



PICO, THE AZORES: VOLCANIC WINES IN THE MIDST OF WAVES

Planted on stone terraces in black basalt lava fields in the shadow of an active volcano and surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean, the vineyards of Pico are among the world's most dramatic. Sarah Ahmed travels to the Azorean island to meet the new wave of producers who have revived this magical terroir to make some of Portugal's most distinctive wines

Is there a more dramatic backdrop for vineyards than Montanha do Pico? Standing, wrote Herman Melville, “unassailable in the midst of waves,” this imposing, conical volcano—at 8,304ft (2,531m) Portugal's highest mountain—dominates the 30-mile- (48km-) long Azorean island that takes its name. Pico's vineyards are truly between the devil and the deep blue sea: Montanha do Pico and the Atlantic Ocean, whose abundant sperm whales brought Captain Ahab of *Moby Dick* fame to its rocky shores.

But as a new era of contemporary wines confirms, there was method in the apparent madness of planting the island's black basalt lava fields (*lajidos*) to thousands of small, contiguous, dry-stone-walled vineyard plots (*currais*). Following a long dormant period during which most of these idiosyncratic *currais* were abandoned, the inscription in the World Heritage list in 2004 of the Landscape of Pico Island Vineyards Culture has stimulated a remarkable renaissance of Pico's once thriving wine tradition.

In the beginning

In the early 15th century, Portuguese navigators en route to the New World claimed the Azores, an archipelago of nine islands located 994 miles (1,600km) from Lisbon and 2,423 miles (3,900km) from North America. Soon after, Pico's first vines were reputedly planted by Friar Pedro Gigante, a parish priest. By the middle of the 19th century, when Melville penned *Moby Dick*, Pico's wine industry was at the peak of its success. Production, which was focused around *licoroso* (sweet, sometimes fortified) wines, even dwarfed that of a rather better-known Portuguese Atlantic island, Madeira. (In 1852, Pico produced 2,977,380 liters versus Madeira's 714,319 liters.)

While vineyard ownership in Pico is fragmented today, back then large estates on the island were predominantly owned by the wealthy families of Horta on neighboring Faial.

And because Horta was “the only good port in all the Azores” (Charles Augustus Murray, *Travels in North America*, 1839), they also monopolized a flourishing trade with America, Brazil, Western Indies, Germany, England, and Russia, where, after the revolution of 1917, bottles of “Verdelho do Pico” were found in the czar's cellars. Impressed with both quantity and quality, Murray, a British author and diplomat wrote, “[T]he Island of Pico, in the vicinity of Fayal [today spelled Faial], produces yearly from 16 to 24000 pipes of a white wine of a remarkable salubrious quality, something between Madeira and Hock: a little of it has been sent to England, where it was so much admired, that orders were immediately given for some pipes of it.”

Pestilence and disease

Pico has experienced four volcanic eruptions since settlement, but the destruction of its wine industry was a function of different “acts of God”—disease and pestilence. By 1866, thanks to oidium (1852), production had shrunk to 100 barrels. The death knell came with phylloxera (1873), which devastated Pico's vineyards. Although American rootstocks—the solution to phylloxera—were planted, unlike Madeira (which was similarly afflicted), Pico's wine industry did not bounce back. Rather, American grape varieties like Isabella, a red grape, took hold, and for more than a century Pico's wines became largely the stuff of local and home consumption—low-brow *vino de consumo*.

As for the high-quality *Vitis vinifera* varieties that had forged Pico's reputation—Verdelho, Terrantez do Pico, and Arinto dos Açores (“the traditional trio”)—the paymasters of Faial cut their losses, abandoning the vineyards. With a living to gain, the hardy peasants of Pico who had tended them emigrated. Valued, writes Melville, for “generously supplying the muscles,” many worked passage on the bridge of Nantucket whale-ships, perhaps explaining why “it has been calculated that half the Massachusetts seaboard has Portuguese or Azorean blood” (Philip Hoare, *Leviathan*).

Photography courtesy of the Azores Wine Company

Opposite: Montanha do Pico, Portugal's highest mountain, dominating its island landscape and surrounded by dry-stone-walled vineyard plots on basalt soils.

Keeping the faith

Happily, a small number of individual growers kept the faith, and the creation of the Cooperativa Vitivinícola of Pico Island (CVIP)—the Azores’s only winemaking operation of scale—could not have been more timely. Released in 1961, its first wine, a *licoroso* made from 36 tons of the traditional trio, came in the wake of another wave of emigration to North America, this one stimulated by a year-long volcanic eruption on Faial in 1957/58. “CVIP was important to keep the viticulture, by creating a market for the grapes and putting money in pockets,” observes fourth-generation grower Paulo Machado, a former president of the Azores Wine Commission.

