



CLASSIC SPANISH WINE TASTING

August 2020



Spain has more land under vines than any other country (nearly 1 million hectares). No day in Spain would be complete without an evening stroll around the local bars, taking the occasional glass of wine with a plate of tapas. There is a fabulous diversity of styles of wine – white, red, rosé, sparkling, sweet – and of course fortified, many made from grape varieties that are not much found in other European countries, and only just being discovered in the New World – where they are rapidly being planted, as water becomes scarcer and temperatures become hotter. Wine has been made in Spain for millennia, even during the Moorish occupation, and its history is inextricably linked with the Church, pilgrimage and the State.

Spain's topography and climate is brilliantly suited to producing great wine. Much of it is arid, soils are infertile, hills are steep, so vines must send their roots deep in search of moisture, and leaves can see the sun. Altitude counters the effect of the hot summer temperatures, nights are cool, and winters cold – allowing grapes to ripen more slowly (and therefore deliciously), and vines to achieve proper dormancy which is vital for their longevity. Its wetter, Atlantic, regions challenge winemakers with threats of disease (though rarely a lack of sunshine), but luckily they have the grape varieties to deal with these.

A steady stream of visitors, from pilgrims en route to Santiago de Compostella, the English (and other nations) in Jerez, the Bordelais in Rioja, and more recently modern tourists in the Mediterranean, have enjoyed Spanish wine in Spain and brought it home – to enjoy the fruits of Spanish sunshine all year round.

And the great news for modern wine drinkers, if not for Spanish winemakers, is that Spanish wine is fantastic value for money. The top red wines of Rioja, Ribera del Duero and Priorat are a bargain compared with their equivalents from Bordeaux or Barolo – and thanks to Spain's culture of ageing wines in bodega, and releasing them when they are ready to drink, do not need to be stored in cellars for years before they are approachable. Cava, sadly not a subject of this tasting, is a high quality sparkling wine made in the Traditional (ie Champenois) method, sold at Prosecco prices. Sherry (also for another day) is finally undergoing something of a renaissance, but is still incredible value for money with an Aladdin's cave of different styles, many of which are beautiful food matches.



So we hope that Tim's tasting of Spanish Classics will remind you of what you love about Spanish wine, and inspire you to drink more of it – a world of quality and variety is ready and waiting.

White Wines

Spanish wine's fame is very much based on its reds (and fortified wines). It is tempting to think Spain is too warm, too dry, too 'oaky', to make great white wine, particularly when cool, wet places like New Zealand are capturing the market for fresh aromatic whites. Rías Baixas, in Galicia, is the answer to that! Spain's northwest frontier (nothing between Cape Finistère and America) is verdant thanks to Atlantic breezes and showers interspersed with glorious sunshine. The perfect ingredients for Albariño, the perfect wine to accompany a Galician seafood lunch – racy acidity, zippy citrus and green fruit, a hint of salinity, often with some lovely creaminess thanks to lees ageing. Albariño, and other Galician white varieties Treixadura and Loueiro are also ingredients of Vinho Verde, across the border in Portugal – more proof that Iberia can compete with the new world if you are looking for fresh, vibrant, aromatic wines, while Godello produces more structured wines further inland.

Sorry – no Galician wines in this tasting, but please get in touch if you would like to try some!

Inland from Galicia, past some mountain ranges, is the northern end of the huge Castilian meseta, and **Rueda**. Sandwiched between the red wine growing areas of Toro and Ribera del Duero, this has always been a white wine producing area, but in the early twentieth century winemakers attempted to replicate sherry, making oxidative, fortified wines that failed to excite wine drinkers at home or abroad.

In the 1970s, the Marques de Riscal from Rioja, who was searching for a source of grapes to make fresh white wines, identified old vines of the Verdejo grape variety (some were very old bush vines on sandy soil that had resisted phylloxera!), and invested in the area, introducing new vineyard practices such as harvesting at night, and modern wine making techniques such as temperature controlled stainless steel fermentation vessels and lees ageing. Rueda now produces 40% of all the white wine made in Spain – Sauvignon Blanc is also grown, and a variety of styles are made including barrel fermented and barrel aged. Quality is very high, and there are some very exciting producers – Pasos de la Capsula is certified organic, and their 2019 Verdejo has great fruit and the tangy finish that is very typical of the grape variety.



