

STIRLING WINES: Spanish Reds – Life Beyond Rioja

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Introduction

The landscape of Spanish red wine has changed enormously from the days when the typical choice was between a powerful Rioja that was so full of new oak it tasted as if someone had added vanilla essence and coarse red wine that was fit only for making Sangria.

Firstly, the wine-makers in classic regions such as Rioja have followed the path of many other parts of the world and really tightened up their act, lowering yields, fermenting at lower temperatures to preserve the fruit flavours and going much easier on the oak ageing. Secondly, we have seen the emergence of first-class wine from previously unrecognized or undistinguished regions (e.g. Priorat, Toro). Finally, we are also seeing great value-for-money from regions that were previously focused on producing industrial quantities of table wine (vino de mesa).

However, Spanish wine still appears to be viewed with some suspicion outside of Spain and

has yet to be re-evaluated in the same way as say Italian wine. Leading producers have put forward a variety of explanations for this to me. Spanish food does not have the same international exposure as French or Italian and hence lacks the platform of close identification with a widespread, national cuisine. Spain does not have a diaspora of Spaniards living abroad, such as the Italian-American community. Consumer perceptions of Spain are coloured by images of cheap package holidays rather than the richness of a history that rivals that of France and Italy. Finally, the Spanish economy does not have a similar tradition of export-oriented marketing to France and Italy.

Whatever, the explanation, it means that there is not the same level of obsessive demand for top-class Spanish wine. Hence, with one or two notable exceptions, the wines typically represent good value-for-money at all price points.

The Wine Regions

Wine is made in virtually every region of Spain and it would be impossible in a newsletter such as this to give the reader a comprehensive picture. So what I have done is to make a personal selection of the famous and the interesting/good value-for-money. These are highlighted on the map below in dotted boxes.



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The Grapes

The signature red grape of Spain is Tempranillo, the dominant grape in the Rioja region. This grape also has a number of clones which feature in other regions such as Tinto Fino and Tinto del Pais. Its grapes are thick skinned and capable of making deep-coloured, long-lasting wines. The variety does not have a particularly strong flavour identity. Some find strawberries, others spice, leather, and tobacco but how and where it is grown are critical. Wines made from Tempranillo are primarily meat wines. Lighter styles go well with veal or duck, heavier styles are perfect for steak and barbeques.

However, as other regions have come to the fore, less well-known grapes have come to play significant roles. In Priorat north of Barcelona, garnacha (known in France as grenache) from exceptionally old vines gives deeply concentrated wines. In Murcia, near Valencia, the monastrell grape (mourvèdre in France) comes into its own. Finally, there are usual international suspects of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, which have been particularly successful in Navarra.

Rioja

There is evidence that the Romans made wine in Rioja, as is the case through much of Spain. However, Rioja's wine industry (and perhaps its early international reputation) grew around the monasteries that were founded to serve pilgrims en route to Santiago de Compostela. The region really took off in the 1850's when two pioneers introduced Bordeaux technology to what had essentially been peasant viticulture – they were the future Marqués de Murrieta and the Marqués de Riscal. Rioja also benefited from the devastation caused by phylloxera in France before the bug eventually reached Spain in the early 1900's. Through the second half of the 20th century, Rioja became a great success on export markets and is undoubtedly Spain's best known wine.

It used to be that one could make comfortable generalizations about Rioja – in general, the wines were moderately fruity, very full bodied and very oaky. As techniques have evolved, there is much more variety in styles. Part of this variety of style stems from viticulture. However, probably the most important elements of style in Rioja are the inter-related elements of

fermentation and maturation. Old-style Rioja was fermented in close contact with the air; indeed some peasant producers still ferment their wine in open *lagars* or troughs. Modern Rioja is fermented in temperature-controlled stainless steel which preserves much more of the fruit character of the wine. The key to style today tends to be maturation.

Rioja has three official age classifications. Crianza must spend a year in oak and another year in bottle before release. Reserva must spend at least a year in oak and be at least 3 years old before release. Gran Reserva must spend at least 2 years in oak and be at least 4 years old before release. Wines which do not meet these requirements are sold as *joven* (young), mainly on the domestic market. Traditionally, Rioja was matured in American oak which imparted broad, round flavours, reminiscent of a combination of cigar box and vanilla. Today, the wines are increasingly aged in French oak barrels which impart more subtle flavours of cedar and sandalwood.

