

Antão Vaz

Why it is emerging as a winning grape variety in the Alentejo and beyond.

by Bart de Vries

Being born in The Netherlands and having lived there for most of my life, countries and regions where the horizon is low and the skies are high have always made me feel at home. The Alentejo is not only a region with a similar open landscape with vast undulating plains and sweeping vistas, it is also a part of a country, Portugal, that shares a seafaring history with my country. In both countries for centuries women were waiting on the quaysides to see if their sons and husbands would come back from discovery journeys or fishing trips. Admittedly, that sense of saudade or melancholy has long disappeared in The Netherlands, but I still feel a connection that has been strengthened by numerous visits to Portugal since my first trip in 1986. So, when I had to decide on a topic for my Weinakademiker Thesis, the choice for Portugal was easily made.

As I didn't want this thesis to be just an investigation into an interesting region, I decided to look at the Alentejo from a specific angle reflecting the times we are living in. Due to its hot and dry climate, the Alentejo can be seen as a marginal region for winegrowing. With rising temperatures and increasing droughts, I wondered how the region would cope with climate change. Caro Maurer MW helped me narrow down the topic even further, by focusing on Alentejo's flagship white grape variety that seems to be emerging as a variety that could be part of the region's efforts to adapt: Antão Vaz.

I used new and existing professional wine literature, reports from the regional and national wine marketing organisations (CVRA and ViniPortugal respectively), the national meteorological institute (IPMA), the Agency for Integrated Fire Management (AGIF), the articles of association of the appellation, the Portugal Environment Agency, and the IPCC and spoke to six winemakers in order to tell the story of Antão Vaz's role in adapting to climate change in the Alentejo.

In chapter 2 I give an outline of the Alentejo as a winegrowing region. Chapter 3 is dedicated to climate change. After some general remarks I zoom in on the Portuguese and the Alentejan situation. Antão Vaz is the main topic of Chapter 4. It explores its characteristics in the vineyard and in the cellar.

In chapter 5 I discuss why adapting to climate change seems a better strategy than to retreat and move to cooler zones, that is, to areas of higher altitude or latitude. Part of such an adaptation strategy is cultivar turnover. This is where Antão Vaz comes in as a serious candidate. As a heat loving variety with several

other practical and positive characteristics, Antão Vaz has increased in relevance during the last decade. However, its growth seems to be tapering off. In the synthesis of this paper, I give reasons why this happens.

The region may not be able to rely upon this variety only, and fortunately it doesn't have to. But if marketing organisations, governments, winemakers and other involved play their role the variety may fulfill more of its potential.

How climate change in the Alentejo will evolve this century, is not precisely known. There are different scenarios. In the worst-case scenario – a temperature increase of 3 to 4 degrees Celsius and thirty percent less precipitation – adaption may turn out to be too ambitious. However, as Antão Vaz has not only increased in surface in the Alentejo, but has also spread beyond its native region to other parts of Portugal, the variety has certainly emerged as a winner.

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