Visit to Menade Winery in Rueda during our 2019 tour

Head east past Burgos and we arrive in **Rioja**. This huge area, where 50% of vineyard plots are less than 1ha in size, is actually dominated by big companies who buy in grapes as well as growing their own. White Rioja is somewhat in the shadow of the red variety, and might be associated with an oaky, slightly oxidised style that typified it until recently. Nowadays you can still get fabulous examples of the traditional style (Castillo de Ygay from Murrieta, or Viña Tondonia from López de Heredia), but the modern approach is to aim for fresher fruit. In 2017 the Consejo Regulador authorised a much larger number of grape varieties permitted in the region, and even single varietal wines can now be made under the DOCa. Viura remains the main variety, a variety that when growth is restrained through pruning and limiting water produces concentrated and structured wines. Under the name Macabeo it is a major ingredient of Cava!

The El Coto that we are tasting is blend of mainly Viura with some Sauvignon Blanc and Verdejo. The grapes are grown in the highest altitude vineyard in Rioja, and vinified in a winery built in the vineyard, to ensure wine is made from grapes at optimum freshness (rather than being trucked across the region).

As it is not oaked, it does not have an age classification. Crianzas, Reservas and Gran Reservas are required to spend at least 6 months in oak barrels (and between 18 and 48 months in total in the bodega before release).

The other major grape varieties that are used for light white wines in Spain are:

Airèn – the workhorse of Castilla La Mancha, where it is grown in huge quantities (as much Airèn is grown as Tempranillo), to make rather bland wines for blending or distillation.

Albillo – like Viura a variety that finds itself when grown at low yields, and assisted with some oak.

Garnacha Blanca – the same variety as Grenache Blanc, a mutation of the better known black grape. Garnacha originated in Spain (though it is widely grown in Southern France), and is ideally suited to arid conditions, and it thrives in the rocky barren soils of Cataluña. Whether red or white, Garnacha wines are fruity, spicy and full bodied – very much food wines.

We are tasting a white Garnacha from **Terra Alta**, a region to the south of Priorat where Garnacha Tinta makes some of the most exciting wines in Spain. It has lovely cumin spice notes—grapes are grown organically, and there it is unoaked.

Rosé Wines

Traditionally, Spanish rosé was a paler version of a red wine – red grapes would be macerated for a few hours, to ensure plenty of colour, and not a little tannin, would emerge when pressed. Often they would be aged in oak, and a fairly robust, full bodied wine would result.

Modern tastes are for more delicate rosés, such as the pale wines from Provence. These use juice from grapes pressed soon after picking, with far less colour extracted. High quality fruit is required to ensure the wine tastes of something – so warm, sunny conditions are essential. Luckily Spain has these in spades, and there is plenty of fresh, pale, fruity rosé being made, mainly from Garnacha and Tempranillo. The El Coto Rosado Rioja we are tasting is principally Tempranillo, and is made from a combination of the 'free run' juice and grapes that have been macerated for longer – lending it more colour and flavour. It is unoaked.

Red Wines

Tempranillo is the flagship grape variety of Spain, the principal ingredient of most Rioja and Ribera del Duero, and our four red wines will explore how this variety responds to contrasting oak treatment and climate.

Tempranillo is an early ("temprano") ripening grape, which in the high altitude zones where it is mainly grown is a good thing as can be harvested before autumn frosts. It loves heat, but not drought, and most Denominación de Origin (DO) zones where it is grown permit irrigation at certain times.

Rioja

In Rioja Tempranillo (which accounts for nearly 90% of all red grapes) does best in the wetter zones of Rioja Alta and Alavesa to the North West, while Garnacha thrives in the drier Rioja Oriental. Both varieties typically have red-fruit flavours, eg strawberries, raspberries, cranberries, plums, but with more ripeness Tempranillo has blackberry and black plum. Tempranillo ensures acidity, tannin and structure, Garnacha adds alcohol, body and softness. Graciano, Mazuelo (Carignan), an obscure variety called Maturana Tinta and Cabernet Sauvignon can be included in the blend, but none of these are grown widely in Rioja.



Approaching the Marques de Riscal bodega during our 2017 tour

Most Riojas are blends, not only of grape varieties, but of grapes from different parts of its zones. This reflects the structure of the industry - lots of growers, and few winemakers, and ensures a typical style can be made every year, despite variations in growing conditions across the very large region (100km from NW to SE).

Rioja winemaking is a scale business. To qualify for the DOCa (the entire Rioja region is covered by the Denominación de Origin 'Calificada', one of only two superior classifications in Spain), the grapes need to be grown in the region, with a yield of no more than 45hl/ha, and only 225l barriques may be used to age wines. However, to qualify to make a Crianza, Reserva or Gran Reserva, a bodega must hold a minimum of 22,500 litres of wine on site. Why? Well, if the top 13 bodegas make 50% of the wine, they must have a bit of influence on the rules...