There are many excellent bodegas (wineries) in Rioja. The three Marqués of Cáceres, Riscal and Murrieta all make high quality wines. Murrieta in particular make a top-of-the-range wine in good years called Castillo Ygay, which can age for over twenty years. Campo Viejo (formerly owned by Allied Domecq and now Pernod Ricard) and Faustino make good value-for-money wines, which are well worth trying. However, two of my personal favourites are Muga and Roda.



Muga are one of the more traditional houses but their wines are very high quality and fairly widely available. Try their Prado Enea Gran Reserva; the 1998 is the current release for approx £20. In contrast, Roda is a 'boutique' winery, making top-class. Finally, no description

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of Rioja would be complete without a mention of architectural innovation. The region has seen producers compete with each other to construct new wineries and visitor centres which are at the cutting edge of contemporary architecture. Bodega Ysios (also formerly owned by Allied Domecq and now Pernod Ricard) have constructed a winery whose roof is designed to reflect the nearby mountain peaks



and Marqués de Riscal commissioned Frank Gehry (the architect of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao) to design a hotel at the winery.



Navarra

In the Middle Ages, the kingdom of Navarra (known in English as Navarre) straddled the current Franco-Spanish border and stretched from Bordeaux to Barcelona. Today's wine region of Navarra lies to the east of Rioja. For many years, the region was focused on producing cheap Rioja look-alikes. However, in the last 30 years, Navarra has been at the cutting edge of the Spanish wine revolution. It hosts a viticulture and oenology centre called EVENA, which has been at the fore-front of bringing modern wine-making disciplines to Spain. The region has also seen the planting of significant quantities of Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot to complement the traditional Spanish varieties. The two leading bodegas, particularly on export markets, are Ochoa and Chivite. Both

produce excellent ranges of wine which offer very good value-for-money at all price points. I think that Chivite's premium wines are universally very well-made, marketed under the name Gran Fuedo (the Gran Reserva is normally 80% Tempranillo/20% Cabernet Sauvignon & Merlot, aged 50/50 in American and French oak), The flagship range is Colección 125 (the Gran Reserva is normally 100% Tempranillo, aged in French oak)



Ribera del Duero

The region of Ribera del Duero lies along the upper reaches of the Duero valley, to the south-west of Rioja. Historically, this region was a complete backwater except for one winery – Vega Sicilia. And what an exception this was because Vega Sicilia has long been acknowledged as producing one of the world's best (and most expensive) wines at approx £150/bottle for recent vintages of their flagship wine Unico. However, the bodega at least has the good grace only to release the vintages when they are more or less ready, at approx 10 years old, rather than making one store the wine for years before being able to taste it. Unico will easily age for another 50 years but old Unico can suffer from a slight vinegary taste if it is badly stored and it is often the victim of counterfeiting so be very careful of provenance.

Now here I must declare an interest because I was lucky enough to be recently invited to a dinner with the wine-maker of Vega Sicilia when we tasted back vintages, including the legendary 1994. This is Robert Parker's review of the wine, which I could never top. "A truly prodigious effort, it boasts an opaque ruby/purple colour as well as a gorgeously sweet, expansive bouquet of sweet cherries interwoven with black currant, truffle, liquorice, and scorched earth aromas. Full-bodied, potent, powerful, and well-delineated with crisp acidity, sweet but noticeable tannin, a multidimensional, expansive, layered palate feel,

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and a pure yet refreshing finish, it should be a wine for the history books”.

As well as their flagship Unico, Vega Sicilia also produces a second wine Valbuena which still costs approx £70 per bottle. Finally, they produce another wine in Ribera del Duero from a relatively new estate called Alion, which is much better value at £25+.



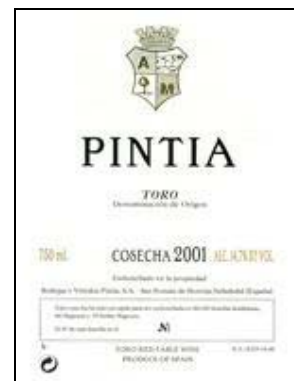
However, Vega Sicilia is no longer alone. In 1982, when the region's wines were upgraded from table wine to DO (Spanish equivalent of Appellation Controlée), there were just nine bodegas. In 2004, there were 178. Perhaps most famous after Vega Sicilia is Pesquera.



Vega Sicilia also has a rival for the title of most expensive wine in the form of Pingus. Only 450 cases are made per annum of this very good but absurdly expensive wine at over £300/bottle for recent vintages that will need at least 10 years ageing. There is also a cheaper Flor de Pingus which is more reasonably priced.

