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REDISCOVERING RIOJA THE BEST OF BOTH WORLDS

Spain's most famous wine region has seen several revolutions over the years. But as **Luis Gutiérrez** explains, ancient and modern are coexisting more happily than ever before, making this an ideal time not only to drink but to visit Rioja



Rioja is the name that most often comes to mind when thinking about wine from Spain. Along with Jerez, it is, and has been for a long time, the country's leading wine region, as well as the source of most of its best wines. A large area full of culture and tradition, with plenty of attractions and a rich gastronomy, where wine is ever-present, it is certainly well worth a visit.

Phoenicians and Romans played an important role in establishing Rioja as one of the earliest vineyards in the Iberian peninsula. The name appears as early as 1092 and may refer to the River Oja (Rio Oja in Spanish), a tributary of the Ebro, the most important river in Spain and the backbone of this region. Grapes were grown here in the Middle Ages, and Gonzalo de Berceo (1197–1264), the first poet in the Spanish language, mentions its wines.

But it was the spread of mildew and phylloxera in France, from around 1867, that helped Rioja become a leading wine region in Europe in the 1870s and '80s. French growers, seeing their vineyards succumb to the twin scourge, went south in search of an alternative. They traveled to Rioja, while Spanish entrepreneurs—most notably the two marquises, Riscal and Murrieta (like Manuel Quintano almost a century earlier)—went to Bordeaux to learn production methods that were soon adopted as the norm in their own region.

Until then, the dominant, old-fashioned style was mainly carbonic maceration. But the *méthode bordelaise* was soon being used for the production of the best wines, both red and white, and became part of local tradition as the *método riojano*. Grapes are fermented in large oak or stainless-steel vats (*tinajas* or *depósitos* respectively), and the wine is then aged in small oak barrels. What is different from Bordeaux *élevage* is that the oak is mostly American rather than French, and the wine spends longer in wood (sometimes too long, as we shall see). Moreover, the wine undergoes further aging in bottle before it is deemed ready for consumption and released on to the market.

Grape growers usually made wine for their own consumption. Because they lacked the technology, and probably the money and space, to age their wines in barrel, they normally went the easier, old-fashioned way, fermenting whole bunches in stone *lagares*, where they were often foot-trodden. This was the so-called *vino de cosechero* (harvester wine), which is still quite popular in Rioja Alavesa. It has also found its way into the bars of the Basque Country, being drunk in Bilbao and San Sebastián with *tapas* and *pintxos*.

Regions, wines, and grapes

Spain today is divided into 17 self-governed regions called *comunidades autónomas* (autonomous communities), one of them being called La Rioja; wine is so central to its history, culture, and economy that the region took the name of the wine. The appellation for wines actually spans three of these administrative districts. The main one is of course La Rioja, the other two being Álava (usually referred to as Rioja Alavesa, in the Basque Country) and Navarra.

All of these are in the north of Spain, less than 125 miles

(200km) southwest of the French border, a region where Atlantic and Mediterranean climates coexist. It has 60,773ha (150,173 acres) under vine—more than the vineyard area of Austria, and more than twice that of New Zealand—in a huge strip some 75 miles (120km) long and 25 miles (40km) wide, on both sides of the Ebro.

Forgetting the administrative divisions, Rioja is also divided into three wine subregions of distinctive character. Rioja Baja (Lower Rioja) is the southern and western part, lower in altitude, with a warmer and drier Mediterranean climate. Rioja Alta (Upper Rioja) and Rioja Alavesa (in the province of Álava) are in the northern and eastern part, higher in altitude, with a cooler and wetter Atlantic climate.

The wines themselves are classified according to the time they have been aged, mainly in cask (it varies slightly for white and rosé). *Vino joven* (literally “young wine”), is normally unoaked, from the most recent vintage, and made to be consumed young. *Vino de crianza* has to be aged for two years, at least one in oak casks. Reserva has to be aged for three years, again at least one of them in oak. To qualify as gran reserva, the wine has to be aged for no fewer than five years, at least two of them in barriques.

In the good old days, the better grapes were saved for the higher categories, which were generally worth their higher prices. But the system was gradually perverted by poorly made wines bearing gran reserva or reserva labels. Nowadays, many producers seek only generic or *joven* labels for all their wines, not wanting to be subject to what they regard as restrictive regulations.

