

## What is rioja?

22 Nov 2004 by JR

In an effort to stir up a bit of interest in their wines, the rioja producers put on a tasting recently here in London to which each exporter submitted one wine. I ploughed my way through more than 50 reds (and two whites) and left with my previous confusion about the current style of rioja only reinforced.

These are some of my comments.

- Sweet red wine, heavily chipped (Alta Rio Tinto 2001)
- Good tobacco leaf Tempranillo aromas but it's fizzy and tastes as though it was all made by carbonic maceration (Belezos 2001)
- Strawberries, intensely - almost oddly - perfumed, very oaky. Rather fetching with lots of fruit but a harsh finish (Bagordi 1999)
- Pale, industrial colour. Light, tart and overpriced at £5.99 (Campo Viejo 1998)
- Bright ruby. Smells of tired old wood. Fruit baked out long ago (Faustino V Reserva 1996)
- Deep crimson. Ambitious. Very pure Tempranillo flavours and densely concentrated fruit - a sort of sub Allende? (Lealtanza Reserva 1998)
- Lively, round, properly oaked. Rather sweet and almost Burgundian in style (Urbina Selección 1997)
- Extremely deep crimson. Reeks of French barrica (Valenciso 1999)
- Thick. Lots of fruit but very harsh tannins too. Not a happy whole. Trying hard but rasping (Marqués de Riscal Reserva 1998)
- Pale brick, looks very old indeed. Hardly any fruit left. Very dry. Non fun (Baron de Oña Reserva 1996)
- Healthy crimson. Thick, sweet, deep. Very confident wine with a strong perfume of Cabernet Sauvignon. Quite a bit of acidity. Bold. Good red wine... but rioja? (Enartis, Dominio de Susar 1999)
- Extremely serious young wine that needs another five years' bottle age at least (San Vicente 1999)
- Very modern, velvety, mulberry-scented wine of the Michel Rolland school (Sierra Cantabria Tempranillo 2000)
- Very claret-like with French oak. Is there really much point in exporting a wine like this outside Spain? You could get a very good red bordeaux for this price [£30] (Gaudium Gran Vino 1996)

Do you see what I mean? There are wines here made with nothing but Tempranillo. The Garnacha (Grenache) component was as high as 50 per cent in some - though is generally much lower. I tasted two that were 100 per cent Graciano, Rioja's own aromatic vine (of which one was delicious but the Contino 1998 disappointingly flabby). Other wines were dominated by Cabernet, some by French oak, some by American oak, some by the rubbery smells of carbonic maceration, some by the warm tomato smells of barrel fermentation. Colours were all over the place, even within the same vintage. Clearly some wines are left in old oak for ages, others made like classed growth red bordeaux.

Admittedly prices varied enormously too, from about £5 to £50. But then price variation has been a characteristic of rioja for as long as I can remember. This is the problem with a wine region where the activities of winemaking and vine-growing are so separate. Every time there's a good or a short vintage, the growers are able to jack up the prices. And it is all too rare for bodega owners to have enough control over grape quality. Within Spain, Rioja has for so long been respected as *the* quality wine region that I think it has led to dangerous complacency - particularly now that so many exciting wines are emerging from elsewhere in Spain. The most impressive rioja producers, many of them relatively small, new outfits such as Allende, Roda and Artadi, tend to be those who are able to grow their own.

See [tasting notes](#) for my favourite wines.