

Rioja

5 Sep 2008 by Jancis Robinson

Rioja in north-east Spain was for long Spain's only high-profile wine region, but in the 1980s it lost many friends by overpricing and under-performing (a pattern which shows signs of recurring in Ribera del Duero now that it has taken over the mantle of Spain's most revered red wine region). Although both issues have since been addressed, other regions of Spain crept up while Rioja wasn't looking and seduced consumers with high-quality, characterful wines in a generally more modern idiom.

Rioja has traditionally been American oak's most expressive ambassador. The wine is made from a blend of Tempranillo and Garnacha (Grenache) grapes aged for a considerable number of years in the sweet, vanilla-scented warmth of small American oak barrels. The result of this prolonged ageing was to allow a high proportion of phenolics to be left behind in the bottom of the barrel, making bottled rioja a relatively pale, gentle, soft wine reminiscent of strawberries and stewed fruit.

In the old days, quality was measured by time in American oak, the Gran Reservas, the product of many years in barrel, a pale, delicate wine representing Rioja at its finest. Today, many Rioja producers are bottling their wines much earlier, and even ageing them in French rather than American oak. This modern style is arguably rather closer to that of Ribera del Duero to the south west,

Some producers are deliberately leaning more heavily on the fuller-bodied wines produced in **Rioja Baja**, the region's lower, Mediterranean-influenced vineyards, when constructing their blends. (Very, very few Riojas are estate bottlings, although Allende, Contino and Granja Remelluri and Valpiedra provide notable exceptions.) **Rioja Alta** is in the mountainous far west of the region, so high and Atlantic-dominated that grapes are regularly picked in late October. (Tempranillo, *temprano* meaning 'early' in Spanish, is particularly valued in this relatively cool climate.) That part of the region which falls within the province of Alava to the north is known as **Rioja Alavesa** and can produce some very fine wines on soils that are not too fertile.

Although Tempranillo and Garnacha dominate the vineyards of Rioja, Mazuelo (local name for Carignan) and the much more exciting but rarer Graciano are also allowed for red rioja. Viura, the Maccabéo of southern France, is the staple ingredient for white rioja but white Grenache, Garnacha Blanca, sometimes adds ballast, and the small amounts of Malvasia still grown can add real character. Most white rioja is either a squeaky-clean, cool-fermented thirst-quencher as pioneered by Marqués de Caceres or a very oaky, often richly nutty wine such as López de Heredia's Viña Tondonia. There has been a limited amount of Cabernet Sauvignon grown in the region for more than a century, however, and the area devoted to international imported grape varieties, both red and white, is increasing every year, whether officially sanctioned or not.

Rioja's fortune was made in the late 19th century when Bordeaux wine producers, devastated by the twin scourges of mildew and phylloxera, brought their techniques over the Pyrenees. The oldest bodegas therefore tend to be centred on the small town of Haro in Rioja Alta, which had good rail links, although Logroño in the centre of the region is its administrative capital. Firms such as La Rioja Alta, CVNE, López de Heredia, Muga, Marqués de Murrieta and Marqués de Riscal belong to what might be called the Rioja aristocracy, all with longstanding reputations - even if Marqués de Riscal's dipped in the 1980s. Other, newer, reputable producers include Artadi, Martínez Bujanda, Roda, Benjamin Romeo and Ysios. The 20th century has also seen the construction in Rioja of some of the most striking modern winery buildings in the world, notably those of Marqués de Riscal, Ysios, Darien and Antion.

See [Rioja Wine](#) for more information on this region.