Toro

This region is at the Eastern end of the Duero valley, just before the river enters Portugal to become the Douro. At an altitude of between 600 and 750 m, growing conditions are severe. The region's main grape variety is Tinta de Toro, another local variant of Rioja's Tempranillo. Local regulations permit a maximum alcoholic strength of 15% but the best wines usually have a strength of around 13.5%. A small number of producers have fostered a move away from the heavy, bulk reds, a move which gained notable momentum when some of the greatest names in Ribera del Duero, Rioja, and even Bordeaux launched their own estates, particularly Vega Sicilia's Pintia, Michel Rolland's Campo Elíseo and Telmo Rodríguez's Gago & Pago La Jara.



Personally, I think that the wines of Toro offer excellent value-for-money, from approx £7 for Gago to approx £20 for Pintia. They remind me of very smooth, velvety Rioja's, very satisfying wines to savour with red meat or barbeques.

Penedès

Penedès lies west along the coast from Barcelona. White wines tend to predominate but there are some fine red wines primarily based on Cabernet Sauvignon or to lesser extent Tempranillo. Winemaking technology in the Penedès region is way ahead of the rest of Catalunya, largely because of the wealth and technical expertise but also the efforts of the famous Torres family, the trailblazer for modern Spanish wine. Torres shot to fame in 1979, when, in a well-publicized 'Wine Olympics', organized by the French gastronomic magazine Gault-Millau, Torres Gran Coronas Black Label 1970 (now called Mas La Plana) was voted winner of the Cabernet Sauvignon class.

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Despite its strong pedigree and high technical quality, Torres' wines for me fall between two stools, neither startlingly Spanish, nor quite in the premier league of international cabernet blends.

Priorat

The wine of this region been described by Jancis Robinson as one of Spain's most inspiring reds. The region of Priorat lies further to the west and inland from Barcelona. The region takes its name from a Carthusian priory which was established in the 12th Century. The best wines in the region are made from garnacha (grenache in French), with a yield of approx 1/10th the level of most quality red wines, which gives enormous concentration of flavours. Perhaps the best known wines are from René Barbier (Clos Mogador) and Álvaro Palacios (Finca Dofí, L'Ermita and Les Terasses which sells for a reasonable £15/bottle, a snip for a wine of this quality).



These are big, sometimes huge, wines with a high alcoholic content – not for the faint-hearted but awesome with a venison or wild boar ragout.

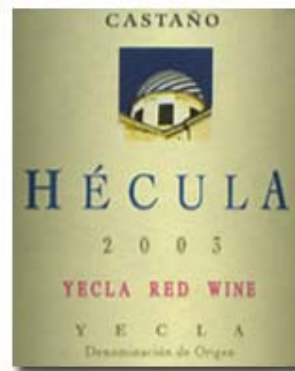
The Levant – Yecla and Jumilla

These wines are produced south-west of Alicante. Historically, the regions produced vast quantities of cheap bulk industrial wine.

However, as we have seen in other regions a new wave of investment has started to flow into the region. There are still some very dodgy wines made in the region but the top producers make seriously good value-for-money wines.

The primary grape in the region is monastrell. In France, it is known as mourvèdre and is very tannic and used to give some stuffing to Southern French reds. However, in the very warm South-East of Spain, the tannins are much riper and softer and the grape makes well rounded wines that still retain a decent backbone.

The best bodega in Yecla is Bodegas Castaño, a family firm that has been at the forefront of innovation in the region and still acts a lodestar for the other producers.



Casa de la Ermita lies in the region of Jumilla. The bodega was only founded in 1999 but has 150 hectares of vineyard, including some very old vines. I recently had a bottle of their Reserva at the restaurant of the Royal Opera House and it was very good indeed, a perfect accompaniment to veal and duck, selling at retail for approx £12.



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Further Reading

The New Spain: A Complete Guide to Contemporary Spanish Wine by John Radford – coffee table style but very well illustrated and written.

The Wines of Spain by Julian Jeffs – best detailed guide for wine-nuts but dense with no glossy pictures.

The Wines of Rioja by John Radford – same as above focused on Rioja.

Peñin Guide to Spanish Wine by Jose Peñin – the equivalent of an annual Michelin guide.

The Oxford Companion to Wine by Jancis Robinson – fantastic overview of the world of wine in one volume, great content on Spain but focused on big picture rather than individual wines.

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