

Coming soon - some hot names old and new in Rioja

29 Oct 2007 by Julia Harding MW

I recently had the pleasure of visiting **Marqués de Riscal**, **Benjamin Romeo** and **Abel Mendoza** in Rioja. It was beautifully warm during the day and very cool at night at these altitudes at the end of September, encouraging all three producers to get excited about the quality of the imminent harvest, if the fine weather continued (which it has done).



The most obvious contrast was in size - the giant Marqués de Riscal, pretty much an institution, linked to an exclusive new Frank Gehry- designed hotel (pictured above) and spa, and with a home- cinema- style room for the audio- visual presentation. During the harvest, they have a hundred full time employees in the winery and over 200 pickers, mainly from Portugal. Small in size but not in vinous stature, Benjamin Romeo and Abel Mendoza manage with as few people as possible and have a more family feel to them. They own or manage around 30 hectares between them, Riscal controls about 1,500.

But there were other differences. All were emphatic about the importance of work in the vineyard but in the smaller ones there's no separation between those who tend the vines and those who make the wine. A function of size, I suppose, but also a move away from the Riojan tradition of buying in grapes rather than owning your own vineyards. Riscal and Romeo's wines are mainly blends; Mendoza's all varietals. Dry- grown bush vines are the hero of the piece for Romeo and Mendoza; Riscal's tend to be vertically trained and have the option of irrigation.

Were the wines different? Yes, as you will see, I hope, from the articles and tasting notes that follow this week.