In 1994, Pico’s *licoroso* wines won PDO (protected denomination of origin) status, which requires that the wines must be made from at least 80 percent of Verdelho, Arinto dos Açores, or Terrantez do Pico (or a blend of all three), have a minimum of 16% ABV, and be aged for a minimum of two years in wood. Around the same time, with CVIP and Manuel and Marco Faria (Curral Atlântis), Machado started selling table wines in a bid to broaden the appeal of Pico’s wines. It was, he reports, a compass-spinning time, “with a bad period of block planting international and high-yielding non-local grapes like Fernão Pires with modern trellising, rather than field-blend *currais* [varietally mixed plots of the traditional trio].”

Nonetheless, as the quality of table wines improved, the Vinho Regional Açores classification was introduced in 2004, coinciding with another milestone launch from the CVIP—Frei Gigante. Made from the traditional trio, “it marked a shift in culture away from *licoroso* to table wines,” says Machado. But with only 120ha (300 acres) of Verdelho, Terrantez do Pico, and Arinto dos Açores left on Pico by then, Frei Gigante alone could not work the miraculous recovery that was to come on the back of Pico’s UNESCO World Heritage inscription. It applied to 987ha (2,439 acres) and a 1,924ha (4,754-acre) buffer zone, comprising “a significant and intact proportion of the island’s 19th-century vineyard landscape.”

Resurrection

Far from seeking simply to preserve the traditional trio and *currais* in aspic, UNESCO’s aim was to build on local efforts and breathe life into the Landscape of the Pico Island Vineyard Culture by managing wine production “under a regime designed to ensure economic viability and sustainability as well as to retain traditional farming techniques.” Between 2004 and 2013, almost €5 million was pumped into 118 rehabilitation projects of 116ha (287 acres) of *currais* vineyards and maintenance projects for a further 156ha (385 acres) centered around the traditional trio. Between 2014 and 2018, additional grants for restructuring of vineyards and improving wine quality became available under the EU-wide VITIS program. Thanks to UNESCO and VITIS, the area planted to the traditional trio is expected to at least triple from 2014’s total of 270ha (667 acres) by the end of 2018. Much of the new planting comprises Verdelho and Terrantez do Pico which, since Pico’s glory days, have been overshadowed by the more disease-resistant and productive Arinto dos Açores (which was estimated to comprise more than 90 percent of plantings).

The most ambitious beneficiary of these grants is the Azores Wine Company (AWC), whose game-changing, arrestingly mineral dry whites have been listed by more than a dozen



restaurants with one to three Michelin stars. Founded in 2014 by Machado, António Maçanita, and Filipe Rocha, the company has embarked on an epic rehabilitation of two large *currais* vineyards totalling 66ha (164 acres). The dense, invasive forests that have taken stubborn root in abandoned *currais* are systematically being felled and burned, and the roots injected with poison to make way for vines. With the goal of increasing production from 25,000 bottles in 2015 to 150,000 bottles by 2021, a new 200-ton-capacity winery is also in the works.

Rocha, until 2016 executive director of the Azores School of Hospitality and Tourism, says, “I could not have imagined ten—even five—years ago how things are now, and sometimes I’m afraid, because so much has happened in a short time.” But things have panned out well. With Pico’s population of around 15,000, labor was originally a major problem. Now AWC has a workforce of 15 employees, 15 contractors, and a waiting list of people keen to work for it. Similarly, Machado has seen a turnaround among locals (*Picarotos*), whose pride and passion have been stirred by a vineyard and winemaking renaissance that, in 2012, saw Pico’s PDO classification extended to table wines made from a minimum of 80 percent of either Arinto dos Açores, Terrantez do Pico, or Verdelho. Their number includes



Portugal’s younger, “brain-drain”-prone generation, such as Cátia Laranjo, who became AWC’s resident winemaker in 2015.

The evangelist

Ironically, AWC came about because of Maçanita’s failed 2013 bid to persuade any of Pico’s winemakers, bar Machado, to accept free winemaking consultancy. A more delicate ego might have walked away, but describing the Azores as “a lost paradise,” the Alentejo-based winemaker was already hooked by genetic and historic research projects on the origins of the traditional trio and a recovery program of Terrantez do Pico. Only 89 Terrantez do Pico vines existed when Susana Mestre took cuttings to plant a trial plot at the Agrarian Department on São Miguel island. Maçanita made the first (2010) vintage—also his maiden Azorean wine—from those vines. Launched in Lisbon under his Alentejo-based Fita Preta label, to huge critical acclaim, he followed it up with equally impressive examples of Verdelho and Arinto dos Açores from Pico.

