

Spanish Albarino well-suited for spring season

By Mary Ross | Tastings

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The forsythia stems we harvest from our yard every January burst into yellow flowers in our house about two weeks later, bringing springtime with them regardless of the weather outside. Recently, during our first-ever broad tasting of Albarino, the special white wine from Spain, we couldn't help but notice that the color of the wine -- pale yellow, with green highlights -- perfectly matched the flowering stems that soared over our heads as we sat at the dinner table. "It's funny," Dottie said, "because these wines do taste like spring."

This is such a great time to be a wine drinker. Just a decade ago, you would have been hard-pressed to find an Albarino in a wine store in the U.S. While we have mentioned Albarino many times over the years, we had never conducted a broad blind tasting because there weren't enough of them out there, and those that did make it to the States were not widely available. Over the past year or two, this has changed, and changed dramatically. Now they're available in stores all over the country, which means you'll be hearing a lot more about them soon.

No wonder: In the Rias Baixas zone of the Galicia region of Spain, the home of Albarino, production of the wine more than doubled between 1999 and 2006 and exports quintupled. The number of wineries in the zone has tripled since 1990.

Suddenly there is a lot of Albarino out there. So our question was simple: How are the wines? We wondered if the surge has created simple, dumbed-down wines or great deals as wineries battle for market share.

We bought the wines from seven states and were amazed at how many different labels we found on the shelves. While we did not set a price limit, almost all of them cost less than \$20 and about half cost less than \$15. We then tasted them in blind flights over several nights.

Albarino (al-baa-ree-nyo) is a sunny wine, so very appropriate to the first weeks of spring. Generally quite dry, it tastes like fresh, ripe grapes. It has a floral nose and bright flavors of all sorts of fruits -- melon, peach, mango, lime, grapefruit and others, along with good acidity that makes the wine crisp and mouth-watering. But that's just a general overview. Our tasting showed that there is tremendous variation among them -- in fact, so much difference that it's worth some caution.

Albarino is still finding its sweet spot. Some of the wines were light and airy and simple as a fresh breeze. Like most of the wines we tasted, they had never touched oak. They were delightful and needed to be drunk this moment. They would be fine with light seafood, but also good as an aperitif. Some of our favorites, though, had more weight, more mouthfeel, more of a sense of minerals and earth.

This second style is what Albarino can be at its height, combining an intensity of marvelous, rich fruit tastes with a sense of place that gives the wine grounding. It's a fun tightrope walk that's a delight to drink. The purity of the flavors and the acidity and minerality of these wines make them easy to pair with all sorts of food, from grilled sardines to baked ham to Wiener schnitzel, and even feta cheese-rich Greek salads.

In fact, one of the wines in our tasting rated Delicious, which is always a pleasure for a wine that costs less than \$20. Our notes: "Clean, bracing and fresh. A grown-up wine. Albarino of stature, with minerals and structure. The bearing of a white Bordeaux and the purity and cleanliness of a Riesling. This is a wine for a serious dinner party." We thought this would be awesome with paella. It turned out to be Don Olegario 2005, which cost \$19.20 (we bought two bottles, one in Michigan and one in Texas).

Others that rated highly include Pazo Serantellos 2006 (\$7.59; a best value!), **Oriel Barona 2004 (\$19.99)** and Lusco 2005 (\$21.99).

Here's the problem, though: While, overall, the wines were quite enjoyable, some fell into very different, but equally unsuccessful, categories. A few were so light and acidic that they tasted like lemon water while others, at the complete opposite end of the spectrum, suffered from far too much oak, leaving them leaden and dull, like clumsy junior Chardonnays. A few, but just a few, even had a hint of sweetness that was quite off-putting. There was simply no way to know which was which before we opened them.

So here is our advice: Buy a young Albarino tonight and try it with fairly light food, perhaps a pasta tossed with shrimp. If you like it, that's great. But if you don't, try another. There are so many available now, with more to come, and at such reasonable prices, that you really should find out what all the fuss is going to be about.

It's also worth noting that the current profusion of Albarino in the U.S. market is part of a renaissance of Spanish winemaking that's great for consumers. If you're looking for something interesting for dinner, whether it's a red, white or rose, head to the aisle marked "Spain" and you'll likely be fine.