Whites have played only a small role here for many years (only 7 percent of the vineyards are planted to white varieties), but because interest in whites in general is growing, we are now seeing some interesting developments. (For a detailed discussion of white Rioja, see WFW 20, pp.116–21.) There's also a little rosé (*rosado*), but Rioja is overwhelmingly red.

Until earlier this year, there were only four red varieties: Tempranillo, the main one, covering some 79 percent of the productive vineyards; Garnacha; Mazuelo (known as Cariñena or Carignan in other regions); and Graciano. The latter, considered very much a local grape, is the same as Parraleta in Somontano, Tintilla de Rota in Sherry country, Morrastel in Languedoc, and Tinta Miúda in Portugal.

As recently as March 2008, another three red varieties (and six white) were authorized: Maturana Tinta, Maturana Parda (both old, recovered varieties), and Monastel (not to be confused with Monastrell or Mourvèdre). Monastel from Rioja is the same grape grown in Somontano as Moristel, which is also called Juan Ibáñez in the south of Aragón.

There are also, of course, the “others.” The most important of these more “international” varieties is Cabernet Sauvignon (168ha [415 acres]), which is in some ways more indigenous to Rioja than is Garnacha, since Marqués de Riscal planted Cabernet here almost 150 years ago, while Garnacha made its appearance only after phylloxera, some 50 years later. The great Marqués de Riscal 1945 contains a high proportion of Cabernet.

(vin voyage)

Although there have been a lot of new plantations quite recently—the area under vine has grown from 43,000ha (106,255 acres) in 1990 to 60,773ha (150,173 acres) today, an increase of nearly 42 percent—there are still enough old vines to produce a fair amount of very good wine. Some 18,000ha (44,480 acres) of vines are more than 25 years old.

The golden age (late 19th century to c.1970)

The foundations of the oldest winery in Rioja were laid in 1825, when the first grapes were planted on the Ygay estate, and a winery started in 1852 by Luciano Francisco Ramón de Murrieta, later Marqués de Murrieta. In 1878 he acquired the estate and vineyards that have been home to one of the great bodegas of Spain ever since. He set the pace not only for classic red Rioja, but also for white. The company remained in the family until it was bought by Vicente Cebrián Sagarriga, Count of Creixell, in 1983.

In 1858, Camilo Hurtado de Amézaga, Marqués de Riscal, diplomat and writer, founded the winery that still bears his title. He had been living in Bordeaux since 1836, so he decided to experiment with French varieties at his estate at Elciego and organized his winery following the French model, being the first in the country to use barriques. His wines soon started winning prizes, being favorites of King Alfonso XII, and became so popular that he had to invent the gold wire-netting for his bottles, in a bid to counteract fakes. This device itself became fashionable, as well as a badge of honor for other top Riojas.

Many other wineries were also started around this time. La Rioja Alta was founded by five wine growers from Rioja and the Basque Country in 1890; it is still in the hands of those same five families today. López de Heredia was founded in 1877 by Don Rafael López de Heredia y Landeta. Between 1913 and 1914 he planted the Tondonia vineyard, 100ha (250 acres) on the left bank of the River Ebro, which has since become one of the most famous vineyards and wines in Rioja. He also built a winery in the Barrio de la Estación (the neighborhood of the railway station) in Haro, next door to La Rioja Alta and other well-known names like Bodegas Bilbaínas (1901) and CVNE (1879). The railway played such a crucial part in the success of the wines that it made sense at the time to establish wineries as close to the station as possible.

Other survivors from this era include Montecillo (1872), Berberana (1877), AGE (1881), Martínez Lacuesta and Lagunilla (1885), Bodegas Franco Españolas and Bodegas Riojanas (1890), Bodegas Palacio (1894), and Paternina (1896).

The appellation and its rules started taking shape in the early 20th century, and its regulatory council, the Consejo Regulador, was set up in 1926. The region had its ups and downs both before and after this (including phylloxera), but broadly speaking the golden age lasted from the late 19th century until around 1970.

