Portugal's most historic wine region. With some irony, then, when the Prime Minister, the Marquis of Pombal, was delimiting the Douro as Portugal's (and arguably Europe's, but there lies a can of worms) first vinous guarantee of origin in 1756, he also subsequently demanded a complete ban on the export of Bairrada wines (and those from the far north too: the foundation stone of England's wine trade with Portugal). But Pombal never would let history, or indeed geography, get in the way of his legislative powers: he designated that his own vineyard in Carcavelos, near Lisbon, could be used for Port production with the same pen that he was trying to define the Douro valley a couple of hundred miles away for a guarantee of origin!

The English traders, however, were well entrenched by this stage, with the first English port shippers establishing themselves as long ago as the 1670s (The first port shipper – not an English one – was founded in 1638). Those early 'settlers' found a political boost to their fortunes when the Methuen Treaty of 1703 gave preferential duty rates to Portuguese wines entering England. But the shippers' fortunes would reach extreme highs and lows comparable to any of the most famously contoured Douro vineyards as the centuries progressed. By the time the Wine Society was founded (in 1874, and the first wine to be offered to members was from *Bucelas*, north of Lisbon, previously popularised by Shakespeare, in *Henry IV*, part 2, and later by one Arthur Wellesley, before he became the Duke of Wellington, during the Peninsular War), the Douro was blessed with both sides of the coin of fortune. On the negative side, the vineyards were in the middle of being ravaged by phylloxera, but if a wine producer could possibly see his glass half-full at this point, it was the fact that the railway was finally coming to the valley. The first tracks were laid in 1873, and would come to provide access to the region like never before, as well as providing much-needed employment.

We think of wine as being a product of people and their environment (or maybe the other way around), but politics clearly has its part to play to. Pombal wasn't the only dictatorial Prime Minister to fundamentally influence wine production in Portugal. When Antonio Oliveira Salazar came to power in 1932, he had far reaching implications for Portuguese wine, which can probably include (due to isolationist policies) the continuity of the wonderful diversity of 'native' grape varieties in Portugal. But from a legislative point of view, Salazar took a very deep interest in his own region of origin, the Dão.

This fascinating sub-mountainous region became one of Salazar's pet projects, forcing grape growers to sell their fruit to a handful (albeit a big handful) of co-operatives, creating a cartel of such proportions that the entire system had to be legally dismantled before Portugal was allowed to join the European Union in 1986. The Dão is now happily recovering, thanks to an increasing clutch of high profile winemakers. And interestingly, it wasn't the only vinous cartel in Portugal which the affronted the EU. Membership for Portugal meant that the old Douro laws of all port wine having to pass through the *entrepoto* at Vila Nova de Gaia was relaxed - previously the shippers maintained their lodges, meaning that independent port producers had no direct route to the market. Even the government monopoly on the supply of grape spirit for fortification of port was broken up. Port, the so-called "Englishman's Wine", would change for ever, in the spirit of free market economics.

These days, sales of Portuguese Wine (if we don't count fortified ones) account for around 1% of the wine we consume in the UK (some statisticians claim this figure is larger, but this is a debate probably not worth getting into), being very different from the two thirds of all wine that passed through English borders in the mid-1700s (which, incidentally, is another figure which is disputed by some statisticians, who claim that quite a lot of this was banned French wine being shipped via Portugal). But within that 1%, we can enjoy great diversity which is made up of at least a couple of hundred native varieties, drenched with regional character which varies from the cool and crisp whites in the far north, to the warmth and generosity of southern reds. Portugal is a country which invites exploration and discovery, and whose influence not only includes deep tradition, but also that of an open-minded generation of new winemakers.

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