In a further touch of irony, it transpires that, through his belief in “the incredible enological potential” of Pico’s grapes and the bold creation of AWC, Maçanita has led by example. Reporting on a “ripple in the pond” effect, Machado commented, “I’ve heard people say many times if they [AWC] are not afraid to do it on a large scale, why should I be afraid to do it smaller?” Before the Alentejo firebrand showed him what could be done, even Machado admits he was on the point of giving up winemaking to stick to growing, “because I could not sell wine at a competitive price.” But the tide is turning. For Rocha, who observes “we started our prices high, and others have almost doubled their price and improved quality a lot,” the distribution, marketing, and sales network that came with the Fita Preta was a missing piece in the puzzle given “the disappearance of trade knowledge that existed 200 years ago.” Confidence is up at CVIP, too, where new broom Thomas

Grundmann is aiming for it to be “among the best three co-ops in Portugal by 2020, with a rock-solid financial base.” Appointed general manager in 2016, he confirms, “Our biggest challenge is to ‘feed’ our almost 250 members so that their future is more sustainable. Given the high cost of producing grapes, good, high prices for grapes are key.” This is why he has introduced improvements, such as vinifying grapes by variety, dispensing with the “dreadful” plate filters, and picking whites earlier (when they are healthier), “to get as much terroir in the bottle as reasonably possible.” After all, “unique with volcanic rock, ocean proximity, and cold to moderate weather,” Pico’s terroir is, says Maçanita, “explosive for great white wines.”

The holy trinity

Maçanita’s research with Raquel Santos (Biocant) and Ana Catarina Gomes into the traditional trio of Verdelho, Arinto dos Açores, and Terrantez do Pico reveals why these grapes are so expressive and well adapted to the islands. It suggests “very strongly,” says Maçanita, that all three varieties originate in the Azores, which is something of a coup for the islands’ producers. After all, Madeira is more heavily associated with Verdelho and Terrantez (though Terrantez do Pico is a different variety) and mainland Portugal with Arinto (though Arinto dos Açores is also a different variety).

According to the historical analysis, the first citation of Verdelho appears in Gaspar Frutuoso’s *Saudades de Terra* in 1589. His book about the Azores, Madeira, and the Canaries mentions the presence of Verdelho only on Terceira, the Azores (which is two centuries before the first known citation of Verdelho on Madeira). As for the genetic research, Maçanita reveals that Verdelho “is very likely” a cross of Savagnin (which he believes was introduced by the Azores’s French or Flemish settlers) with a grape of Portuguese origin (whose identity is still unknown), “because Verdelho gets closer to the Portuguese cluster [of microsatellites] than Savagnin.” Reinforcement for the theory that Verdelho originated in the Azores also stems from genetic research in which, he summarizes, “everything

Opposite (top) and above: The remarkable renaissance in the island’s vineyards. Opposite (bottom): A vertical tasting at Adega Czar, the top *licoroso* producer.

Photography courtesy of (top and opposite) the Azores Wine Company; (bottom) Adega Czar

points to Verdelho being the parent of Arinto dos Açores and Terrantez do Pico, which are not found anywhere else, and also Verdelho has no connection with other Madeira grape varieties.”

Hallowed ground

Pico shares its combination of volcanic geology and maritime climate with the other eight Azores islands, including Graciosa and Terceira, where, at the same time as Pico, distinct regions (Graciosa and Biscoitos) were classified as PDO for *licorosos* and wines made from the traditional trio. So, what makes Pico’s 500-year-old vineyard landscape uniquely worthy of World Heritage status? The answer lies in the very fabric of Montanha do Pico.

Geologist Manuel Paulino Soares Ribeiro da Costa explains that, because Pico is the youngest island on the archipelago, its black basalt lava fields “challenge the definition of soil.” Rather, says the director of Pico Natural Park, the 300,000-year-old island’s *lajidos* are “mother rock,” which had to be supplemented with soil from Faial island, several miles away. Visit the Landscape of Pico Island Vineyard Culture Interpretation Center, and you will see the primitive tools with which islanders prised open fissures in the bedrock to plant vines. Suffice to say, yields are meager (perhaps 1kg [2.2lb] per vine), but together with vine age (which averages 70 years old), this translates into concentrated, mineral-infused wines with, remarks Maçanita, high potassium levels. It gives them “a fat sensation—a density in the mouth” that, he adds, “is useful in the Azores, because it lowers the perception of acidity, which is naturally high.”