Decline and renaissance

The decline in Rioja's prestige in the 1970s came about for several reasons. In the vineyard, younger, higher-yielding vines and less rigorous selection and sorting meant a steep decrease in the quality of the grapes. In the winery, increasingly industrial techniques were used. Brief macerations of barely mature fruit (to avoid high alcohol) produced low-quality musts, without the aromatic compounds, concentration, or tannins to withstand the oak regimes of the past. As a result, many of the wines were acidic, thin, and dried out, reeking of coconut and vanilla and little else.

One of the causes of the problem was that bodegas didn't have vineyards of their own, relying on grape growers to supply them. This created a conflict of interests, because the growers, paid by the kilo, had very little interest in the quality of the grapes, concentrating instead on quantity, while wineries hoped their suppliers would do the opposite. Some of these wineries were nothing more than wine factories, and the bottles coming out of them during the 1970s and '80s gave Rioja a bad name.

Today most wineries believe that the ownership of vineyards and full control of viticulture

are critical for their wines. Only a handful still rely exclusively on external grape suppliers.

Even during the less happy times, a few of the more enterprising producers had experimented with longer macerations, shorter maturation in barrels, and French oak. Relevant milestones were the creation of Marqués de Cáceres and Contino, which pioneered the single-vineyard concept as early as the 1970s, when the norm was to achieve consistency from year to year by blending across the region. They used French oak, and the wines were darker and fruitier than the average Rioja.

Bodegas Palacios developed its line Cosme Palacio y Hermanos with the help of Michel Rolland in the 1980s. But wineries such as Remírez de Ganuza, Roda, San Vicente, and Torremuga quickened the pace of change in the early 1990s, capturing the public's imagination, especially



Sisters Mercedes (left) and María José López de Heredia, owners of Viña Tondonia and precious old reserves (opposite)





Cousins Juan (left) and Jorge Muga, the third generation at the eponymous bodega created in 1932

from the release of the excellent 1994 vintage onward. The unfortunate term *alta expresión* (high expression) was coined to designate the new style of wines (were the rest “low expression?”). Everybody started talking about it; it even appeared on labels.

It was good to move away from bad tradition. But trying to overextract from mediocre grapes was equally undesirable. Using oak to add aromas to the wine was also a great mistake. Put the wine into a heavy bottle, add a heavy price tag, and we had the perfect recipe for disaster.

What happened in the 1990s was mainly a swing in style, but there was also the creation of boutique, or garage, wineries and a renewed interest in the vineyard by some other small, artisanal producers. Most moved away from the bad practices of the 1970s and '80s. A few stayed loyal to the better, older traditions, but the majority looked for more color, fruit, and freshness, through longer macerations, French oak, and shorter maturation times. Many abandoned the traditional designations of *crianza*, *reserva*, and *gran reserva*. Rioja reinvented itself. But there was always the risk of overdoing it.

Overoaked, overextracted, overpriced...but coming back into balance

When people started hearing about the critical acclaim for Pingus (from Ribera del Duero), with its 200 percent new-wood treatment, a mentality of “the more the better” caught on with some Rioja producers, and we started hearing about 400 percent, even 600 percent, new oak! Overripeness, overextraction, and overoaking were the common excesses of the 1990s. Of course, going from one extreme (dilute,

dried-out wines) to the other (black, overripe, flabby, heavy, jammy wines) is never good—but that’s what happened.

Mercifully, the pendulum has been swinging back a little, and now people discuss acidity, balance, and finesse, and no longer only color, concentration, and power. The excellent 2001 vintage marks the start of the new era, in which balance and elegance are again the ideals for which to strive. The change has not been general, though. It has not been a phenomenon like *alta expresión*, but rather a silent revolution.

The best modern examples are actually aging into the style of the more traditional wines. The character and the terroir of Rioja is there but takes time to show, since the winemaking style makes the wines difficult to read when young. Most people, moreover, don’t really know what traditional wines tasted like when young, because they were never released as such. Some now suppose that the great wines from 1947, 1954, or 1964 must have been very similar in their youth to some of today’s heavyweights.

Unfortunately, just as most people today drink their red Bordeaux or Vintage Port far too young, very few lie down their Riojas and age them properly to drink when fully mature. It was part of the tradition that wine was aged by the winery and released when ready. Storing wine for years has never been common among Spanish consumers.