Ageing has been mentioned a fair bit, so let's now review why. More than any other country, Spain's wine 'hierarchy' reflects what happens in the bodega. This is probably because historically grapes would achieve very high levels of ripeness, including tannin, and to make them drinkable they needed to spend time maturing, for at least part of the time in oak. The oak's influence is to allow slow oxidation of elements of the wine - softening tannins and evolving more dried, savoury flavours. Historic use of American oak (because it was cheaper than French) has created an association with a vanilla aroma, although nowadays more French oak is used than American across Spain, including Rioja. Further time spent in bottle allows the wine's structure to soften further, the flavours to evolve, and all the elements to integrate.

As with white wines, the terms Crianza and Reserva are used to indicate the minimum period of time a wine has spent in oak, and in bottle, or a combination of the two before release.

Crianza wines have spent at least 6 months in oak (12 in Rioja), and cannot be released until two years after harvest.

Reserva wines have spent at least 12 months in oak and cannot be released until three years after harvest.

Gran Reserva wines have spent at least 18 months in oak (24 in Rioja) and cannot be released until five years after harvest. Gran Reserva wines are only supposed to be made in rare years where the quality (ripeness) of the grapes merits the longer period of ageing.

In recent years many winemakers have become frustrated by the system, which does not allow them to convey the rising quality of wine they were making through better vineyard practice - grapes that are ripe without being overly tannic, and they wanted to make wines that expressed a particular terroir.

Some younger producers opted to leave the traditional classification system and make wines under the regional *Vino de Tierra* (VdT) classification.

The *Consejos Reguladores*, the official bodies attached to each Spanish wine region, recognised the issue, and moves are afoot to create more 'modern' classifications, for example the *Vino de Zona* and *Vino de Municipio* designations in Rioja (wines made in, and from grapes grown in, specific areas). Rioja's *Viñedo Singular*, single vineyard wines which must pass a number of tests relating to ownership, vine age and blind tasting, feels like an over-designed solution that may not quite solve the problem of how to reward quality wine making. In general it is better to do a bit of research about the *bodega* (or ask your friendly wine merchant) to find out if you will like the style of wines they make.

The El Coto *bodega* was founded in the 1970s, with vineyards across Rioja, and a modern approach to vineyard management and winemaking.

Ribera del Duero

The other region where Tempranillo achieves fame is Ribera del Duero. This region was until the 1980s a bit of a one trick pony. Since the nineteenth century *Vega de Sicilia* has been a very famous, highly rated, red wine made from Tempranillo, in the town of Aranda del Duero, to the west of Burgos. Significantly higher altitude than Rioja meant that it was cooler at night, so grapes took longer to ripen – a few weeks longer than Rioja! This resulted in greater concentration of fruit flavours, along with fine elegant tannins.

But it was not until Alejandro Fernandez, who had made his fortune selling sugar beet harvesting equipment (sugar beet is the major crop in the area) set up *Pesquera* in the 1980s, and Robert Parker liked a couple of vintages, that the region took off.

A lot of investment has poured in (its proximity to Madrid has encouraged some very fancy tourism opportunities), and rather pricey wine is emerging.

Once again, it is important to know your winemaker, and Valduero is one of the best.



Vineyards at the Valduero estate in Ribera del Duero

They make both 'traditional' wines - the Crianza spends 15 months in a mix of French and American barriques, and their Reserva, made from 50 year old vines is aged for 30 months. However, their Una Cepa (a single vineyard wine not part of the main tasting but part of the 'extra list') demonstrates brilliantly why time in oak does not trump fruit quality. A super wine.

Other reds from Spain

A thorough exploration of the classic wines of Spain would require us to taste about 40 wines, to cover the full gamut of grape varieties, styles and quality levels. Another time (perhaps even on a tour!) we will cover

Navarra – next door to Rioja, making some of the best rosé in Spain.

Priorat – the Garnacha based wines of a tiny region in Cataluña where dark coloured slate soils (licorella) produce intensely ripe, rich wines that are just about as good as Garnacha can get. Spain's other DOCa (DOQ in Catalan).

Also in Cataluña is **Penedès**, home of Cava, but also of reds made from international varieties like Cabernet Sauvignon, Syrah and even Pinot Noir. This is where Miguel Torres pioneered modern wine making in Spain in the 1960s.

Toro – perhaps the next Ribera del Duero, an up and coming region whose Tempranillos are getting great press.

Cigales – some fabulous rosé wines, made from Tempranillo.

Across Spain, but particularly in Castilla La Mancha (Don Quixote country) there are a number of **Vinos de Pagos**, which sit outside the DO system but have been recognised for their high quality, often using international varieties.

We hope you enjoy the tasting of some of the amazing wines produced by Spain, and look forward to raising a glass with you via YouTube—or better still in person, in the not too distant future.

¡Que aprovece!