These acidity levels would be much higher (disease pressure, too, where the relative humidity ranges between 73 percent and 84 percent) but for the heat-absorbing qualities of the black basalt bedrock of the *lajidos* (which Murray writes once produced a “Passado, or Fayal Mulmsey” style that was “thick and luscious” from grapes “culled and exposed for 15 days on large lava stones”). Pico’s growers cunningly maximized the lava stones’ ability to absorb and radiate heat, constructing the complex matrix of walls within walls that culminate in the 97 x 130 sq ft (9 x 12 sq m) *currais* containing, on average, three sprawling bush vines. Laid in a continuous line, it is estimated that these stones would stretch twice around the equator—some 49,700 miles (80,000km). Those muscles prized by Nantucket’s whalers were hard won.

Brainpower came into it, too, since the intricate interplay of walls was also designed to protect their precious cargo of vines from the Atlantic’s harsh, humid, salt-laden winds, including wind piping. Machado reckons that the microclimate of the *currais* is 9–11°F (5–6°C) warmer than the ambient temperature. It explains why the island’s top *licoroso* producer, Adega Czar’s Fortunato Duarte Garcia, specializes in unfortified examples, albeit, he says, he is the last to harvest (usually after September 15). Ideally, he is looking for a potential alcohol of 19% or 20%, so he harvests in two stages. Half of the fruit is raisined, the balance already brown.

Perhaps surprisingly, given its tradition for *licorosos*, Pico’s vineyards are situated by the coast, where the Atlantic does its worst. In January and February, waves 26–33ft (8–10m) high pound the coastline, creating atomized salt clouds that oxidize the islanders’ cars. During May 2016, they were disastrous for flowering, and reports Maçanita, AWC was 70 percent down on

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production. Still, even if “we’re in the middle of where all storms start,” he believes in the old saying that “the best vineyards are where you can hear the crabs singing.” Why? Because bathed in bright sunlight, the coastline escapes the long, looming shadow of Pico and the clouds that surround its summit as warm, humid air rises. What’s more, thanks to the Atlantic, high sodium levels bring a pronounced signature saltiness to the wines—terrific piquancy. Even in Pico’s *licoroso* wines, which, says Garcia, should be about “salt, acidity, and never too much sugar.” (Czar’s residual sugars range from 19 to 35g/l.)

Lifeblood

The renaissance of this special terroir holds particular importance, both economic and historical, to the islanders of Pico. According to Soares Ribeiro da Costa, only 3.4 percent of Pico’s soilless land can be cultivated. Therefore, unlike the rest of the archipelago’s older, greener islands (which have sedimentary soils), Pico cannot produce Azorean staples like potatoes, corn, bananas, or milk on a commercial scale. This is why Pico is home to the Azores’ highest concentration of Verdelho, Arinto dos Açores, and Terrantez do Pico and was the historical hub of the Azores’ wine industry. So, it is thrilling to see vineyards spring back to life and producers collaborate on wine events and host press tastings to demonstrate the strength in character, freshness, and aging potential of their wines. Notable examples include the vertical of Czar dating back to 1970, the first branded vintage of this 2,000–3,000-bottle *licoroso*. Or the tasting of every vintage of Maçanita’s and AWC’s wines back to 2010—older if you include their latest release, a 10-year-old fortified *licoroso*.

The town of Madalena, home to Pico’s grandest buildings, was built from the taxes on wine. Today, wine runs through its veins once more. Two new wine bars—Cella Bar and Atlantico TeaHouse & WineHouse—are excellent showcases for local wines, including Cancela do Porco’s mineral Verdelho, which is made for Atlantico’s owners by Cural Atlantis. Be sure to try out AWC’s peerless range, Adega Buraca Cacarita Arinto/Verdelho (the *licoroso* producer’s first table wine, made by Maçanita), and Cural Atlantis’s powerfully fruited, salt-licked Verdelho and Arinto dos Açores and new, more savory blend of the two with Terrantez do Pico, the saltiest grape of all. Marco Faria and Czar are both planting it because “it’s our grape,” says Garcia. CVIP is rolling out new wines, but, made from the traditional trio, the Lajido Licoroso and Frei Gigante white take some beating. For Rocha, who has been instrumental in promoting the Azores food and wine culture, “It’s a privilege to be part of the history. And this is a key moment.” ■