The excesses and heavy-handedness of the recent past are slowly receding today. More and more producers look for balance and finesse in their wines, even though they are more concentrated than previously. They again consider the vineyards the essential prerequisite for quality; they look back at tradition but still make the most of modern

technology. Most wines from the 1970s and '80s were so thin and dried out that they could not be compared with those from the past. But it is to be hoped that the other two styles, the pre-1970 and the "high expression," will converge—and indeed it seems that this is what we are already starting to see. The best of both worlds should produce wines as glorious as the best from the past, which can still give so much pleasure today.

Name dropping, in various styles

We have already discussed some of the early pioneers, and at this point it's worth looking at some other names—some old, some new.

López de Heredia is today the most authentically traditional winery. The current generations have made strenuous efforts to preserve their traditions, trying to do everything exactly as it was done originally. The grapes are hand-harvested and fermented in old vats—72 of them—of different sizes and types of oak (none of it new). Malolactic is carried out in these vats or in barrique, and no stainless steel is to be seen here. Nearly 15,000 Bordeaux barrels rest in their cellars, which are some 50ft (15m) underground.

A few other producers, like La Rioja Alta, have also preserved what was best in the old tradition. Others, regrettably, have stuck to what was worst in the new tradition, making large volumes of boring wines to sell in supermarkets. The rest have adapted their methods to make more modern wines or have introduced a more modern range of wines alongside the more traditional versions.

A good example of this twin approach, even though the

winery remains unique in other ways, is Bodegas Muga. Created in 1932 by Isaac Muga Martínez, it moved, under the second generation, to the Barrio de la Estación in 1971. Nowadays the company is in the hands of the third generation, brothers and cousins dividing the duties in the vineyard, the winery, and the local and export markets. They employ some 60 people, and their annual production is measured in seven figures. At Muga, the key aspects of production sound very much like the living definition of tradition: wild yeast, fermentation in oak vats without temperature control, vats and barrels produced by their own coopers, very light filtration, clarification with fresh egg whites... Their signature is certainly the use of oak; no stainless steel is seen here. But they have modernized their range, offering "new age" bottlings (Torremuga and Aro) as well as more traditional wines (Crianza, Selección Especial, and Prado Enea). Like many other producers, they have their own shop, and they are finishing a visitor's center with meeting facilities and standard tours and visits.

Artadi is probably the most valued new name among connoisseurs today. It started as a cooperative, producing only red *cosechero* by carbonic maceration in 1985, but has reached the summit of Rioja and Spain's wines in less than a decade. This incredible achievement is due to the determination of Juan Carlos López de Lacalle, Artadi's guiding light, to produce world-class wines. Located in the outskirts of Laguardia, it has a very functional bodega, because what is important here are the vineyards, such as El Pisón, source of one of the earliest and greatest single-vineyard wines in the country. The whole lineup—

Artadi winemaker Jean-François Gaudeau at El Pisón, the company's most famous vineyard



(vin voyage)

Pagos Viejos, Viñas de Gaín, and even the entry-level *joven*—is worth exploring. Balance and finesse are the ideals and objectives here.

A more individual success story is that of Miguel Angel de Gregorio, who grew up surrounded by vines and wine. His father was in charge of the vineyards of Marqués de Murrieta in Rioja, so it was predictable that the young de Gregorio would, sooner or later, catch the wine bug. After completing his agricultural studies at university, he took the post of technical director at Bodegas Bretón in Rioja as his day job. But his determination to go one step further led him to create Finca Allende and, in 1995, to make his first wine, Allende (an old word meaning “further”). By 1997 he had given up his day job and was devoted to his own project, which was enlarged with Aurus, a wine that attempts to express the golden mean by striking the perfect balance between Tempranillo and Graciano. It was first produced in 1996 and remains top of his portfolio, even though he has introduced since then a single-vineyard bottling called Calvario.

One of the newest players, and somewhat controversial at that, is Contador. It was founded by Benjamín Romeo, winemaker at Artadi from 1985 to 2000, who decided to fly alone and start a boutique winery in his village, San Vicente de la Sonsierra. The wines are very aromatic and distinct, exuberant, and with a sophisticated texture, produced following Burgundian practices. But Romeo is also very focused on the vineyards.

Other names to keep in mind are Eguren, Finca Valpiedra, Abel Mendoza, Remelluri, Remírez de Ganuza, Palacios Remondo, Roda, San Vicente, and Viña Ijalba.

