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Portuguese winemakers embrace native oak barrels to enhance authenticity and terroir in wine production

Shift from French and American oak highlights unique qualities of Portuguese oak and growing interest in local materials

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Portuguese winemakers are increasingly turning to local oak for aging their wines, marking a shift from the traditional reliance on French and American oak barrels. This trend reflects a growing focus on terroir and authenticity in Portuguese wine production. Historically, Portuguese oak was mainly used for aging Port and other fortified wines. Now, more table wine producers are experimenting with this native wood.

Francisco Toscano Rico, president of Wines of Lisboa, notes that interest in Portuguese oak barrels has grown recently. He describes the wood as denser and less porous than French oak, which allows less oxygen into the barrel. This characteristic makes it suitable for longer maturation periods without the wood overpowering the wine's natural flavors. According to Rico, Portuguese oak adds a unique character to the wine while maintaining balance.

The move toward Portuguese oak gained momentum about five years ago when Quinta do Gradil, located near Lisbon, released two wines—a Tannat and an Alicante Bouschet—aged in barrels made from local oak. The success of these wines encouraged other producers to try Portuguese oak for themselves.

António Ventura, a respected winemaker at Quinta de Atela on the southern banks of the Tejo River, has worked with a wide range of grape varieties in his 600-hectare vineyard. Ventura explains that Portuguese oak is more rustic and resinous compared to other types of oak. He finds it works especially well with grape varieties that have higher tannin levels, such as Alicante Bouschet, Tannat, Caladoc, and Sousão. These grapes have shown excellent results when aged in Portuguese oak.

Ventura's experience extends beyond his own vineyard. He played a key role in developing the Porta 6 wine label, which is popular in the UK market and produces millions of liters annually. As a consultant through his company Provintage, Ventura advises producers across Portugal. He believes that using Portuguese oak results in wines that are more authentic and less masked by wood influence. Even after long maturation periods, he says the wood never dominates the wine.

While Ventura does not recommend using Portuguese oak with certain floral grape varieties like Touriga Nacional, he has found success with reds from regions such as Alentejo, Douro, and Lisbon—especially those with strong tannic structure. In addition to red wines, some producers are now using Portuguese oak for high-end white wines. Rico points out that Arinto, a leading white grape in the Lisboa region known for its aging potential, benefits from time spent in Portuguese oak barrels.

Traditionally, chestnut wood was used to age white wines in Portugal because it imparts a subtle sweetness. However, Portuguese oak gives white wines a pale straw yellow color—a feature that aligns with modern consumer preferences. Ventura recalls that decades ago, consumers expected white wines to be topaz yellow; today's market favors lighter hues.

It is important to distinguish between Portuguese oak (Quercus pyrenaica) and cork oak (Quercus suber). While cork oaks are valued for their thick bark used in cork production, Portuguese oaks are planted mainly in northern Portugal and are used for aging Douro reds. Cork oaks dominate forests in Alentejo in southern Portugal. The country accounts for about one-third of the world's cork forest area.

Interest in cork production is also growing outside Portugal. In 2023, reports indicated that California is considering domestic cork production to reduce shipping times and costs associated with importing cork stoppers from Europe. Cork oaks' resistance to fire has attracted attention as well; their ability to withstand wildfires could help protect vineyards in fire-prone regions like California.

As more Portuguese producers experiment with local materials and techniques, the use of native oak is likely to continue rising. Wineries such as Quinta da CasaBoa, Adega de São Mamede, and Quinta do Carneiro have already adopted Portuguese oak barrels for some of their top-tier wines. The trend reflects both a return to tradition and an embrace of innovation within Portugal's dynamic wine industry.