Going there

Rioja is a place rich in history, culture, tradition, and gastronomy. It's famous for its fruit—peaches and pears—but also for its vegetables—artichokes, asparagus, beans, potatoes, and peppers (especially the wonderful red *pimientos del piquillo*, often stuffed with cod or meat). *Menestra de verduras*, a boiled vegetable stew, is a local specialty well worth trying. The town of Lodosa is particularly renowned for its vegetables, which can also be bought as preserves in glass jars.

Lamb and pork are the main meats, but snails are another specialty. Sea bream, cod, and tuna also feature among the

more traditional dishes. *Bacalao a la riojana* and *bonito a la riojana* (cod and tuna respectively) are two of the better-known recipes from popular local cuisine. There's nothing like some chorizo sausage or a few milk-fed lamb chops cooked over a fire of dried vine shoots—a normal lunch if you're out in the country visiting vineyards. Ideally it will be washed down with some fresh rosé—even better drunk from a glass *porrón*, a vessel with a long side-neck that projects the wine in a thin stream that you have to catch with your mouth.

Haro, the capital of Rioja Alta, but also considered the wine capital of Rioja as a whole, is still strategically positioned, and the infrastructure makes it the ideal place to stay, especially if you are more interested in Rioja Alta and Rioja Alavesa. Wine is present everywhere—

in bars, restaurants, shops, even service stations. Many wineries are still located in the Barrio de la Estación, and from there it's only a matter of minutes by car to Briones, Cenicero, Elciego, Laguardia, Labastida, and San Vicente de la Sonsierra.

In Haro itself, Hotel Los Agustinos, with its functional rooms, is convenient. It also houses the best restaurant in town—Las Duelas (“the barrel staves”), with tables in an old cloister, an attractive combination of modern and regional

cuisine, and a very impressive wine list. My favorite hotel in Laguardia is Castillo del Collado, with only eight ample and original rooms and a good restaurant. There is also an increasing number of hotels in small villages, often in old monasteries, palaces, or other historic buildings. Logroño is roughly half an hour from Haro, so it is also a good option if you prefer a bigger city. You might want to stay in Alfaró or Calahorra if you intend to dive into Rioja Baja.

Haro is also a good location from which to visit the biggest non-wine attraction in the area: Santo Domingo de la Calzada, the 11th-century town founded by St Domingo to host Jacobean pilgrims. As well as a monumental cathedral, there is an impressive main square and a Parador de Turismo (a branch of the state-run chain of hotels that are usually located in historic buildings). A little farther south, in Ezcaray, is the best restaurant of the region—Echaurren, where the Paniego family offers both traditional and modern cuisine.

Laguardia is a medieval town full of aristocratic stone buildings. All the old houses had wine cellars, which created



The range of old vintages on offer at Marqués de Riscal is one of its many attractions

an intricate maze underneath the original walled town. This is why no heavy vehicles are allowed through it. Enotourism has developed quite slowly but seems to be catching up. Some wineries already offer standard tours, and you can just show up and join the next one, but it's still safer to make appointments, since only a handful are open to visitors without prior notice.

Marqués de Riscal has opened an impressive hotel next to its winery at Elciego (Álava), as part of what it calls Ciudad del Vino (City of Wine), run by the Starwood Hotels & Resorts group. Designed by Canadian Frank Gehry, it is very much in the striking style of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao. It includes a restaurant and a wine spa managed by the French company Caudalie, creators of the wine-therapy concept in France. And if you don't fancy driving down to Ezcaray, chef Francis Paniego is also responsible for the restaurant in this hotel, so you have the opportunity to experience his cooking here.

Something not to be missed is the new Museo de la Cultura del Vino, created by Dinastía Vivanco in Briones. This is one of the best wine museums in the world and all the more amazing in that it is a private venture. It houses an incredible collection of books, documents, tools, photographs, works of art, coins, notes, and stamps—anything and everything related to wine and its culture.

The bigger bodegas tend to be located in Logroño, where you can find Juan Alcorta, Bodegas Franco-Españolas, Marqués de Murrieta, Marqués de Vargas, Olarra, and Ontañón. Nearby, Fuenmayor and Cenicero also host a good number of big companies, such as AGE, Berberana, Lagunilla, LAN, Marqués del Puerto, Montecillo, and Riojanas.

El Camino de Santiago (St James's Way) has become a very popular pilgrimage walk, especially the so-called French Way from Roncesvalles on the French border to the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela more than 470 miles (760km) away, where legend has it that the remains of the apostle St James are buried. It goes through Rioja, most notably through Logroño, Nájera, and Santo Domingo de la Calzada. Most of the bodegas at Logroño are prepared to receive pilgrims who are also interested in wine and give tours in a number of languages.

The *camino* has played an important role in the development of wine in the north of Spain. Over the centuries, it has been the way in for grape varieties, winemaking monks, and wine merchants—proof of which is that it is liberally strewn with wine-producing regions. Following this well-worn path takes you not only through Rioja, but other regions as well: Navarra, Bierzo, Valdeorras, and Rías Baixas. The ways to heaven are many and various...

Hotels

Hotel los Agustinos, C/ San Agustín 2, 26200 Haro (La Rioja). Tel: +34 941 311 308. www.hotellosagustinos.com Located in central Haro, with functional rooms and a good restaurant.

Hotel Ciudad de Cenicero, Majadilla s/n, 26350 Cenicero (La Rioja). Tel: +34 941 454 888. www.hotelciudaddecenicero.com Strategically situated to visit most of Rioja.

Hotel Restaurante Castillo El Collado, Paseo El Collado 1, 01300 Laguardia (Álava). Tel: +34 945 621 200. www.euskalnet.net/hotelcollado Only eight rooms, each with a different name and decoration. Good restaurant and wine list.

Hotel Marqués de Riscal, The Luxury Collection, C/ Torrea 1, 01340 Elciego (Álava). Tel: +34 945 180 888. www.marquesderiscal.com Luxury inside a building designed by Frank Gehry, with a wine spa and restaurant.

Rural hotels

Hospedería Señorío de Briñas, Travesía de la Calle Real 3, 26290 Briñas (La Rioja). Tel: +34 941 304 224. Fourteen rooms in a 17th-century palace.

Hospedería Señorío de Casalarreina, Pza. Santo Domingo de Guzmán 6, 26230 Casalarreina (La Rioja). Tel: +34 941 324 730. Quiet, pleasant environment in a 15th-century monastery.

Casa de Legarda, C/ Real 11, 26290 Briñas (La Rioja). Tel: +34 653 874 394. www.casadelegarda.com A 17th-century house just 2 miles (3km) from Haro.

Restaurants

Hotel Restaurante Echaurren, Padre José García 19, 26280 Ezcaray (La Rioja). Tel: +34 941 345 047. www.echaurren.com

Worth the diversion; two restaurants owned by the same family, home to Francis Paniego, Rioja's Michelin-starred chef.

Las Duelas, Hotel los Agustinos, C/ San Agustín 2, 26200 Haro (La Rioja). Tel: +34 941 303 148. www.lasduelas.com Creative cuisine with local roots and a pleasant atmosphere.

Terete, Lucrecia Arana 17, Haro (La Rioja). Tel: +34 941 310 023. Traditional cuisine, including famous roast lamb.

Restaurante Marqués de Riscal (see *Hotel Marqués de Riscal*, left). Taste Francis Paniego's food without driving to Ezcaray.

Wine shops

La Vinoteca, Pl Mayor 2, 01300 Laguardia (Álava). Tel: +34 945 621 213. Over 500 different wines in the centre of Laguardia.

Jelén Rioja, Marqués de Murrieta 5, 26005 Logroño (La Rioja). Tel: +34 941 202 676. Wine and other typical products.

Palacio del Vino: Avda de Burgos 136, 26006 Logroño (La Rioja). Tel: +34 941 228 200. Most wines from Rioja can be found here.

López de Heredia, Avda de Vizcaya 3, 26200 Haro (La Rioja). Tel: +34 941 310 244. www.tondonia.com Good range of old vintages.

Others

Museo de la Cultura del Vino Dinastía Vivanco. Carretera Nacional 232, km 442, 26330 Briones (La Rioja). Tel: +34 941 322 305. www.dinastiavivanco.com

Comercial Sacesa, Conservas La Fragua, Avda del Ebro s/n, 26500 Calahorra (La Rioja). Tel: +34 941 131 671. Offering more than 200 different vegetable preserves.